

An Ireland for all.

Manifesto 2016



FIANNA FÁIL
THE REPUBLICAN PARTY

Ireland is faced with a fundamental choice about its future. Will we move forward together or will we become more unequal and unfair?

Fianna Fáil believes that there is a fairer way than Fine Gael and Labour's divisive and failing policies.

This manifesto shows how we can create an Ireland which serves all of its people - which helps families and communities to thrive and supports them with strong public services.

Our plans address all areas of government activity and fundamental reform but there must be priorities. Here we set out our core priorities and how they can be implemented and sustained.

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Fiscal Responsibility Commitment

Ireland has now exited the corrective arm of the Stability and Growth pact as our deficit has fallen below 3%. The debt / GDP ratio has fallen below the critical 100% mark. This follows many years of sacrifice on the part of the public following the implementation of tax increases and painful expenditure cuts.

However as the European Commission, the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council and independent analysts have stated, this government is ignoring the lessons of the past in its fiscal policies. Having spent a decade demanding more tax cuts and spending rises and subsequently voting against 70% of the measures which consolidated the state's finances, Fine Gael and Labour remain committed to putting rhetoric ahead of sustainable long-term policies.

Enda Kenny's radical objective of reducing taxation to US levels would represent a dramatic move towards a more unequal society with poorer public services and a declining infrastructure.

In contrast, this manifesto is based on not only achieving a fairer future for our country, but also a more sustainable one.

Fianna Fáil will fully uphold Ireland's EU and national fiscal obligations on spending and Debt to GDP ratio convergence targets. Our financial plans are based within the parameters of the €8.6bn fiscal space confirmed by the Department of Finance. Furthermore we will establish a rainy day fund from 2017 to put aside budget surplus funds above that space during good times in order to invest it during any future downturn.

The specific commitments in this manifesto have been costed using a triple lock of sources. Firstly with parliamentary questions to individual departments, secondly verifying those measures with the Department of Finance and the Department of Public Expenditure & Reform. As a further third step, the costs were submitted to independent assessment of their accuracy and sustainability within current accepted economic projections. This is the first time any party has submitted its manifesto to such a review. The financial information and sources behind this document are published in a detailed appendix.

Fine Gael and Labour rejected our proposals to ensure all manifestos are objectively costed by an expanded Fiscal Advisory Council. In government, we will legislate to address this failing.

This commitment to adhere fully to EU and national rules underpins each of our core priorities.

Our Four Core Priorities

Fianna Fáil has published detailed policy documents covering the full range of government responsibilities. However, we believe that it is essential to set out the core priorities which we believe must underpin the work of the next government.

These are:

Create decent jobs and support enterprise

Cut costs for families and improve the services they rely on

Tackle crime and develop community services

Secure home ownership and tackle homelessness

What our Priorities mean for you

What our Priorities mean for you at each stage in your life

A fair start in life

We will:

- establish a €2,000 childcare support credit to give working parents greater choice,
- enhance the quality and sustainability of the childcare sector,
- lengthen maternity leave benefit to 30 weeks and allow for shared leave,
- increase child benefit by €10 a month,

The best education

We will:

- reduce average class size to 23:1 in the next government,
- establish on-site early intervention teams in primary schools to help children with developmental difficulties and fully restore resource teaching hours,
- expand DEIS schools and widen the school meals programme,
- guarantee a guidance counselling service in every secondary school,
- freeze student contribution fees & restore post graduate grants,

Getting a decent job

We will:

- help create over 250,000 jobs by 2021,
- set up a full State enterprise bank to fund business expansion,
- reduce the tax burden on the self-employed to encourage start-ups,
- roll out universal fibre to the home broadband and 4G mobile coverage,
- set up an Entrepreneur Training and Mentoring Programme,
- create a new apprenticeship scheme across a wide range of sectors,
- ban zero hour contracts,
- reduce Capital Gains Tax for entrepreneurs to 10%,

Securing a home

We will:

- increase construction activity to deliver 150,000 new homes by 2021 including 45,000 new Social Housing Units,
- retain mortgage interest relief to 2020,
- create a special savings scheme to help first time buyers save for their deposit,
- raise rent supplement and tackle the homelessness emergency,

Support with the quality & cost of living

We will:

- reduce and eliminate USC for low and middle income workers up to €80,000,
- abolish Irish water and water charges,
- reduce the monthly Drug Payment Scheme threshold to €100 per month,
- increase working age welfare payments by €10 with an additional €10 top-up payment for carers, disability allowance, invalidity and blind pension recipients,
- abolish prescription charges,
- lower treatment and Emergency Department waiting times,
- re-balance our health system towards primary care,
- create a new National Mental Health Authority,

A vibrant and safe community to live in

We will:

- increase Garda numbers to 15,000 and the Garda reserve to 2,500,
- toughen sentencing with mandatory terms and a new sentencing council,
- invest in Garda IT and cars to get more Gardaí on the beat,
- create community councils and restore town councils,
- increase LEADER funding and establish a new grant scheme for Community Centres,
- allow cities to hold plebiscites on directly elected mayors,
- reform planning laws to revitalise town and village centres across Ireland,

An independent retirement

We will:

- increase the state pension by €30 a week and living alone allowance to €15 a week,
- ensure older people can live independently in their home for as long as possible,
- expand housing adaptation grants, home help hours and homecare packages,
- protect and develop the free travel scheme,
- tackle older community loneliness with a social enterprise fund for older people,



Foreword

This election is a fundamental choice about the sort of Ireland, we as a people, can create. Will we move forward together as a country or will we become more unequal and unfair? Fianna Fáil is clear where it stands, we need a new government committed to building “An Ireland for all”.

Ireland is a remarkable country with a vibrant culture, deep history and a warm, open, generous people. This is a country rich with immense potential, built on strong foundations. Ireland has come through a long and difficult recession because of the skills and dedication built up by its people over generations. The recovery belongs to all our people.

However, the profound sense of drift overseen by this government, setting ourselves at odds with our best traditions of fairness, threatens to make us more unequal and divided. Fianna Fáil is committed to building “An Ireland for all” where economic growth is felt across the nation, families can own their own home, streets are safe, hard work is rewarded and society takes care of its young, vulnerable and older people. Our manifesto sets out the Fianna Fáil plan to realise that commitment based on four, fully costed, key priorities:

1. Create decent jobs & support enterprise
2. Cut family costs & improve the services they rely on
3. Tackle crime & develop community services
4. Secure home ownership & tackle homelessness

These are our core priorities to help build a better country for all of our people.

This election, 100 hundred years on from the foundation of our Republic, gives you a chance to vote for “An Ireland for all” and help achieve a vibrant, secure future for you and your family. A new government, with Fianna Fáil’s four core priorities at its heart, can deliver that country.

I am asking for your vote on February 26th to help create “An Ireland for all”.



Micheál Martin TD
Fianna Fáil Leader

1

**Create decent jobs
& support enterprise**

Create decent jobs & support enterprise

Fianna Fáil will make Ireland a global hub of innovation for SMEs and generate over 250,000 jobs by 2021. We will:

Help SMEs & Balance Regional development

- Set specific regional job targets
- Create a fully licenced state enterprise bank
- Reduce CGT Entrepreneur Relief rate to 10% & expand chargeable gains limit to €15m
- Incentivise Job creation by reducing Employer PRSI
- Help Irish SMEs compete for public service contracts
- Set up a business voucher scheme & Entrepreneur Training and Mentoring Programme
- Ban zero hour contracts and expand apprenticeships

Advance Science & Research

- Implement multi-annual, ring-fenced funding for science & research
- Strengthen the link between Researchers and Innovators

Support the Self-Employed

- Introduce Employer PRSI relief
- Reduce & reform income taxes on the self employed
- Move towards a social protection safety net for the self-employed

Bridge the Digital Divide across Ireland

- Conduct a national mobile phone coverage audit and Mobile Phone Infrastructure Plan
- Roll out Fibre to the home broadband at 1000 Mbps across the state
- Develop Regional Digital Hubs in every local authority

Secure a fair price for farmers & a successful Agri-Food Sector

- Establish a Food Ombudsman to secure a fair price for farmers
- Reform the farm inspection regime
- Enhance and reform the Beef Genomics scheme
- Roll out an "Island of Ireland" suckler beef label
- Fully realise Food Harvest 2020 and Food Wise 2025
- Secure a strong fisheries sector

Protect our Corporate Tax Rate & re-build the Eurozone

- Fight in Europe to fully maintain our 12.5% corporate Tax Rate
 - Create a fiscal, banking and transfer union to prevent a future Eurozone crisis
 - Establish a Rainy Day Fund to invest during any future global downturn
-

Ireland is recovering because of the skills and enterprise of the Irish people built up over a period of decades. However there are undeniable signs of a growing two-tier nature to the economy, with businesses and employees divided between high-value and high-security employment and those caught in low-value, low-security jobs. Unless we have a government which addresses this it will become a permanent feature.

The politics-first approach of this government has meant that claiming credit for the work of others has taken precedence over addressing new problems. An OECD review of the 'Action Plan for Jobs' has stated that it is not possible to claim specific job creation figures for the Plan, yet Fine Gael and Labour continue to do so anyway.

Over the past five years the only significant innovation in employment policy has been the active politicisation of its communications activity. Announcements which were once routine are now hyped and withheld until ministers are in a position to get publicity.

The failure to plan or invest in critical infrastructure is a direct threat to medium and long-term economic prospects.

We are committed to a wide range of ambitious policies to foster a more sustainable and more inclusive approach to employment creation and economic development.

We will:

- Build on the current core strengths of the economy but add to it a greater balance in terms of sectors and distribution,
- Develop a more dynamic SME and start-up culture,
- Have skills and support for innovation at the core of public policy,
- Invest in essential infrastructure including the technological capacity vital in a modern economy,
- Actively help areas in danger of being left behind,

This jobs plan will help to create a sustained, broad based recovery across the whole country built on decent, secure jobs.

Help SMEs & balance regional development

A strong multi-national sector has developed in Ireland because of consistent support over a period of decades. A sustainable economic model requires a balance between this sector and the crucial, overwhelmingly indigenous SME sector. It also requires a greater balance within and between regions. We cannot allow a continued drift to a two-tier economy where good jobs are highly concentrated as other communities are left with insecure and lower-paid employment.

That is why Fianna Fáil is proposing a series of ambitious steps to help SMEs, including start-ups and to ensure more balanced regional development.

We will:

(i) Set regional targets for high-value and sustainable employment

The two tier recovery overseen by this government is leaving large parts of the country behind. We need to directly address this by driving job creation across the entire country. SMEs are key drivers of growth across the country and will play a vital role in generating new employment. In addition strong indigenous industries such as the tourism and agri-food sector have to be fully utilised across every region. We will:

- Aim to reduce unemployment levels on a regional basis to their 2007 levels.
- Set targets for sustainable employment growth and high-value jobs on a regional basis.

(ii) Create a full state enterprise bank

Small businesses that have withstood the pressures of the country's most challenging recession continue to face the threat of credit starvation. Credit is the life blood of a healthy economy; it allows businesses to invest in the future. Currently the banks have failed to live up to their obligations as the financial custodians of the credit market, jeopardising SMEs across Ireland. The Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland (SBCI) established by this government is completely inadequate. What is needed is a state backed bank along the lines of the Industrial Credit Corporation (ICC) which operated successfully in the economy for many years. An enterprising nation needs the lifeblood of credit to flow around the economy in order to grow and prosper.

- We will fundamentally reform the role of SBCI by fully licencing it as a state enterprise bank similar to the former ICC. This fully fledged enterprise bank will be a permanent solution to the lending gap which exists in Irish banking and would lend to any company, regardless of sector or size, including farms, provided it can demonstrate its creditworthiness.
- In addition we envisage SBCI will work with credit unions to help provide finance to SMEs. Credit Unions will be able to put a portion of their €8bn savings fund into an SME lending

scheme, backed by the enterprise bank. This will maintain the regulatory integrity of the Unions while providing a fresh avenue of investment in SMEs.

(iii) Reduce CGT Entrepreneurial Relief Rate to 10%

Risk takers need to be incentivised in order to promote and foster a strong culture of entrepreneurship across the country. Ireland must be equipped to compete directly with the UK to ensure aspiring business people are willing to set up new companies here. Reducing Capital Gains Tax (CGT) on entrepreneurs will help to attract, retain and develop start-up businesses and encourage new ideas across the country.

- We will reduce the CGT Entrepreneurial Relief Rate to 10% and increase the chargeable gains threshold to €15m

(iv) Equalise the tax treatment of the self - employed

Self-employed people who have started their own small business and try to make a go of it are discriminated against in the current tax system. Unlike PAYE workers they do not receive the benefit of the €1,650 tax credit and receive a third of that in the Earned Income Tax Credit. This means their hard earned income is subjected to an even higher effective tax rate regardless of the impact they have on the broader economy and community. This type of tax discrimination is symptomatic of a state attitude that demotes entrepreneurship instead of fostering and cultivating it. We will move to rectify this discrimination.

- We will increase the earned income tax credit from €550 to €1,650 at a cost of €123m and increase the earned income tax credit in line with the PAYE Tax credit to ensure equalisation is maintained into the future.

(v) Allow Irish SMEs compete for public service contracts

The state is the biggest employer in the country and invests enormous sums of money in public service contracts every year. Ireland's public procurement market is worth an estimated €12bn per annum. Irish SMEs are at a serious disadvantage in competing for contracts where the criteria laid out involved minimum turnover levels far in excess of what a small Irish company can achieve. Furthermore in the long term the competitiveness of the procurement process is damaged by the narrow range of businesses eligible to compete.

- We will open up the procurement process to ensure all businesses can benefit. We will work within EU rules to ensure that Irish SMEs are not disadvantaged in tendering for public service contracts. This will include creating a Public Procurement Ombudsman to ensure SMEs are facilitated to compete for contracts. This will eliminate discriminatory requirements which effectively exclude fair competition in many cases.

(vi) Tackle the shadow economy

SMEs bear the brunt of an extensive shadow economy that damages business, dampens employment and reduces exchequer revenues. The scale of the shadow economy ranges from an estimated €5-20bn costing the state enormous sums of money and inflicting immense damage on compliant companies.

- We will take on the shadow economy by encouraging greater use of electronic payment systems, setting a target for an annual 10% increase in e-transactions over the course of the next government.

(vii) Support a fair Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) agreement

Fianna Fáil supports the principle of removing barriers to trade. This is essential for Ireland to be successful. However, we also believe that trade deals must be fair and must protect the position of states which aim to ensure high living and employment standards.

An ambitious and comprehensive TTIP (Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership) agreement between the EU and United States has the potential to add up to 10,000 jobs to the Irish economy across a wide range of businesses. However there are a number of issues that cannot be compromised around food standards and investor-state-dispute-settlement (ISDS) mechanisms to protect Irish interests before full support can be given. We will:

- Defend and ensure that EU standards are not up for negotiation. In particular, we recognise the importance of maintaining the high standard of food safety in Europe. Fianna Fáil will only support a TTIP deal which fully upholds food safety standards to the highest levels.
- Work at an EU level to reform the ISDS proposals.
- Ensure all companies benefit from the opportunities opened up by the trade deal by working with the European Commission and member states to facilitate the participation of SMEs' in transatlantic trade after the agreement takes effect.

(viii) Provide access to vacant or underutilised public property to use as incubation centres

For fledgling companies the costs of accessing property to get going can be crippling. In addition to rental cost, commercial rates can fatally undermine a business starting out. The state is one of the biggest property owners in the country with significant sections of property currently under-utilised or lying entirely vacant.

- We will undertake in 2016 a local authority survey of suitable properties including unused public buildings and earmark them as incubation units for start-ups. These units will be

subjected to a ‘use it or lose it’ clause to maximise their impact. Community groups hoping to set up their own enterprise will also be eligible to apply for these units.

(ix) Promote Social Entrepreneurship

Social Enterprise is an innovative way of using business acumen to achieve broader social goals. It already empowers some 30,000 people across the country through 1,400 enterprises. With the right state support and framework the area has immense potential to grow and expand employment numbers while tackling a wide variety of social issues.

- We will extend the role of Local Enterprise Offices to support Social Enterprise Initiatives, expand CSO surveys to encompass social enterprise activity, move social enterprise clearly under the remit of the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, establish social enterprise-specific training courses and broaden out finance guarantees to assist the attraction of investment.

(x) Reform the Commercial Rates System

The commercial rates system has to encourage start-ups and regional development not penalise them. A reformed system will secure the foundations of local authority finance and help promote enterprise into the future. Our measures are targeted to help business and revitalise town centres across Ireland within the existing financial envelope of local authorities. We will:

- Establish a Rate Holiday for start-up businesses

Encouraging and fostering entrepreneurship is vital to building a vibrant economy across both rural and urban Ireland. Hefty commercial rates are a deterrent to start-up businesses. Town centres are suffering from a severe drain to out of town shopping developments where a reduced commercial rates and parking charge burden allows business to grow and expand leaving towns hollowed out. We need to breathe new life into our cities, towns and villages and encourage start-ups to take the risk and start creating jobs.

- We will introduce a rate relief scheme for start-up companies who set up in town centres and other neglected areas specified by the local authority. This incentive will be for up to two years in order to help the business finds its feet and get going.

- Introduce an “Inability to pay” clause for struggling businesses

The government has continually declined to introduce an “inability to pay” clause in the rates process. This means that businesses in severe financial difficulty are hit with a commercial rates bill regardless of the potentially disastrous impact it will have. Across Ireland significant parts of bills are going unpaid with businesses accumulating massive debt as they simply cannot afford to meet their commercial rates obligation. The lack of recognition of turnover

and ability to pay is destroying businesses that are struggling to hold on and keep jobs let alone create them.

- We will introduce an “inability to pay clause” in local government legislation to ensure that turnover and profit is taken into account by local authorities in calculating the commercial rates for individual businesses. This will establish a transparent and accessible process which will allow businesses to appeal commercial rates bills on the grounds of financial constraint directly to the local authority in a clear organised format.

- Introduce long-term reform of Commercial Rates on a revenue neutral basis

Some €1.5bn is raised for local authorities every year through the commercial rates system. The weight of this burden falls on traditional bricks and mortar premises at the heart of communities. The current system is effectively a disincentive to locating premises in the heart of our towns and cities. Equally it provides no support for new and innovative business.

It is time to re-evaluate the long term viability of what is in effect a property tax on businesses in an age when business is becoming increasingly mobile.

- We will initiate a joint departmental report between the Department of the Environment & Local Government, the Department of Finance and the Department of Public Expenditure & Reform on the future of the Commercial Rates system drawing on independent expertise and international experience. Its terms of reference will include finalising proposals for flexibility, encouraging town centre development and supporting new businesses. The report will be issued within 12 months with a clear action list for the government to carry out.

(xi) Ban Zero Hours contracts and tackle exploitative self-employment contracts

Bringing clarity to work hours is as essential to creating decent jobs as increasing the rate that a worker is paid and helping vulnerable families reliant upon welfare. Workers in precarious zero hour contract positions face uncertainty every week, as to the hours they are required to do and this leads to a lack of security in relation to how much they are actually going to earn. On a broader level, low pay and casual working arrangements prevent people from getting mortgages, entering rental agreements and being able to make financial commitments. Tackling this is an essential part of our commitment to creating decent jobs as part of our vision for “An Ireland for all”. We will:

- Ban zero hour contracts by changing the remit of the Low Pay Commission to put forward legislation on banded-hour contracts for those on low pay. This will allow workers on low and

zero hour contracts a minimum set of hours and the right to request more hours as practised in other larger retailers.

- Clamp down on exploitative bogus self-employment contracts. These contracts, which are becoming increasingly prevalent, circumvent basic employee rights in relation to holiday pay, sick pay and pension contributions and deprive the State of PRSI revenue.

(xii) Reform JobBridge & strengthen interns' employment rights

For many young people starting out in life trying to get a foothold on the career ladder is increasingly difficult. The government's JobBridge scheme has been unfairly exploited by certain employers while unpaid internships have exploded beyond short work experience to form a major part of the employment market for young people. The instability and precarious nature of this employment and its financial implications is squeezing out opportunity for large parts of a generation. A "pay to play" system risks creating an even more divided country. As part of our commitment to creating decent jobs and achieving "An Ireland for all" we will protect the rights of young people and strengthen their job prospects. We will:

- Introduce legislation that provides clarity on employment rights associated with internships and work experience. In line with current employment legislation, if an intern is doing work of value to the employer, has a similar level of supervision and responsibility as the rest of the workforce, then he or she should be paid at least the minimum wage.
- Place a four week limit on unpaid internships in order to discourage and guard against the potential exploitation of unpaid workers by employers.
- Reform the JobBridge scheme to ensure participants receive adequate on the job experience with relevant employers.

(xiii) Expand and diversify apprenticeships

Skilled craftspeople with practical training are an integral part of the economy. Ireland needs to develop a broader spectrum of opportunities for young people who wish to learn a trade with real experience. Apprenticeships are vital in building up a skilled workforce across a wide range of sectors. We need additional avenues to a decent job that does not rely on a university education. A diverse range of apprenticeship routes across IT, Finance as well as the traditional sectors similar to the model pursued in Germany will help tackle unemployment and ensure Ireland does not suffer from a skills mismatch in its economy. These are demand led schemes but the state has an important role in facilitating and developing the courses involved. We have earmarked €7m to accommodate initial future increases in numbers.

- We will expand the number of apprenticeships and broaden out the range of areas where they are available.

(xiv) Implement the Living Wage across Government Departments

Fianna Fáil has always protected citizens in this state who are on low pay. We introduced the National Minimum Wage (NMW) Act in 2000 which gave all employees a legal statutory entitlement to a minimum wage. We suggested and welcomed the most recent increase to the minimum wage. It allowed a careful balance against causing any adverse effect on job creation.

Establishing a "Living Wage" is an important measure in ensuring that works pays at all levels. An adequate living wage, which has been estimated at €11.50 an hour, is vital to attracting more people in the workforce. The living wage forms part of our commitment to creating decent jobs across the country. The government, as the largest employer in the country, should act as a role model in this regard. This will set a broader standard without placing an undue legislative burden upon employers struggling to keep down costs.

- We will make the Living Wage mandatory across all government departments. 12 out of 15 government departments responded to our request for information on the cost of implementing the living. The total cost across these departments has been estimated at €9.7m.

Advance Science & Research

Fianna Fáil established Science Foundation Ireland (SFI) in 1999 - this was a game changer and grew the reputation of Irish scientific research. Support for science and innovation is essential to ensure that Ireland is a high-value economy supporting good jobs in the future. For the past five years the emphasis has been on publicity for ministers over a credible policy covering a diverse area. Fine Gael and Labour have limited funding opportunities and damaged a research system which had previously achieved immense progress. For example, for two years there was no science strategy in operation. We will end this neglect and implement an investment policy based on putting faith in individuals and teams rather than imposing restrictive controls.

We will:

(i) Implement Multi-Annual Funding for Science & Research

The government's recently published science strategy is highly unambitious and fails to match its rhetoric with serious funding commitments. In contrast, the last Strategy for Science, Technology and Innovation published by Fianna Fáil set out very specific commitments and targets. Research requires a multi-annual commitment in order to secure staff and take the time necessary to undertake breakthrough research. We will:

- Revise the Science Strategy and as part of this will provide a five year funding envelope for the sector.
- Establish a new five year funding cycle for the Programme for Research in Third Level Institutions (PRTI) of €300 million for investment specially earmarked for capital investment in research facilities as well as research projects. Based on previous iterations we believe this funding pool could attract matching funding from private sources and institutions themselves of equal proportions.

(ii) Ring-fence funding for programmes in a broader range of areas

Research prioritisation was introduced by Fianna Fáil in order to ensure Ireland developed a critical mass of excellent research in strategically important areas. This approach has been successful. However, the more radical approach of this government has been to squeeze funding for all areas outside of these fields. This is causing immense damage to our research base and involves a fundamental misunderstanding of how research and innovation works. A research-intensive economy cannot exist without a broad base in primary research. In addition, genuine breakthroughs which create new industries and horizons primarily emerge from research cultures which value basic science. The new Science Strategy's commitment to this area is little more than a fig-leaf. We will:

- Ring-fence funding for the support of basic science outside of the research prioritisation areas.

- Maintain a separate budget for research in the humanities and social sciences as part of a dedicated body within the Higher Education Authority.
- Support the idea of a broad-based research capacity based on innovations driven by third-level institutions working in cooperation with each other.
- Continue the support begun under our Centres for Science Engineering and Technology for critical mass in key priority areas based on innovation from within the system and cooperation with industry.
- Publish an annual report on the balance of research funding by all principal research funding agencies.
- Ensure that capital programmes such as the Programme for Research in Third-Level Institutions are linked to overall strategic development goals in higher education.

(iii) Ensure a sound evidence-base for science policy

Ireland has not yet been successful in embedding an appreciation of up to date science within its decision-making processes. It is necessary to implement a complete reform of how scientific advice is accessed and utilised by government. We will:

- Separate the Office of Chief Science Adviser from any agency or implementation responsibilities. The Office will be moved to the Department of the Taoiseach and take charge of a Science and Innovation Division in the Department.
- Diversify the Office to contain a balance of expertise between education, research and business experience.
- Empower the Office to coordinate a panel of scientific advisers available to provide confidential advice to government on detailed issues as they arise.

(iv) Link researchers and innovators

There remain important blockages preventing our research base from maximising its impact within industry. This is particularly the case for SMEs, who have a very low rate of engagement with research.

- We will review Intellectual Property requirements concerning state-funded research to encourage innovation.

Support the Self-employed

The self-employed are a key dynamic force in our economy which has too often been ignored in official policy. If we are to have an innovative and high-value economy we must support risk-takers.

We will:

(i) Equalise the tax treatment of the self-employed

The tax code currently imposes a draconian burden on self-employed people through an anomaly that can see self-employed people pay a considerably higher proportion of their income as tax, particularly at lower income levels. This acts as a massive barrier to people willing to take the risk in setting up their own business and actively punishes enterprise rather than rewarding it. It is at heart, grossly unfair and inequitable.

- We will remove the tax anomaly for the self-employed over the course of the next government to ensure the self-employed pay the same tax on the same wage. The Earned Income credit will be increased by 300% to €1,650 to bring it in line with PAYE earned income credits. The full year cost of this is €123m.

(ii) Move towards a social welfare safety net for the self employed

A further disincentive to potential entrepreneurs considering starting a business is the threadbare social welfare safety net. This is an active impediment to undertaking the risk inherent in creating new businesses. Our welfare system should support existing business people and budding entrepreneurs who will lead the way in job creation in their communities.

- We will explore new mechanisms to allow self-employed people to make full Class A equivalent PRSI contributions in order to qualify for Jobseekers Benefit and Invalidity Benefit.

(iii) Provide business advice vouchers to help more start-ups survive

Good financial management is critical to the success of any business. Without it, a business can be set for failure from the start. Financial decisions made by entrepreneurs at the earliest stages of their business can be the most important, as well as the most difficult. Many budding entrepreneurs have the business ideas, vision and enthusiasm to see their idea through, but lack the necessary financial skills to ensure the idea becomes a business reality.

- We will introduce a Business Advice Voucher scheme, open to 5,000 entrepreneurs in the start-up stage and early growth phase, who require finance to support their enterprise, grow and scale up. Vouchers worth €2,500 each would assist entrepreneurs in managing and growing their business. Such voucher provision would assist an entrepreneur in availing

of a local business advisor, discussing the business's financial elements, establishing if their business plan in operation is meeting targets, while reviewing business performance to-date. The total cost of this annually would be €12.5m

(iv) Encourage Job creation through Employer PRSI Relief

Reducing the costs of generating new jobs is vital to spurring further growth and reducing unemployment. PRSI is a significant barrier to employers who want to expand and are prevented from doing so by onerous costs.

- We will introduce a new PRSI relief system that reflects the increase in the headcount of a business encouraging further expansion, innovation and employment. In particular we will eliminate PRSI contributions for employers who take on long term unemployed young people aged below 29. This will be done on a revenue neutral basis within the existing budget for employment supports.

(v) Establish new financial supports for young entrepreneurs

Finance is one of the main hurdles preventing young people from starting new business ventures. They do not have the same personal financial resources as established entrepreneurs typically have. Banks apply a set of constraints in the assessment of loan proposals, including credit history, previous business performance and collateral, which mean it is more difficult for young people to obtain external funding, including debt finance. A level playing field is needed in securing access to alternative sources of funding.

- We will establish a Disadvantaged Entrepreneur Start-up Assistance Fund (DESAF). DESAF will invest in supporting aspiring young business entrepreneurs by providing coaching, training and mentoring. This programme would make available seed finance and early stage enterprise capital for young people starting their own business. Young people aged 18–25 years with a viable business plan would be eligible for this programme. An annual allocation of €10m would be made to this fund.

(vi) Set up an Entrepreneur Training and Mentoring Programme (ETMP)

Starting and expanding a business requires a distinct set of skills not always accessible or possible to deliver in traditional courses. A new approach is required.

- We will create an Entrepreneur Training and Mentoring Programme (ETMP). The aim of this programme will be to increase the number of entrepreneurs in Ireland as well as increase the sustainability of existing new enterprises. First-time young entrepreneurs aged over 18 years of age following completion of second level education will be eligible for ETMP. The

programme will provide training and counselling for persons interested in a self-employment career path. Entry into the programme will be permitted to anyone who owns their own business, regardless of how long it has been established. ETMP will offer free training and mentoring services to persons wishing to become self-employed. The ETMP will offer three basic services centred on assessment, training and business counselling. We are allocating €2m on an annual basis towards the operation of this scheme.

Bridge the Digital Divide

Digital infrastructure is now essential for supporting employment in all areas – yet policy has been slow and unambitious. The failure to ensure universal access to a reliable and fast mobile and broader digital infrastructure is a key driver of unbalanced regional development.

We will:

(i) Undertake a national mobile phone coverage audit

A core issue with communications in many parts of Ireland is the dire quality of mobile phone signals. This is directly harming business as well as frustrating people in their day to day lives, another example of the digital communications divide that is leaving many behind. Instead of “hot spots” these rural areas are “not spots” struggling to stay connected with the wider world.

We will:

- Launch a national mobile phone coverage audit under the remit of ComReg, at a cost of €200,000. This audit will form the evidence basis of our plans for improving coverage levels and strength.
- Ensure that details of the audit are publicly available and updated regularly.

(ii) Launch a National Mobile Phone Infrastructure Plan

In order to reduce rural isolation and ensure businesses across the country have a fair opportunity to compete we will actively tackle the mobile phone signal deficit. We will:

- Require Comreg to enforce coverage standards through its licensing contracts which will include meeting national coverage targets within set periods. Where there is no reasonable alternative, we will roll out state funding for improved coverage. We are allocating a capital sum of up to €50m for this purpose.
- Enforce 4G national coverage standards through licensing contracts issued by ComReg.
- Charge ComReg with putting forward proposals on how best Ireland can spearhead 5G mobile coverage.

(iii) Secure Universal Fibre to the home broadband across Ireland

All communities in Ireland need rapid high speed broadband access. It is vital for rural sustainability that homes and businesses join the global digital community. There have been too many commitments left unfilled by Fine Gael and Labour.

Broadband can help open up a global market for rural tourism and small local producers. Ad hoc approaches must be replaced with a bold, ambitious long term plan that will place Ireland at the

forefront of the IT revolution.

Rolling out Fibre to the Home broadband (FTTH) will be a future proofed policy that will equip Ireland with an infrastructure capable of competing in the global economy. FTTH is fibre optic cable capable of delivering download speeds of up to 1 Gigabit per second (Gbps) directly to households and businesses.

- We will support the roll out of fibre optic broadband directly to all premises in the state through commercial operators and direct state intervention, backed by an additional €75m in funding to accelerate roll out.

(iv) Develop Regional Digital Hubs

The Digital Hub Development Agency (DHDA) has been a success in terms of job creation and promotion of digital related learning and training opportunities. Since its establishment in 2003 it has provided flexible office space and business support services to growing technology companies in Dublin. Combined with a renewed physical infrastructure thorough Fibre to the Home broadband and 4G mobile coverage spreading this Digital Hub example across the country this will help generate an IT enterprise revolution in rural Ireland. We will:

- Build on the success of the DHDA by engaging with local authorities to ensure that rural Ireland also benefits from the development of the digital sector.
- Provide up to €1m of funding to each local authority. This will support entrepreneurship throughout the country and enable tomorrow's entrepreneurs to grow businesses and jobs in their home county.

Secure a fair price for farmers and a successful agri-food sector

The agri-food sector is not only Ireland's most important indigenous industry; it also lies at the heart of social and economic life throughout much of the country. There are clear imbalances which are undermining its long-term sustainability. Especially important is the manner in which family farmers are increasingly finding it difficult to receive fair prices for their produce. We believe action is now required to ensure that producers can earn a decent living as part of a dynamic and innovative sector.

We will:

(i) Establish a national Food Ombudsman and work for new fair price legislation at EU level

The future of the family farm unit and long term food security is reliant upon producing goods at a profit. Farmers are struggling to make a sustainable income in the face of on-going price erosion by large multiple retailers. Tackling the fundamental problems of price and profitability facing the family farm requires a combination of national and EU action. A fair price for their product is the central plank of Fianna Fáil agriculture policy and is vital to the long term survival and success of the horticulture, beef, sheep, liquid milk and poultry sectors. We will:

- Amend consumer law to provide for a "Food Ombudsman" and protection of primary producers in national law.
- Press at an EU level for legislation focusing on two interlinked issues. Firstly ensuring that there is transparency in the food chain and secondly that the over dominance of a small number of players is curbed in the interest of food security and the retention of family farming in the EU.
- Seek specific EU legislation making it mandatory on food retailing firms that exceed certain thresholds to supply information and data on the gross margins they obtain on specific food items for each of the Member States in which they operate.

(ii) Reform the inspections system

The impact of "Green tape" and an intrusive inspection regime is creating undue stress and concern for working farmers already struggling to make ends meet. Many families fear the threat of failing an inspection and subsequent financial penalties.

- We will introduce a fairer and more transparent inspection system based on the yellow card model that gives farmers a fair but firm warning on non-intentional non-compliance with measures. This means that failure will not instantly meet with potentially disastrous penalties but rather with a clear introduction to fix the problem before penalties are levied. This will be introduced in co-ordination with the EU.

(iii) Restore Farm Assist and the Rural Social Scheme

In order to maintain the family farm unit across the country state supports are vital to making it financially viable for families. Measures such as Farm Assist and the Rural Social Scheme combined help support low income farmers make a living and keep farming their lands. In areas where profitable farming is difficult to achieve Farm Assist is a vital safety net and has helped generations of farmers keep their holdings and communities alive. We will:

- Increase the number of places on the Rural Social Scheme by 2,500 on a phased basis at annual cost of €42.5m.
- Restore Farm Assist means testing rules to the rules that applied in 2011 at a cost of €10m annually. This will encourage more enterprise and increased production from small farmers.

(iv) Enhance and reform the Beef Genomics Scheme

The beef industry is the cornerstone of Irish agriculture and employs more people than any other sector. However the administrative burden and low returns of the government's new Beef Genomics scheme is undermining this vital industry. The sector requires targeted supports that are accessible to all ordinary farmers not an administrative black hole. We will:

- Increase funding to the Beef Genomics scheme by 25% to top up payments moving towards €200 per head payments on the first 20 cows. We will use the mid-term CAP review to make the scheme a pillar of the future of the beef industry. The cost of this measure will be €12.5m annually in additional funding. Furthermore RDP underspend will be used to supplement this finance as it becomes available.
- Work to ensure that processors and supermarkets pay proper prices for quality Irish beef as part of the broader efforts to increase price transparency and strengthen profitable farming.
- Appoint a beef regulator under the auspices of the new Food Ombudsman body to ensure that the dominant position of a small number of processors on the price of cattle is not abused.

(v) Introduce a new Primary School Farm Safety Programme

Farm safety deaths remain a serious threat to old and young alike. 2014 witnessed a disturbing spike in avoidable fatalities that devastated families and communities. Fianna Fáil is committed to addressing farm safety.

- We will introduce a new primary school level programme on farm safety in rural areas. Based on the successful RSA road safety education programme we will target instilling farm safety at a young age. Combined with this, the Health and Safety authority will adapt a renewed focus on key risk areas and enhance co-operation with the industry to address safety concerns.

(vi) Roll out an “Island of Ireland” suckler beef label

A geographical beef indicator would help build a distinctive brand for beef produced on the island of Ireland. This cross border initiative would benefit beef farmers across the island.

Rather than a national brand which is unavailable under EU rules the geographic indicator can encompass the entire island such as Welsh beef. In addition the distinct brand will help Irish beef compete following the completion of TTIP negotiations.

- We will develop an “Island of Ireland” suckler beef label as allowed under EU rules.

(vii) Set up a Market Access unit in the Department of Agriculture

Access to international markets will be critical to the future development of the agri-food industry in Ireland. Markets such as China offer immense potential for future growth. In conjunction with our embassies across the globe, the Department of Agriculture & Food must co-ordinate market access initiatives. This means effectively weaving together the various strands within the department into one effect unit.

- We will establish a Market Access unit in the Department of Agriculture & Food to spearhead new markets for Irish agri-food produce.

(viii) Fully Realise Food Harvest 2020 and Food Wise 2025

Fianna Fáil introduced Food Harvest 2020 as a bold new blueprint for the future development of the Irish agriculture industry. It set out a framework for the growth and expansion of agrifood across a broad number of areas generating and sustaining employment in rural Ireland. Food Wise 2025 builds on the success of that visionary document. The strength of our strategic vision has been demonstrated by the fact that the current government has tried to claim authorship.

- We are committed to fully realising Ireland’s potential for a green, sustainable agriculture industry as set out in Food Harvest 2020 and Food Wise 2025.

(ix) Encourage the next generation of farmers

Farming faces a serious demographic challenge as the bulk of the agricultural workforce grows older and retires. The long term future of the industry needs fresh blood to rejuvenate it. The 2013 CAP agreement does not go far enough in achieving the supports necessary to draw in and sustain a new generation of Irish farmers.

- We will press for a mid-term review of CAP and will fight to ensure all farmers under 40 have access to the same entitlements regardless of when they started farming in order to remove the current discriminatory set up. We will also incentivise farm family partnerships to allow older farmers to get the next generation involved.

(x) Use RDP underspend to increase payment under the Areas of Natural Constraints scheme

The Areas of Natural Constraints (ANC) scheme is an important mechanism to help maintain the continued use of agricultural lands and ensure farmers serve as custodians of the peerless Irish countryside. Additional financial resources are necessary to ensure that farmers on the most disadvantaged lands are maintained and lands do not fall into disuse and disrepair. This additional funding to areas with limited capacity will underpin a more regionally balanced and sustainable farming system across Ireland.

- We will use the CAP mid-term review to direct any future underspend in the RDP to finance increased ANC expenditure.

(xi) Review market intervention tools for the Dairy sector

It is imperative that the current European tools for price intervention are reviewed as catered for under the 2013 CAP Regulation to cater for the current market volatility. We will:

- Push at EU level for a review of price intervention tools in the Dairy sector and other effected areas. EU market intervention levels should also reflect average production costs. Such measures would send a strong message to the markets.
- Work with farmer groups to invest in education schemes to promote knowledge transfer around futures markets, insurances, fixed priced term contracts, risk management actions to protect the primary producer and cooperatives.

(xii) Secure a strong Fisheries sector

Fisheries are a vital part of local employment of coastal communities across Ireland and make a significant contribution to the Irish economy. Fianna Fáil is committed to helping to secure a strong and vibrant fisheries sector, copperfastening their role at the heart of towns and villages along Ireland's beautiful coastline. We will:

- Appoint a Minister with full responsibility for fisheries and place all responsibility for fisheries including inland fisheries and marine leisure in a single government department.
- Promote sustainable fishing and aquaculture practices to achieve long term security of fish stocks and incomes of fishermen and related sectors.
- Establish an independent body to adjudicate and administer the current unacceptable regime of aquaculture licensing.
- Develop and implement a specialised policy for traditional coastal fishing areas in consultation with those communities.
- Work to reform the EU Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) in future reviews with a view to enlarge the fishing opportunities (days at sea, fishing gear, quotas) for the Irish industry. We would apportion particular attention to the needs of the inshore fleet as additional fishing

opportunities become available.

- Seek the immediate implementation of the avoidance and minimisation measure on the discards ban as contained in the new CFP.
- Promote maximum flexibility in applying the regulatory regime, including a more flexible approach to the transfer of quotas and the landing of catches.
- Introduce a more flexible and proportionate approach to inspections. Vessels subject to inspection on returning to port should be dealt with promptly.

(xiii) Secure Ireland's place as the global leader in the Equine industry

Horse racing and breeding is a strong indigenous industry with a long historic tradition on this island. The industry employs thousands directly and indirectly, drawing tourists from across the globe and contributing up to €6bn to the Irish economy. We must maximise the economic impact and job potential of this enormous resource and consolidate its position as a first in class leader in the global industry. We will:

- Secure the long term funding of the horse racing sector with adequate prize money and logistical supports to ensure its prestige and credibility as the global leader is fully maintained.
- Draw up and implement a national plan for the development of the equine industry.

Protect our Corporate Tax Rate & rebuild the Eurozone

Critical Eurozone decisions have had a major impact on the performance of the Irish economy. The future strength of the common currency area and wider EU will continue to be central to our success. As such, this government's policy of sitting on the side-lines as vital issues are discussed must be replaced by a proactive engagement on the reform and development of the Eurozone.

We will:

(i) Protect and fully maintain our 12.5% Corporate Tax Rate

Our vision for Ireland is a thriving economy with a strong multinational sector and vibrant indigenous industry. Our corporate tax rate is a vital part of Ireland's attractiveness to Foreign Direct Investment and driving on our indigenous industries. We have a strong record of fighting to protect the rate and securing it in negotiations on EU treaties. The EU Commission has re-launched plans for a Common Consolidate Corporate Tax Base (CCCTB) which is essentially a fresh route to removing sovereignty over setting national taxation rates. Ireland's rate is transparent and fair. We will:

- Not accept or implement any increase in Ireland's Corporation Tax rate.
- Oppose and, if necessary, veto any measure to weaken or reduce national control of corporation tax rates.

(ii) Rebuild Economic and Monetary Union to prevent a future crisis

The architecture to ensure the long-term sustainability of the Eurozone still needs to be put in place to provide a secure basis for the future prosperity of the Union. The ECB's mandate must require policies for targeting growth as well as targeting inflation. We will

- Ensure that Ireland supports proposals to reform the Eurozone and EU so as to address core failures in existing policies.
- Work towards a re-examination of the structures of the Economic and Monetary Union as well as the mandate of the European Central Bank.

(iii) Strengthen Banking Union

A fully functioning banking union is vital to ensuring monetary union is a long term viable project. The weaknesses of the Euro architecture were ruthlessly exposed in the maelstrom of the economic crisis and the fragility of banking union fully revealed. The current agreements on a banking union are completely inadequate to withstand a major shock.

- We will push for the completion of a more ambitious banking union including a common regulation, deposit insurance and resolution mechanism.

(iv) Fight for fairness on Bank-related debt

The Euro Area Heads of State or Government agreed in June 2012 to “break the vicious circle” between banks and sovereigns. It is now time to recognise the unfair burden Ireland has borne due to ECB actions at critical points of the financial crisis. The government has allowed this policy priority to slip off the agenda. We will:

- Work to ensure that the EU fulfils its commitment to separate sovereign debt and banking debt within the Union and vindicate the sacrifices and hard work of the Irish people.
- Immediately table a request to the European Council and ECB that Ireland should receive all profits accruing to the ECB in relation to holdings of debts incurred during the financial crisis.
- Seek a commitment that holdings of promissory note-related debt by the Central Bank be held to maturity and, therefore, that interest payments will mostly be returned to the Exchequer.

(v) Support a more substantial Fiscal and Transfer Union

Monetary Union is ultimately flawed without some fiscal capacity. Weaker countries and regions need the possibility of accessing stabilising resources at times of crisis. In order to re-balance this asymmetrical distribution of consequences from monetary union, real fiscal transfers to help weaker countries is vital.

- We will call for a more ambitious fiscal union within the EU, in particular one which involves transfers between states, mutual bond issuances and allows the Union some modest revenue raising capacity in order to balance the economic equilibrium of the EU.

(vi) Create a Rainy Day Fund

Ireland needs to prepare for any future downturn due to the volatile international economic climate. The National Pension Reserve Fund was an important source of counter cyclical investment and sets an example of putting aside money to invest during a downturn. A new Rainy Day fund is needed to insulate us from the effects of future recessions in the Eurozone. These countercyclical measures will help to boost economic activity when it is needed the most.

- We will ensure that once a balanced budget is achieved in 2017 any increase in corporation tax revenue above a baseline of €6.6 billion should be put aside to lessen the impact of any future slowdown in the economy. These funds would then only be drawn on if the unemployment level rose by 1% (or was forecast to rise by that level). The money would be specifically used for infrastructure projects which would cushion the impact of a slowdown in the economy.

Create decent jobs & support enterprise

2

**Cut costs for families
& improve the services
they rely on**

Cut costs for families & improve the services they rely on

Fianna Fáil will ease the burden on families and strengthen public services. We will:

Reduce the cost of living

- Eliminate USC for Low and Middle Income earners up to €80,000
- Abolish Irish Water & scrap water charges
- Double the Home Carer Tax credit to €2,000
- Reduce DIRT by 3%

Lower childcare costs and help working parents

- Create a €2,000 childcare support tax credit for parents
- Increase child benefit by €10
- Expand maternity benefit to 30 weeks and allow for shared leave between parents
- Raise quality standards for childcare

Create a fairer welfare system

- Raise the state pension by €30 to €263 a week
- Increase working age payments by €10
- Boost carers allowance, disability benefit, invalidity & blind pension by a further €10 per week top-up
- Expand Credit Union's role in providing affordable community finance

Tackle big class sizes and create an education system for all

- Reduce average class sizes at primary level to 23:1 by 2021
- Establish on-site Early intervention teams for children with developmental needs
- Introduce modern languages and coding courses at primary school level
- Ensure every secondary school has a full time guidance service
- Legislate to protect children from Cyber Bullying
- Freeze student fees, increase maintenance grants and restore post grad grants

Support a publicly funded health care system

- Reduce Emergency Department waiting times to a maximum of 6 hours
- Abolish Prescription Fees

- Reduce the Drug Payment Scheme threshold from €144 to €100 per month
 - Re-activate a €100m National Treatment Purchase Fund
 - Establish a new National Mental Health Authority
 - Rebalance the Health budget towards primary care
 - Boost GP numbers by 250, Consultants by 500 and Nurses by 4,000
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During the past number of years, working families have been hit by steadily rising costs linked to government actions and by crisis after crisis hitting the public services they rely upon. Families are not feeling the recovery and are running just to stand still. Instead of working towards building a better future for their children they are struggling just to pay their bills. Rather than supporting them in their day to day lives, when they get sick or grow old the services of the state are being steadily eroded by Fine Gael and Labour neglect.

In five consecutive budgets Fine Gael and Labour chose to be regressive in the impact of its budgetary measures. Independent reviews have confirmed this. Now Fine Gael wants to double-down on their regressive policies – moving towards Enda Kenny’s objective of US levels of taxation.

In contrast Fianna Fáil is proposing a progressive approach. We want to implement a range of proposals to both reduce taxes on low and middle-income earners but also to make sure that we have the public services required to meet our country’s social and economic obligations to this and future generations.

The growing chaos and neglect of public services by this government will do lasting damage to our country if it is not reversed. Investment in fundamental state services such as Health and Education is essential to maintaining the social fabric of Irish life. Sustaining our welfare system is central to upholding the basic standards of decency we are all entitled to as Irish citizens. All the while, ordinary families need a break from the burden of taxation and deserve to feel the financial benefit of economic growth. Our policies reflect those pressing concerns and will help to reform and strengthen our public services and the conditions of the staff who work in them.

We believe that the state has an important role in helping families and communities to reach their full potential. We will cut the cost of living for families and invest in strong state services to give all families the opportunities they deserve.

Reduce the cost of living

Far too many families are faced with a continued struggle in the face of increases in their costs of living. Fine Gael and Labour have introduced 45 separate tax increases including 13 increases in tax on income causing real hardship for families.

We will:

(i) Eliminate USC for all income earners on the first €80,000 of income

The Universal Social Charge (USC) was introduced in 2010 as a response to the grave fiscal challenge the country faced at the time. It has served its purpose in shoring up the state's finances during a deeply turbulent period. Fine Gael and Labour campaigned against it in 2011 but have left it in place for five years. A significant reduction in the burden of USC will help families by giving them more in their back pockets. The cost of this is €2.64bn in a full year.

- We will eliminate the USC for low and middle income earners by abolishing the 1%, 3% and 5.5% bands and increasing the 8% band threshold to income above €80,000.

(ii) Abolish Irish Water and end water charges

Irish Water has been a complete failure on the part of the government. Since it failed the Eurostat test, the very reason it was set up, it is incapable of delivering major investment in our water network. Instead it is imposing a water charges regime where families are paying for a service that does not deliver, operated by a quango that simply is not working. People should not be expected to pay for a service that is not up to standard. We need a 21st century water system that will attract global business investment, allow businesses and agriculture to expand and provide safe water to homes. Irish Water has failed to achieve basic public legitimacy, has diverted resources away from the water infrastructure and does not have the capacity to focus on its most important tasks. We will:

- End the failed water charges regime. This will save families €160 per year and allow the better use of state resources.
- Abolish Irish Water and create a new slimmed down agency to deliver the national water investment programme. The National Water directorate will develop a nationwide approach while local services will be handed back to democratically elected local authorities with on the ground knowledge.

According to the Department of the Environment the net cost of scrapping water charges would be of the order of €210m annually. This would be replaced by a direct state subvention to the new National Water Directorate, which will be run at an approximate cost of €16.2m per annum. We would also fully provide for the costs of winding down Irish Water, at a cost of €9.1m and

abolish the government's botched Water Conservation grant to save the state €110m.

(iii) Push down energy costs

Ireland's current energy policy is driving up consumer prices, making our economy uncompetitive and failing to tap into the opportunities presented by community energy projects. It is time for policy makers to develop a national energy policy which is low in cost, is respectful of local communities and their ability to contribute to our renewable energy future and which secures our energy supply from external energy shocks. We will:

- Achieve a balanced energy mix to meet our EU Climate Change targets.
- Diversify our renewable energy mix and explore Bio-Mass and solar as additional sources of renewable energy.
- Reform the Commission for Energy regulation to help drive down prices for business and families.
- Commission a full economic review of wind energy, its impact on energy prices and its long term sustainability in supplying the Irish national grid.
- Ensure that extensions to the national Grid and interconnectors are underground where possible and respect areas of natural beauty.
- Place climate and energy policy together in one Department in order to ensure a joined up, co-ordinated approach to meeting our Climate Change energy emissions targets.

(iv) Reduce DIRT by 3%

Savers have got a very raw deal under this government. The tax on the interest earned by savers has been increased by a massive 14%. In addition, anyone with unearned income of greater than €5,000 has to pay an extra 4% PRSI on deposit interest, bringing the total tax on interest earned to 45%. This is a punitive tax on people who have prudently saved money. Fianna Fáil is committed to reforming and reducing the tax on savings and making it more attractive for people to put money aside.

- We will reduce the rate of DIRT from 41% to 38%. this will cost €22m annually.

(v) Cap local property tax charges

Fianna Fáil successfully campaigned to prevent a huge rise in local property tax bills in 2017. We are committed to ensuring that homeowners are not hit with large increases after the next valuation date. We will:

- Legislate to ensure fair treatment of all householders and prevent councils from implementing increases in the overall property tax take in their local area.
- Examine ways in which the operation of the tax can be made fairer including offering a reduction to apartment owners and others in managed estates who pay for local services such as lighting, maintenance, grass cutting, road repairs etc through their management fees.

Support families by introducing a childcare support tax credit

Helping families with the cost of childcare is a priority for Fianna Fáil. We believe that a range of social and economic objectives require that families be helped with the pressure of these costs.

We will:

(i) Create a €2,000 childcare support tax credit

The burden of childcare costs is crippling working families and preventing many parents from taking up employment. In particular, the burden of childcare costs mostly affects women who continue to bear the bulk of responsibility of childcare. Childcare supports must reflect the diverse and unique circumstances of each family rather than a crude one size fits all approach. Parents are in the best place to know what is right for their family and the state must support that by giving them real choice and flexibility. This means choosing what is best for their child whether looked after in a home or centre based setting.

- We will directly support working parents with a progressive tax credit worth €2,000 for average income households to help them deal with childcare costs. Low income households can benefit up to €5,000.
- The Childcare Support Credit will have three main goals:
 1. To Ease the Cost of Childcare for Working Families
 2. To Enable all Parents to Afford Good Quality Childcare
 3. To Facilitate Parents of Young Children to Participate in Employment
- The Childcare Support Credit will cover 20 to 40 per cent of families' childcare costs, depending on their income. Parents will be responsible for choosing the childcare arrangements and type of childcare provider, that best suit their needs.
- The Childcare Support Credit will be allocated on the basis of the income of one parent – the designated Primary Care Giver, which is currently initially established for tax purposes at birth cert registration. The designated recipient of the Childcare Support Credit will have to work a minimum of 25 hours per week to be fully eligible to participate in the scheme.
- The support credit will be progressive, based on three income bands with an income of €35,000 receiving a credit of €2,000. In addition parents who do not pay enough tax to avail of the full tax credit return (e.g. a lone parent earning between €30,000 and €33,000), they will receive a cash subsidy payment for the balance.

The total estimated cost of this measure is €235m per annum.

(ii) Expand maternity benefit from 26 to 30 weeks and allow for shared leave between parents

In order to give parents increased choice and the option to spend more time with a child during its special first few months without damaging career progress, maternity leave should be increased. This will allow for a better work life balance, give parents more flexibility in their career and contribute enormously to the well-being of the new born child. We will:

- Increase maternity benefit from 26 weeks to 30 weeks at a cost of €40m per annum.
- Implement legislation already published by Fianna Fáil allowing for the sharing of paid and unpaid leave between mothers and fathers (or between two guardians). For many parents working full-time it will be more manageable to share leave from their career and allow both parents to share the responsibility of care more evenly between them.
- Extend Parental Leave Entitlements, which can currently be taken only until a child is 8 years of age, for parents up until their child is 12 years. This will ensure that parents have a greater opportunity to use their statutory parental leave entitlement.

(iii) Raise quality standards for childcare

Each child, regardless of background, deserves the best possible start in life. To achieve this Ireland needs a childcare service that is fully trained and equipped to support them. It is central to the future success and positive impact of expanding the free pre-school year and tackling childcare costs that the childcare sector reaches the highest possible standards. The levels of effective early childhood care and education in early childhood services depends on having highly skilled and trained staff, and a high ratio of staff to children. Therefore we are committed to incentivising further training and upskilling for staff, and have earmarked €39m for that purpose. We will:

- Put a Professional Development Fund in place similar to the existing Learner Fund for staff, but with greater resources and higher ambitions. In line with increased investment, we will revise the conditions of DCYA childcare programme funding contracts as an incentive to raise quality standards for the early childhood workforce as follows:
 - Introduce Higher Capitation Rates for Level 8 and above qualifications as an incentive for up-skilling and agree a professional pathway for staff.
 - Ensure higher capitation rates are passed on to staff through an agreed salary scale for the early childhood workforce in line with qualifications, levels of experience and job responsibility.
 - Increase early childcare and education programme from 38 to 42 weeks per year for children aged three and over.

- Develop a cohesive national plan with ring fenced funding for the roll-out of Aistear training and Síolta accreditation, putting in place the essential practical supports for early childhood educators to provide quality experiences and opportunities for young children. This will be backed up with the full and rigorous implementation of the 2014 national inspection plan to maintain strong standards.

(iv) Increase funding to Tusla

Tusla is at the heart of protecting vulnerable children and ensuring all children have an equal chance in life. These services and infrastructure will help to look after the best interests of children and give them a fair chance at life. Specifically we will increase the funding to address deficits in child protection and welfare services as well as community programmes such as domestic abuse services Family Resource Centres and early intervention programmes.

- We will increase Tusla funding by €15m to equip the agency to fully perform its duties.

(v) Raise the Homecarer Tax Credit to €2,000

In order to ensure mothers and father's who stay at home to care for children or a look after a parent are not unfairly penalised we will match the €2,000 Childcare Tax credit with a €2,000 Home Carers tax credit. This credit will ensure all families are given a break with the costs of raising a family or looking after a dependent. The increase will benefit families by around €72m overall to help deal with the cost of living.

- We will double the Home Carer Tax Credit from €1,000 to €2,000

(vi) Increase Child Benefit by €10 & maintain it as a universal payment

We are committed to maintaining child benefit as a universal payment to all families. The payment is an integral part of family's household budget and ensures that all parts of Irish society benefit from the Social Welfare system. An increase in the payment to meet inflation rates will help ensure it continues to help families across the country.

- We will maintain the universal payment of child benefit and increase it by €10 per month at an annual cost of €145m.

Create a fairer welfare system

Our welfare system should encourage people to work and support those who cannot due to age, incapacity or economic difficulties. It is the guarantor of the basic level of decency that we set as a country. We will expand welfare payments and strengthen the administration of the system to ensure it does not penalise work but encourages it.

We will:

(i) Increase the state pension by €30 week

Older people have taken a series of hits from this government. The abolition of the Telephone allowance, five-fold surge in prescription charges, reductions in free electricity and gas units, cuts to Home Adaptation grants, axing of the Bereavement grant, medical card cull, have all hit older people with fixed incomes hard.

Fianna Fáil is committed, as part of “An Ireland for all” to an Independent Living Contract which will ensure older people can stay in their own homes which they spent their life working for. The state pension is the basic foundation of older people’s finances, they rely on it to pay the bills and keep going week to week. We will recognise their contribution to the country and the increased cost of living with a €30 increase in the state pension over 5 years at a cumulative annual cost of €927m.

- We will increase the state pension by €30 a week from €233 to €263. This increase covers both the contributory and non-contributory pensions.

(ii) Increase working age benefits by €10 a week

The cutbacks to working age benefits over the past number of years have hit vulnerable families hard. In building “An Ireland for all” we must set a high threshold of decency for all citizens. Families should be supported with an adequate welfare system that meets their needs.

- We will increase working age benefits with a €10 increase in all working age payments from €188 to €198 a week at a cost of €436m.

(iii) Increase the One Parent Family maximum Child age threshold to 12

The reduction in the One Parent Family Allowance from 14 to 7 years of age hit lone parent households hard. Despite promises of a “Scandinavian style” childcare system from the Tánaiste Joan Burton, lone parents trying to raise their family were put under further severe pressure. We will put some €23m back into the hands of hard pressed, lone parents.

- We will increase the One Parent Family Payment scheme maximum child age threshold from seven years to twelve years and move towards full restoration as resources allow.

(iv) Establish a Basic Income Commission

This government introduced a series of regressive budgets that have inflicted profound damage on the basic social fabric of the country. In the midst of economic crisis Fine Gael and Labour chose to place the burden of adjustment on those least able to bear it. In contrast Fianna Fáil implemented tough but progressive budgets that asked the most of the wealthy in Ireland. Addressing the unfairness of government policy that neglected low income households and empowering people from all strands of Irish life to get ahead will be a priority for our party in government.

- We will establish a commission to further investigate the feasibility of establishing a basic income system as part of an overall effort to create a fairer 21st century welfare system. The commission will report within 12 months with specific recommendations and proposals.

(v) Boost Credit Unions and protect the vulnerable from predatory lending

The vast majority of moneylenders' customers are on low incomes, compounding the problems associated with them such as the often extortionate rates charged. Providing loans at affordable interest rates for those who cannot access credit elsewhere is the reason credit unions were established. Discretion in lending small amounts needs to be restored to credit unions. The requirements are currently excessive and have created a serious barrier to credit unions fulfilling their important social role. Regulations should not limit the socially progressive remit of credit unions. A series of measures are needed to ensure credit unions play a central role in their community. We will:

- Ensure that loans of up to €1,000 will require less stringent assessment measures. Red-tape surrounding such loans will be reduced.
- Introduce further regulation of moneylenders to prevent exploitative behaviour. This will involve greater regulation regarding the amount that can be borrowed, and how often a loan may be obtained. A limit should be imposed based on the borrower's income, and/or a limit on the number of loans per adult per household. There should also be a minimum time period until the next loan.
- Expand the role of the credit union advisory council to ensure their voices are heard in discussions on future regulations.
- Implement a tiered approach to the regulation of the sector.
- Remove the €100,000 savings cap.
- Develop a national policy in conjunction with credit unions.

(vi) Overhaul the Social Welfare Appeals System

Long delays and a non-transparent process have generated massive stress amongst people

appealing rejected or reduced social welfare claims. Individuals and their families are sometimes lost in the system and find it does not respond to their needs. This has to change.

- We will put the Social Welfare Appeals Office on a statutorily independent footing to ensure perceived and actual independence from the Department of Social Protection.

(vii) Make work pay by introducing a sliding scale for welfare payment assessments

Across Job Seekers Allowance, Family Income Supplement and One Parent Family Payment people are being locked into a poverty trap. This has a devastating impact on families and upon future generations raised in a culture of joblessness. Fianna Fáil is committed to encouraging and rewarding work, not punishing it with a sharp financial cliff. We will make work pay by moving towards replacing the financial cliff with a sliding scale across a number of areas where this is administratively and financially possible. We will:

- Explore revising the Three Day Rule for the payment of Jobseeker's Benefits with a system which better recognises the reality of the modern labour market.
- Revise the 38 hour threshold for FIS qualification, subject to resources and administrative feasibility, with a view to creating a sliding scale in order to reflect the fact that many people may be working (or wish to work) less than 19 hours per week and may be in just as much need as current FIS recipients.
- Study the possibility of expanding FIS to cover the self-employed to allow families, in particular lone parents, greater flexibility in seeking work.

Create an education system for all

Education is the best way to tackle inequality and ensure that equality of opportunity is spread to all children across the country. It is the cornerstone of our economic model which is built on a highly skilled workforce, attracting investment and creating new businesses. Fianna Fáil will emphasise education as a national priority.

We will:

(i) Reduce average class sizes at primary level to 23:1 by 2021

We will start to fundamentally improve the education system by confronting the basic problem of class room overcrowding. Teachers addressing supersize classes are unable to make the personal difference that young children need. Tackling oversized classes to give teachers more time to interact with each individual pupil is important in ensuring they receive the most effective possible education. We will invest €138m to achieve this. We will:

- Hire 5,500 new teachers (2,500 additional above demographic demand) to progressively reduce the average class size to 23:1, over the term of government. We will prioritise reductions for the youngest children under 9 years of age and super-size classes which will have the biggest impact on long term outcomes for children.
- Protect small schools from adverse teacher pupil ratios affecting their viability.

(ii) Invest in the School infrastructure

A lack of funding over the term of this government has left schools in varying states of decay and neglect. Basic funding for school buildings and day to day IT equipment has been drained away. The Minor works grant scheme is an effective mechanism to fund schools to bring their buildings and equipment up to scratch.

- We will place the Minor works grant on a permanent footing, linked in an automatic way to the annual capital depreciation costs that each school incurs. The scheme will be put on a multi-annual basis to ensure schools can plan ahead. This will ensure that each school is financed to deal with depreciation, not left behind struggling with inadequate infrastructure and equipment. We also increase the average annual value of the grant by 10% at a cost of €2.9m.

(iii) Ensure free education for all

The erosion of funding for primary schools by this government has placed increased pressure on parents to make up the shortfall with “voluntary contributions”. We believe that education should be free and that the inadequate funding of schools is damaging the fundamental

bedrock of our education system. We are committed to ending the need for “voluntary contributions” by ensuring the state sufficiently finances education.

- We will increase capitation funding to primary schools by €38 to pre-2010 levels.

(iv) Improve School leadership and Management

Due to cutbacks many principals are under severe pressure with teaching responsibilities and are unable to meet their administrative requirements or put in place any strategic plan. The overall effectiveness of the school and children’s education suffers as a result. These principals, particularly in smaller schools require additional assistance to ensure they can fulfil their duties adequately. We will:

- Give each principal one administrative day a week. This will involve a pool of teachers to replace teaching principals on their administrative day. This will cost €10m annually.
- Appoint 350 assistant principals to help re-build the management structure at a cost of €6.2m annually.

(v) Establish Early Intervention Teams in schools

Fianna Fáil proposes to introduce multi-disciplinary therapy teams on-site in primary and secondary schools for children with disabilities. This would be a new point of departure for education of children with special needs in Ireland. This will include physiotherapists, speech & language therapists and psychiatrists which would be employed by the Department of Education. These school-based Early Intervention Teams will be shared in clusters between pre-schools participating in the ECCE programme and Primary Schools within each given geographic area.

By providing on-site visits by multi-disciplinary teams to each school, children can be assessed for developmental delays at an early age, receive early interventions and ongoing continuity of care by the same group of professional therapists. Such multi-disciplinary teams of therapists would be available to both mainstream and for special schools.

- We will establish multi-disciplinary early intervention teams based in pre-schools and primary schools and hire an additional 300 therapists to staff the new teams. This would cost €14m annually.

(vi) Overhaul Special Needs Assessment and increase Resource teaching

Building on Fianna Fáil’s proud tradition of investing in special needs education we are committed to addressing this government’s attack on Special Needs Assistant (SNA) support and resource teaching hours. 100 years on from the founding commitment to “cherish all children of

the nation equally" we will ensure the SNA role is developed into that of an Edu-Carer helping the child to develop and thrive. We will:

- Restore resource teaching hours to 100% of National Council for Special Education the recommended hours at a cost of €72m per annum,
- Change the SNA structure to ensure they spend more time in the classroom,
- Hire an additional 100 psychologists and attribute learning supports and teaching based on need at a cost of €7m annually.

(vii) Expand DEIS & help schools serving disadvantaged communities

Through a coordinated series of initiatives, Fianna Fáil in government succeeded in increasing the educational outcomes for disadvantaged students and communities to their highest ever level. Unfortunately Labour and Fine Gael have seen support for disadvantaged schools as an easy target for cutbacks and have stopped all progress in this area. We will:

- Implement a coordinated plan across all schemes to help schools serving disadvantaged families and communities,
- Remove the cap on the expansion of the DEIS programme to new schools and enhance investment in underperforming DEIS schools at a cost of €9.5m per annum,
- Reverse cuts and increase supports to the School Completion Programme that aims to help at risk school leavers to complete their education at a cost of €5.5m annually,
- Increase the school meals programme by 10% at a cost of €3.9m to ensure every child has adequate nutrition.

(viii) Make Modern Languages and Computer Coding accessible at Primary School level

At Primary school level children need to develop critical thinking, linguistic ability and IT literacy in order to grow and develop the tools that will equip them for the global workforce. Language and coding skills will help to promote entrepreneurship and foster new start-ups across the country. In addition it will help attract further investment due to our highly skilled workforce.

- We will introduce modern languages as a separate primary school subject and establish a fund to promote coding in primary school and ultimately as a Leaving Cert subject based on the highly successful Israeli model. The annual required budgets for these measures is estimated at €12.6m and €3m respectively on an annual basis.

(ix) Ensure all children have access to their local school

Irish society has grown increasingly diverse and parents are demanding a greater plurality of

choice for their children's education. Basic fairness demands that we broaden school patronage and ensure that local children have access to their local school. We will ensure that educational partners are fully engaged in the divestment process. In addition school admissions policies must reflect the richer diversity and ensure children are not unfairly penalised for their denomination. We will:

- Engage with educational partners to set out a consensual approach to roll out further divestment of schools in line with assessed community demand.
- Reform school admissions on the basis of locality to ensure children have access to their local school regardless of denomination while protecting religious rights.
- Ensure LGBT students and staff are treated equally in every school.

(x) Ensure every school has a guidance service

Guidance counsellors have always played an important role in helping students with difficult career decisions at a critical juncture in their lives. Guidance counsellors have a strong record of helping young people through these important choices and difficulties. Government cut backs in this area have caused immense damage in depriving students of critical help. The Fine Gael and Labour decision to allow schools to provide for their own guidance has resulted in a massive 51% reduction in one-on-one counselling supports in secondary schools with the reduction even greater in disadvantaged areas.

- We will restore the ex-quota Guidance counsellor provision to all schools at a cost of €30m annually.

(xi) Increase supports for Traveller children

There are serious issues with educational disadvantage for children from the Traveller community that demand serious action. We are committed to combining the unique cultural heritage of the Traveller community and ensuring that outcomes reach comparable levels to that of the settled community.

- We will restore the Visiting Teacher service for Travellers. This will involve the appointment of an additional 41 teachers at an annual cost of €1.9m.

(xii) Improve school transport links

Government cutbacks to the school transport scheme have further marginalised rural families. The basic principle of equality of access to education was trampled upon. Ensuring rural families are not burdened with the additional cost of bringing their children to school is an important part of basic community services and an open, accessible education system.

- We will restore pre-2011 eligibility criteria for the school transport scheme ensuring that

children who are attending a school that is not their nearest school (but still within the traditional catchment area) are eligible to apply for school transport. This will cost €3.2m annually.

(xiii) Legislate to protect children from cyber bullying

Social media has opened up immense opportunities to engage with others but it also revealed a darker underbelly. Cyber bullying is generating massive concern amongst parents who lack the control to protect their children from the 24/7 threat of bullying on-line. A co-operative approach with social media sites many of whom are based in Ireland is vital in setting out clear protocols in how to identify and remove bullying material. Legislation has failed to catch up with the rapid development of social media and needs to be updated to reflect this new specific threat. Protocols with social media sites should be combined with the ultimate and final sanction of a criminal offence against bullies as a measure of final resort and deterrence. We will:

- Legislate to make cyber bullying a specific criminal offence and work with the Special Rapporteur on Child Protection to establish new protocols for social media sites operating in Ireland to deal with bullying.
- Provide training and support for schools to help them in identifying and tackling cyber bullying as part of the new mental health authority.

(xiv) Ensure that History is a core part of the junior certificate curriculum

Learning about the past is vital to understanding who we are. The centenary of the 1916 Rising marks an opportunity to reinvigorate and re-emphasize the history curriculum. Equally, it is impossible to expect our young people to succeed in the modern world without an appreciation of the core themes in European and world history. We must ensure that every student who emerges from our education system knows about and understands the key events that shaped us as a nation and the wider world.

- We will ensure that History is a core part of the Junior Certificate curriculum.

(xv) Freeze student fees

A particularly cynical addition to the government's list of broken promises was the increase in student fees which has inflicted great hardship on many students. In addition it placed a further burden on already stretched parents struggling to make ends meet trying to support their children's education.

- We will freeze student contribution fees at their current levels for the next five years.

(xvi) Create equality of access to 3rd and 4th level education with an increase in the Student Maintenance Grant and Student Hardship Fund

A world class education system is a key part of Ireland's economy. Central to our policy is the principle that access to a top quality education should be determined by merit and hard work, not ability to pay. We will:

- Fully retain the undergraduate maintenance grant system to support low income students who may otherwise be put off by the costs. The grant will be increased in line with the CPI at a total additional cost of €12.5m annually. In addition we will increase the Student Assistance funds to help disadvantaged students access third level at a cost of €4.7m annually.
- Review the effectiveness of access policies in higher education and ensure that the distinct needs of different groups such as people with disabilities and people from disadvantaged communities are being effectively assisted.
- Explore the roll out of an income contingent loan system to assist students and parents with costs.

(xvii) Re-introduce Post Graduate Grants

Part of building a world class education system and equipping a global workforce is a post graduate system that attracts and retains our best and brightest. The cuts to the Post Graduate support system are having a corrosive impact on the quality of the education system. In addition they freeze out low income students who have the ability but not the resources to go onto post graduate study. This will cost €53m annually.

- We will re-introduce the post-graduate grant scheme at 2010 levels and criteria.

(xviii) Raise Higher Education funding and standards

The gradual decline in the performance of our third level institutions in international comparison tables illustrates the impact of government neglect of the area. The long term repercussions of starving the sector of vital funds needed to compete globally will be felt for years to come. A strong higher education system is vital in producing high quality research and producing the skilled graduates needed to attract investment. We will:

- Increase current funding to Higher Education institutions by €100m.
- Increase capital funding via a €296 million package in research and capital investment.

Support a publicly funded health care system

In 2011 Fine Gael and Labour said that they would implement a dramatic reform of our health system which would tackle all major problems. In fact they have presided over growing chaos, abandoned key pledges and are undertaking ever more desperate attempts to prevent problems from escalating before the election. They have caused immense damage and undermine public health services. If Enda Kenny's desire to implement Universal Health Insurance is carried out it will destabilise and undermine services further. In contrast Fianna Fáil will invest in the service, work with the committed personnel who staff it and ensure future reforms put patients and services first.

There is a clear choice in this election between those who will continue with damaging measures and Fianna Fáil which is committed to developing our public health system to the benefit of all.

We will:

(i) Secure a strong public health service

Fianna Fáil believes in a publicly funded, publicly delivered health care service, one that emphasises patient care above structures. This means leadership rather than spin, reform rather than revolution and building on the strengths of the service and the hard work of its staff. We believe in a publicly funded health care system that the government continues to provide adequate finance for. This is a more progressive model that places health spending in the hands of a democratically elected body rather than private health insurers. Our emphasis is on working with committed staff within the system and building on its strengths to provide real delivery and improvement for patients. We will:

- Secure a strong public health service for the future.
- End the process of trying to implement compulsory private health insurance and protect hospital trusts from privatisation.

(ii) Improve the Health Service Executive

Fianna Fáil established the HSE because we wanted to bring clarity regarding roles and accountability — political responsibility for the Minister and management responsibility for the management. Fianna Fáil wants to see a greater emphasis on the service rather than the executive. While resources are clearly a factor in the difficulties in our health service, we must also guarantee that they are managed efficiently and effectively. If this is not happening underperforming managers will need to be removed to posts more commensurate with their

capabilities.

- We will establish an independent oversight group to guarantee best practice in the management of resources and to ensure that frontline services are maximised to the benefit of patients.

(iii) Reduce scheduled waiting times to the international standard of six months by re-activating the National Treatment Purchase Fund

The culture of publicity-focused policy and the lack of commitment to supporting current services has placed immense pressure on the healthcare system. The result of this has been dangerously long waiting times directly impacting upon the health and wellbeing of the patients involved. We will:

- Re-activate the successful National Treatment Purchase Fund with a €100m annual spend in order to immediately reduce waiting times.
- Set and achieve a target of reducing scheduled treatment waiting times to the internationally recognised standard of three to six months. To develop a coherent credible strategy to achieve this we will convene a special task force to produce a plan to ensure that all scheduled day case / inpatient care is delivered within the internationally recognised target of six months.
- The recruitment of additional medical staff as set out in this manifesto will significantly contribute to a reduction in waiting lists.

(iv) Achieve a Six Hour Time Limit in Emergency Departments

The persistent problems in our Emergency Departments (ED) must be tackled once and for all. The 2012 HIQA report on Tallaght Hospital recommended that the total patient time spent in the emergency department should be less than six hours. This time should be measured from the time the patient arrives in the ED to the time of departure from the ED. We will:

- Implement the recommendations of the National Emergency Medicine Programme Report launched in June 2012.
- Analyse what is required to address this capacity issue and produce by Budget 2017 a plan for 400 extra hospital beds where they are most needed. These beds will cost €400m in capital expenditure and a further €122.4m in current costs.
- Create 7 day medical assessment units to improve patient waiting times and target staffing allocations of the additional consultants and nurses to critical areas in ED at a cost of €11m annually.

(v) Abolish Prescription charges

The government promised to abolish prescription charges. The Fine Gael Minister for Health

announced their impending abolition in mid-2011. Yet they actually quadrupled prescription charges to €2.50. This is having a disproportionate impact upon fixed income groups such as pensioners. As further detailed in our “Independent Living Contract for older people” eliminating prescription charges will be a key goal for Fianna Fáil.

- We will abolish prescription charges on a phased basis. This will cost €120m when fully implemented.

(vi) Reduce the Drug Payment Scheme threshold from €144 per month to €100 per month

Ordinary families who are not eligible for Medical Cards or only have a GP visit card are penalised by hefty drug costs. The current Drug payment scheme exacts €144 a month from working families already struggling with costs. Reducing the financial impact of drugs necessary to deal with a variety of illnesses is an important part of cutting costs for families.

- We will reduce the Drug Payment scheme threshold by €44 from €144 to €100 at a cost of €44m a year.

(vii) Recruit an extra 500 Consultants

Ireland has around two thirds of the number of consultants recommended over a decade ago in the Report of the National Task Force on Medical Staffing. We also have one of the lowest numbers of consultants on a per capita basis. Furthermore in some specialties, Ireland has one third to half the number of consultants on a per capita basis compared with recommended norms. We will also ensure that public health doctors are put on an equal footing with hospital consultants.

- We will recruit 500 extra consultants over five years, with a particular emphasis on geriatricians, obstetricians, neurologists, rheumatologists, orthodontists and emergency medicine. This will cost €80m.

(viii) Employ 4,000 more nursing staff

The recruitment of more nurses is essential, both for addressing problems in acute care and for the expansion of primary and community care. A significant increase is required especially for Emergency Departments and for Community Intervention Teams

- We will recruit 4,000 additional nurses over the next five years at a cost of €190m.

(ix) Hire an additional 50 dental surgeons

The erosion of the Health service by this government has seeped across all aspects of care.

Escalating pressure on dental provision is another clear example of that. Fianna Fáil is committed to investing in and rebuilding the Health service across its multiple facets to ensure patients have access to quality care. We will:

- Hire a further 50 dental surgeons at a cost of €7.6m.
- Ensure that children that have been waiting long periods for dental and orthodontic treatment can apply to the National Treatment Purchase Fund.
- Develop a new oral health strategy.

(x) Reduce Outpatient and Diagnostic scan Waiting Times

While the recruitment of additional consultants could have a significant impact on waiting lists for an outpatient appointment, it is not simply a matter of extra resources. We will:

- Set rules that all hospitals will be required to have 8am to 8pm consultation times and enforce them.
- Publish monthly waiting times for diagnostic scans as with other waiting lists. Diagnostic scans must also be made available in public hospitals seven days a week.

(xi) Expand the use of District Hospitals

The district hospital network is an asset that we should fully utilise. We want to maximise existing facilities to be a more effective provider of services to patients. District hospitals can be used in the treatment of relatively minor medical conditions. This type of early intervention and treatment can greatly assist in offsetting later admission into an acute hospital.

- We will have a study undertaken by the end of 2016 to analyse how we can significantly increase the role of district or community hospitals in relieving pressure on the hospital system.

(xii) Improve Ambulances and Pre-Hospital Emergency Care

As a first responder the ambulance network and workers play a critical role in saving lives. There are a number of issues that need to be addressed to reach the service's full potential such as replenishing the fleet and bolstering staff numbers. The National Ambulance Service and Dublin Fire Brigade need to tackle inefficiencies and bring forward joint action plans to improve performance. With regard to the future of Dublin Fire Brigade in the provision of ambulance services, proper consultation must take place between the HSE, Dublin City Council and the paramedics who work on the ground before any attempt is made to remove the fire brigade from ambulance provision. We will:

- Ensure that a comprehensive workforce plan is developed and acted on to provide an unskilled and modern emergency response workforce. We will have this expedited as a matter of urgency.

- Invest in upgrading the ambulance fleet to make it fit for purpose. An additional 20 emergency ambulances and 200 extra staff will help ensure the fleet and staff are fully equipped at an annual cost of €18.14m.
- Maintain standards and target times to ensure all citizens across Ireland have an adequate service as part of our community services guarantee.

(xiii) Strengthen Maternity Services

Fianna Fáil welcomes and supports the newly published National Maternity Strategy. While it is clear that the vast majority of expectant mothers enjoy a high standard of care across the country, it is also increasingly evident that our national maternity infrastructure is under strain. We support the re-location of the four standalone maternity hospitals in Dublin and Limerick to new hospitals on the campuses of adult teaching hospitals.

As the new Strategy points out, Ireland has one of the lowest ratios of obstetricians to patients in the OECD. We will recruit more as part of our plans to recruit a further 500 consultants. The provision of accessible, safe and high quality obstetrician-led maternity services to all mothers and babies, regardless of where they live must be a core objective of public health policy. We will:

- Implement the National Women & Infants Health Programme.
- Recruit more obstetricians and midwives.
- Ensure that people outside Dublin have high quality maternity services.
- Create bereavement specialist teams in all maternity units to deal with the tragic cases of infant deaths.

We have allocated €14.5m annually to bring maternity services up to required standards.

(xiv) Rebalance the Health budget towards Primary Care

Robust and active primary and community care is seen as playing an essential role in enhancing health outcomes and limiting costs. A strong primary and community care system will be invaluable for preventing the development of conditions that could ultimately require acute hospital care. It will also provide the right environment to enable earlier discharges from hospital. From a patient's perspective it helps to enhance quality of life and reduce the undue stress of a hospital admission. It is within this setting that we should seek to meet 90-95% of all health and personal social service needs. We will:

- Re-balance the proportion of our health budget going to primary care to the international benchmark.

- Assign the Minister of State position at Cabinet (the “super junior”) to the Minister for Primary and Social Care.
- Introduce specific programme and targets for the rebalancing of our health service towards primary care every year as part of the health service annual plans.
- Set Targets for:
 - Required number of GP, nursing and other staff to provide the services.
 - Expansion and assignment of services into primary care that currently take place in hospitals.
 - Patient outcomes.
 - Management of chronic disease care programmes.
 - Developing the necessary IT supports for patient care.
 - Enhance Oireachtas scrutiny of Primary Care targets

(xv) Support General Practise

At the heart of primary care must be the family GP. Fianna Fáil values our family doctors, appreciates the work they do and believes that GP services must be properly resourced. Fianna Fáil accepts that many GP practices are now running at unsustainable levels of net income after meeting unavoidable practice costs. It has been estimated that around one in 12 practices are under financial risk of closing. By the HSE’s own estimate, Ireland is facing a shortage of between 493 and 1,380 GPs by 2025 unless urgent steps are taken to address the shortfall. We will:

- Increase GP numbers by 250 by 2021 at a cost of €40m annually.
- Ensure that all communities have access to GP care linked to our Community Services Guarantee. This will have a positive impact on hospital overcrowding and pressure on already overstretched Emergency Departments.
- Negotiate a new contract with GPs to facilitate the rebalancing towards primary care,
- Increase the Rural GP allowance to €25,000 in order to attract more doctors into setting up practices in rural Ireland by making it commercially viable at a cost of €1.5m annually.
- Examine new incentives for GPs to work to the age of 70.

(xvi) Expand GP Care

If we want to make primary care stronger and embed it as the first point of contact in health care we need to make it more accessible. Fianna Fáil wants to expand GP care on the basis of income, not age. Yet at the moment no-one, whether in government or opposition, can definitively say how much it will cost. Despite submitting a number of parliamentary questions neither the Department of Health nor the HSE has been able to provide an estimate up to now. We must also bear in mind how the original estimate for free GP Care for the under 6s doubled following the agreement of contract with GP’s last April.

Therefore, before we proceed any further on this, Fianna Fáil wants to see a GP contract in place which has General Practitioners on board for universal GP care. We will also undertake an evaluation of the impact of under 6s scheme, especially on waiting times to see a GP. We will:

- Negotiate a new GP contract following which we will then bring forward plans for the expansion of GP care.

(xvii) Expand Medical Cards

During the last Dáil, Fianna Fáil was to the forefront in highlighting the government's targeting of people on discretionary medical cards, especially from 2012 to 2014. The subsequent U-turn and climbdown by the government was testament to the strength of our opposition. However, we believe more can be done, especially for children with disabilities.

We will:

- Provide a medical card for all children in receipt of the Domiciliary Care Allowance.
- Ensure that the more humane system for discretionary medical cards that has been in place in the run up to the election is fully maintained after polling day. We will ensure that people with very serious illnesses which is causing them undue financial hardship will receive a discretionary medical card.

These measures will cost €57m per annum.

(xviii) Establish a new National Mental Health Authority

Mental health issues continue to silently inflict immense damage on our country. The undercurrent of depression, anxiety and addiction is a profoundly ingrained problem for society. No family is untouched from some form of mental health issue. Beyond the striking statistics about suicide levels the affliction of depression is exacting a hefty toll on the day to day lives of countless people. We have successfully confronted dangerous challenges like this before. The spike in road fatalities that endangered a generation of motorists was tackled head-on with the National Road Safety Authority. We need a similar concerted national approach to the devastating impact of mental health issues. We will:

- Establish a new statutory National Mental Health Authority to be charged with leading an all-out national programme to promote positive attitudes to mental health and to reduce the incidence of self-harm and suicide.
- The National Mental Health Authority will provide a focus on mental health through an organisation that has the treatment of mental ill-health and distress and the promotion of positive mental health as its sole focus. It will also provide definite ring-fencing of funding for our mental health services.

- We will also carry out a full review of what still remains to be achieved under *A Vision for Change* and will bring forward an updated plan for 2016 to 2026.
- Current levels of funding for our mental health services are insufficient to deliver the staffing levels envisaged by *A Vision for Change*. At approximately 9,316 WTE (September 2015), mental health staffing levels remain at circa 75% of what is recommended by *A Vision for Change*. We will increase staffing levels to the 12,000 required under the strategy.

We have earmarked total additional funding of €187.5m for increased spending on mental health.

(xix) Make Smoking History

Fewer than 1 in 5 adults now smoke in Ireland. This is a landmark achievement and it is the first time the smoking rate has fallen below the 20 per cent level. The next goal is to break through the 10 per cent barrier.

- We endorse the aim of 5 per cent by 2025 and will target efforts to curb smoking at disadvantaged socio-economic groups where rates are highest. This will encompass increases in excise duty on tobacco products.

(xx) Establish an Office of Alcohol Control

Fianna Fáil recognises that there is an issue with harmful drinking in Ireland. Over 8,000 people were treated for problem alcohol use in Ireland in 2012 alone. Alcohol is associated with 2,000 beds being occupied every night in Irish acute hospitals, one-quarter of injuries presenting to emergency departments and over half of attendances to specialised addiction treatment centres.

- We will establish an Office of Alcohol Control which will aim to holistically address the diverse drivers and consequences of harmful alcohol consumption in Ireland. This will cost €1.7m annually. In addition as part of our commitment to promoting healthy living, we will phase out alcohol companies' sponsorship of sporting events.

(xxi) Tackle Chronic Lung Disease and Asthma

Fianna Fáil supports the development of the National Clinical Programmes for asthma and chronic lung disease and recognises the success they have had in the secondary care setting. We will:

- Properly address the needs of these patients, to maximise their quality and quantity of life, and keep them out of hospital for longer, Fianna Fáil will bring forward a National Respiratory Disease Strategy to tackle lung diseases including cystic fibrosis, within existing resources.
- Incorporate and implement the recommendations of the National Asthma Programme within the new Respiratory Disease Strategy.

(xxii) Improve Cancer care

In government Fianna Fáil implemented sustained improvements in cancer care which have helped thousands of people. We will:

- Bring forward a new National Cancer Strategy and include cancer patients or family members on the review group of the strategy to bring their perspective to discussions on treatment. Fianna Fáil recognises the link between health inequalities and cancer and we will provide that this is reflected in the new National Cancer Strategy.
- Recognise that e-referral should be extended to all cancers and would introduce this on a phased basis alongside a GP education programme on the signs and symptoms of cancer.
- Extend the National GP Referral Guidelines and Forms to include more cancers.
- Undertake to shift the burden of care from acute to community settings and upskill GPs and practice nurses so that some services can be carried out in the community.

(xxiii) Enhance Dementia Care

Most people living with dementia and their families want to have their care at home. We are committed to ensuring this is possible and will step up the provision of intensive home care packages to achieve this. We will:

- Expand intensive home care packages year on year by €11 million with an extra 190 packages annually benefitting 250 people every year.
- Implement and fund the National Dementia Strategy
- Ensure that anyone diagnosed with dementia should be allowed to apply for home helps or home care packages, including intensive packages.
- Include dedicated dementia units in residential care homes that are either being built or upgraded over the next five years.
- Use the mid-term review of the existing strategy to prepare a new strategy for the 2020's.

(xxiv) Neuro-Rehabilitation Services

Neuro-rehabilitation must be recognised as a distinct element of disability service delivery by the Health Service Executive.

- We are committed to the implementation of the National Policy and Strategy for the Provision of Neuro-Rehabilitation Services in Ireland published in 2011.

(xxv) Fight Blindness

We are committed to the development of a National Vision Strategy to fight blindness and sight loss. We will:

- Develop this strategy based on a coordination and integration of services, a focus on prevention and early intervention, supporting the general public to achieve a better understanding of good eye health and the risks associated with sight loss.
- Direct the Health Research Board to publish a review of current research gaps and opportunities in Ireland on the issue of sight loss and eye disease.

(xxvi) Recruit 250 additional HSE therapy staff, a total increase of 550 therapists

Waiting times for both assessments and services for essential therapies are unacceptable. This covers a wide range of groups including children with speech and language needs, physical therapists for stroke victims and occupational therapists for people with life challenging conditions. It is essential that children with speech and language difficulties have access to therapy prior to going to school.

- We will recruit an additional 250 therapy staff at a cost of €11.38m annually. In addition, as outlined in the education section, new early intervention teams will be established in schools with a further 300 therapists.

(xxvii) Increase funding for the Fair Deal scheme

Demographic pressure on the Fair Deal scheme requires additional resources to ensure older people who are no longer able to live at home are accommodated in Nursing homes. As the population ages and increased demand mounts up we need to take a holistic approach to integrating older people into the community. Fianna Fáil is committed in its “Independent Living Contract for Older People” to supporting older people to live in their own homes for as long as possible. However this will not be possible in a significant number of cases and resources are required to ensure all older people are catered for.

- We will invest an additional €35m annually into the Fair Deal scheme to ensure the programme is adequately funded over the next 5 years.

(xxviii) Promote Healthy Living and fight obesity

Promoting health lifestyles is vital to tackling long term health costs and enabling people to live long, active lives. A holistic approach to healthcare must start long before lifestyle illnesses become apparent. This needs to be targeted from childhood all the way to a person’s elderly years. Government has an important role to play in education, economic incentives and providing a physical environment that encourages sports and physical activity. We will:

- Introduce a tax on sugar sweetened drinks. It would add on average six cent to a can of premium cola. This will raise €71m annually according to Department of Finance estimates.

- Establish a new primary school healthy eating education programmes to help cultivate lifelong good cooking and eating habits.
- Amend the 2000 Planning & Development Act to strengthen the capacity of Local Authorities to CPO land for recreational use.
- Issue National Planning regulations to create “No Fry” zones near Primary and secondary schools.
- Phase out alcohol companies’ sponsorship of sporting events.
- Expand the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland (BAI) code to prohibit TV advertising of foods high in fat, salt and sugar (HFSS) up to 9pm.
- Expand the PE programme at primary and secondary school level at a cost of €4.8m.

(xxix) Boost Community Pharmacists

Community pharmacists are keen to play a greater role in health care in Ireland and Fianna Fáil supports them in that aim. Pharmacists in other countries routinely offer a wider range of vaccination and other medical services. We will:

- Allow pharmacy vaccination services to be extended similarly to include a far wider range of vaccines.
- Implement a Minor Ailment Scheme to allow medical card patients to obtain treatments for common illnesses free-of-charge directly from the local community pharmacy.
- Roll out a new pharmacy-based health check programme. This Scheme will be within existing resources.

(xxx) Lower Drug Costs

The cost of drugs to the HSE continues to remain high notwithstanding significant savings over the past decade or so. Fianna Fáil fully supported and offered to expedite the passage of the Health (Pricing and Supply Medical Goods) Bill during the last Dáil. It is our belief that the National Procurement Office should be given the task of managing purchasing medicines on behalf of the HSE. This must involve direct meetings between the National Procurement Office and the relevant pharmaceutical companies. We will:

- Give the National Procurement Office the task of managing purchasing medicines on behalf of the HSE.
- Allow for patients to be switched, where appropriate and subject to the Health Products Regulatory Authority, from existing medicines to more affordable, but equally effective, biosimilars.

(xxxi) Focus Capital Spending

In addition to the increase in hospital beds outlined in earlier points, Fianna Fáil is committed to the implementation of the €3 billion capital investment programme announced last autumn. We will

- Complete the National Children's Hospital.
- Support the relocation of the Dublin maternity hospitals. The relocation of services from certain Dublin hospitals may offer opportunities for their vacated locations to be used for alternative purposes within the health system.

(xxxii) Reform the Health Budget

Fianna Fáil commits to the introduction of multi-annual funding for our health services and we believe that should start with Budget 2017. We cannot reasonably plan for the long-term on the basis of short-term budgets. The HSE and other service planners need to operate with a greater degree of certainty. We will:

- Ensure that there is a five year financial framework within which there can be realistic and meaningful forward planning
- Commit to greater transparency and greater consultation on the budgetary process.
- Direct the Director General of the HSE and Ministers and officials from the Department of Health to undertake a full and open consultation with the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Health on what is required to meet both the demographic demand and unmet needs.

Reform the Public Sector

Investing in public services is a key priority for Fianna Fáil in government. However we need to ensure that tax payers are getting full value for money and the services produced make a real difference on the ground. In addition the work and pay conditions of ordinary public servants who made an invaluable contribution to keeping vital services going during the recession must be fully recognised. "An Ireland for all" will ensure strong public services are built with dedicated public servants.

We will:

(i) Secure fair pay and conditions for public servants

During a deeply difficult time for the country ordinary public servants played a central role in keeping the functions of the state going and delivering vital services to people across Ireland. The financial sacrifices of those workers were also vital in stabilising the public purse. As the exchequer figures recover it is important that ordinary public servants are adequately recognised for their work. We will be guided by the following principles in any future negotiations following the completion of the Lansdowne Road agreement within the financial limits of the fiscal space. We will:

- Fully implement the Lansdowne Road agreement.
- Target future pay agreements on low to middle income earners.
- Repeal the Financial Emergency Measures in the Public Interest Acts over the next two years and return to normal industrial relations mechanisms, in relation to setting pay and conditions.
- Ensure that improvements in take home pay of public servants are in line with general wage improvements in the economy.
- Engage with representatives of retired public servants in the recent negotiations.
- Secure equality of treatment for newly recruited public servants.
- Use the ERSI to externally verify costs of pay and pension measures and the achievement of targets in future agreements.

(ii) Reform the government department structure

The decay in public services overseen by this government demands a substantial monetary and organisational response. Beyond our comprehensive investment package we will restructure government departments to make them more responsive to the needs of modern Ireland. We will retain the current number of 13 Junior Ministers and 15 cabinet positions. We will:

- Reform the Department of Social Protection to make it the Department of Social Protection,

Disability & Equality. This will move disability out of the inappropriate area of justice and into a new department recognising the need for inclusion.

- Create a new Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government. This department will be tasked with tackling the housing crisis and cutting through the red tape of multiple agencies.
- Establish a new Department of Climate Change. This new department will head up our climate change policy. It will bring together the current departments of Environment, Flood Defence, Energy, Transport, Natural Resources, & Heritage.
- Set up a new Department of Community Support & Development, Rural Affairs, Gaeltacht and Islands to lead on community services and ensure a nationwide set of basic services.
- Secure Super Junior cabinet table status for the Minister for Primary and Social Care including older people.
- Amalgamate the Department of Public Expenditure & Reform with the Department of Finance.

(iii) Make public services more user friendly

Public services should be responsive to the needs of the people they serve. We will work to ensure current services and future programmes are designed to maximise ease of use and in particular IT access. We will:

- Open access to the public on a 24/7 basis to as many as possible Government services. All new programmes should be designed so they can be shared across public bodies.
- Roll out enhanced data to provide that no citizen is asked for the same information more than once. IT systems should be designed to eliminate duplication across the entire system.
- Engage staff annually with surveys on improving the system.
- Ensure digital assistance is always available for those who are not online in particular older people.

(iv) Enhance public sector performance and accountability

In order to deliver full value for money across the public services we must provide clear mechanisms for performance review and greater flexibility in the public service. Every euro spent should have an impact. We will:

- Initiate clear performance reviews for secretary generals and assistant secretary generals.
- Allow for greater flexibility of staff across Departments and agencies as required.
- Standardise customer service charters across the public service.
- Extend the remit of the Office of the Ombudsman to semi-state monopolies.

(v) Improve gender representation across the public service

While the majority of public sector workers are female the majority of senior positions are held by males. This needs to be addressed so that the senior positions in the public service reflect the gender balance in society. In addition state board appointments should continue to lead the way in securing a fair gender balance.

- We will improve equal gender representation at upper management levels of the public service and continue to work towards gender representation targets in state board appointments.

Cut costs for families & improve the services they rely on

3

Tackle crime & develop community services

Tackle crime & develop community services

We will tackle crime head on and protect community services. We will:

Keep homes and communities safe

- Increase An Garda Síochána to 15,000 members and Garda Reserve to 2,500
- Impose mandatory sentences for assaults on elderly people
- Put in place tougher sentences and electronic tagging for burglars
- Implement a Victim's Surcharge to make criminals pay for their crimes

Establish a Community Services Guarantee for all citizens

- Create a new Cabinet Minister for Community Support and Development
- Set specific measures for Education, Health and Transport services across Ireland
- Increase LEADER funding and restart the RAPID & CLAR programme

Create a “Pathway to Inclusion” for people with a disability

- Create a Cabinet level Minister for Disability
- Recognise the cost of living with a €10 Disability Allowance top up payment
- Increase employment assistance supports for people with a disability

Revitalise Irish town centres, cities & our capital

- Roll out town teams to lead change in town centres
- Protect and strengthen the Post Office Network
- Establish a Dublin City Centre Public Order Unit
- Create a new Transport Police division within An Garda Síochána

Improve the road network and protect public transport

- Set up a National Public Transport Commission
- Promote and expand the use of E-cars
- Increase funds for Road Maintenance
- Create a new national cycle way strategy
- Increase flood defence spending & establish a new flood insurance model

Give local people power over local decisions

- Roll out community councils and Town Councils across every town and village in Ireland
 - Establish a community fund to own and run community assets
 - Initiate a directly elected Dublin mayor
 - Launch a “21st Century Oireachtas” political reform initiative
-

Ireland has a resilient community spirit and a deep, abiding sense of pride in our nation. This strength has helped us endure and bounce back from the challenges we have faced as a country. However, to thrive communities need to be safe and to have access to core state services. “An Ireland for all” is built around this core priority.

The surge in crime across the country and escalating fear of burglaries is generating serious unease in communities around Ireland. The strong sense of community that has served Ireland so well is being jeopardised by the scourge of criminality and fear. The Fine Gael/ Labour government has allowed this far reaching sense of alarm to grow through their downgrading of An Garda Síochána and gross mismanagement of justice in Ireland.

The neglect of communities is a defining feature of this government. In 2011 Fine Gael and Labour ended the 20-year status of community development and the fight against drugs as cabinet-level responsibilities. This was followed by the closing of a range of successful programmes and policy of neglect and disinterest. Rising crime, the spread of serious drugs and a lack of community development have directly arisen because of this government’s policies. In contrast, Fianna Fáil is committed to the implementation of a comprehensive plan to tackle crime and protect our communities.

“An Ireland for all” will involve real political reform, empowering democratic institutions responsible to communities and establishing new standards for services across the country. Investment and development of community service means securing our vibrant Arts sector and protecting and enhancing our national language.

As a party whose core objective remains the re-unification of this island as a single state we are fully committed to strengthening cross border links and revitalising the institutions and immense potential of the Good Friday agreement. Under Fianna Fáil Ireland will play a strong role in EU and global affairs.

Most of all, our commitment as part of “An Ireland for all” is to help communities overcome the many and rising challenges they face to ensure Ireland remains a great place to live in and raise a family.

Keep Homes and Communities Safe

Over the past five years this government has inflicted great damage on the ability of An Garda Síochána to protect our communities. Ministerial policies have directly undermined the principle that Gardaí should be as close as possible to the communities they serve. Fianna Fáil is determined to reverse this policy and implement a concerted campaign to tackle crime in all parts of our country.

We will:

(i) Increase Garda Numbers to 15,000 and Garda Reserve to 2,500

Garda numbers have been reduced below the level of 13,000 by this government and accompanied by the closure of 139 Garda stations. Reducing the force to such dangerously low levels has jeopardised the safety and security of communities across Ireland. The number of Gardaí needs to be significantly increased to take the fight to criminals. We will:

- Increase Garda numbers to 15,000 in order to combat crime across Ireland. This will cost €40m annually.
- Require the publication of a policing plan which will show how the increased number of Gardaí will be targeted at priorities.
- Double the Garda Reserve to 2,500 at a cost of €3.5m to complement and support the work of the main force and encourage community engagement with policing. In addition a special accelerated training scheme will be put in place for Garda Reserve members selected to join the main force to ensure they are put on the beat as quickly as possible.

(ii) Increase the number of Community Gardaí by over 200

Strong community relations are the bedrock of an effective police force. However, the imbalance in community Gardaí across the country is damaging local links with the force. We need to cover all Garda districts to ensure that a community Garda is based in the area with strong links to the local community.

- We will use part of the 2,000 Garda boost from recruitment as well as organisational changes to increase Community Garda by 200 to ensure all areas are sufficiently covered.

(iii) Launch a Garda Inspectorate Report into re-opening Garda stations

The closure of 139 Garda stations and potential threat to the future of other small stations throughout Ireland is the wrong policy as it jeopardises the security of countless communities and homes. The decision to extinguish the blue light of the local station sent a clear message to criminals that resulted in a wave of burglaries hitting cities, towns and villages around the

country. The paltry savings from the closures did not justify the deeply damaging impact on the communities they served.

- We will launch a Garda Inspectorate report on the 139 station areas to assess the impact of the closures and make recommendations on whether the station should be re-opened or in the case of the building being sold, a new station established. Public input will be facilitated. The report will be completed and recommendations put to implementation within 12 months. In addition, where there is a pressing case for immediate action, the Garda Commissioner will be provided with resources for the reopening of select stations.

(iv) Implement a new Garda Workforce plan to release Gardaí to work on frontline duties

Building on the findings of the Garda Inspectorate Report there is a clear need to ramp up the use of civilian staff in the force to alleviate the burden of administrative duties on Garda. New workforce planning and outsourcing of certain non-essential duties that do not require a sworn officer will help to free up Garda to get them back on the beat, visible in their communities and directly tackling crime.

- We will launch a new Garda Workforce plan that will aim to increase civilisation of up to 1,000 positions to put more Garda back on the streets protecting communities. Any additional staff will be re-located from existing public service positions that are no longer necessary. In addition we will work to implement the recommendations of "Changing Policing in Ireland" in regard to the organisational structure of the force to maximise efficiency.

(v) Toughen sentences and measures to stop repeat burglars

Families and older people are living in fear from the surge in crime. Hardened burglars are not afraid to commit crime because of lenient sentences and low Garda numbers. We will introduce a set of specific measures to tackle burglaries across the state. We will:

- Impose mandatory 3 year sentences for burglary offenders and seven years for a third burglary offence,
- Enforce driving disqualification for people convicted of driving a car for the purposes of a robbery,
- Roll out Electronic Tagging for repeat offenders on bail. This will cost €3.1m annually
- Install advanced vehicle recognition CCTV at all motorway junctions to tackle mobile gangs attacking rural Ireland. The capital cost of this is €4m.

These measures will help ensure that the Gardaí have the legal and technological tools to effectively tackle home robberies. The increase in the force to 15,000 will ensure Gardaí have the local community presence to prevent future burglaries and send a clear message to criminals.

(vi) Establish a new sentencing council to ensure consistent sentences

Public faith in the justice system is an integral component of enabling it to do its job properly. Inconsistent sentencing and a lack of information around decisions harms public trust in the justice system. We will help ensure that greater consistency is applied in sentencing for serious offences such as rape and robbery.

- We will establish a Judicial sentencing council to disseminate accurate information around sentencing guidelines and help judges impose fair sentences on criminals. The council will also be charged with informing the public and media around sentencing standards. It will cost €2.1m annually.

(vii) Enforce mandatory sentences on assaults on older people and emergency workers

In combination with a new sentencing council we will toughen sentences on those guilty of particularly heinous crimes. It is important that rampant criminals are sent a strong, clear message that assaults on older people will not be tolerated and will be severely punished. This is replicated in attacks on emergency workers that are on the frontline of protecting communities and helping victims. Mandatory sentences will underline the serious nature of assaults on such personnel.

- We will implement the Assault on Older Person's Bill which will ensure that people convicted of the heinous crime of attacking a pensioner will face a mandatory sentence of 3 years. Attacks on emergency workers will also be subject to this mandatory sentence.

(viii) Crack down on knife crime

The epidemic of knife crime across the country illustrates how carrying a knife has become culturally acceptable in certain areas. The brutal nature of knife attacks and their devastating impact on victims underlines the need to stamp this practise out and help protect communities. We need to eradicate this scourge and take back our streets for all people, day or night.

- We will introduce a mandatory minimum 12 month sentence for the carrying of a knife in public.

(ix) Retain and expand the Special Criminal Court

The continued threat of dissident terror groups and scourge of organised gangland crime demands a clear, strong response from the state. The Special Criminal Court has an important part to play in providing a viable route to prosecuting serious criminals. The three judge

Special Criminal Court protects jurors and their families from the distinct threat that this level of criminality represents. For example, its role in confronting and breaking up vicious criminal gangs in Limerick is a testament to its effectiveness.

- We will retain the Special Criminal Court and establish a second court in order to deal with the backlog of cases.

(x) Introduce a new Community Court structure

International experience drawn from the USA and UK indicates that Community courts can reduce re-offending levels and help ensure that communities that suffer from crime receive redress. They bring persons charged with low level crimes to justice in the area where the incidents occurred, thereby producing greater efficiency, visibility and accountability. They also improve public safety, break the cycle of re-offending by addressing the problems, addictions, mental illness, lack of job skills etc., presented by some low level offenders.

- We will introduce a system of Community Courts within the District Court system that will be neighbourhood focused, specifically addressing problems of particular communities by targeting 'quality of life' crimes such as drug possession, public order offences, petty theft, prostitution and vandalism. This will relieve pressure on the prison system and curb recidivism by nipping it in the bud. We have allocated €2m to this new structure.

(xi) Introduce a new Victim's Law and surcharge

We believe that the victims of crime need to be fully supported. Too often the justice system seems balanced in favour of criminals and repeat offenders while ordinary people who fall prey to criminality are left unrecognised. We will:

- Enshrine the right to make a personal statement before sentencing and on parole hearings as well as greater information being given by An Garda Síochána and the DPP to victims on the course of the prosecution.
- Implement a new victim's surcharge. Criminals convicted of an offence will be expected to pay a new Victim's Surcharge. Fees from the surcharge levied on convicted criminals will be ring-fenced for a new Victim's Support Fund to help finance victim's support groups.

(xii) Establish a National Major Crimes Investigation Team

Outside of the capital much of the Garda force suffers from a lack of expertise and resources in investigating serious crimes such as murder. In order to ensure that the entire country has access to a strong Gardaí across all crimes including the most serious, a national unit is required.

- We will establish a national major crimes team to investigate serious crimes across the country. This will free up local Garda resources to deal with other crimes.

(xiii) Set up a new Serious & Organised Crime Unit

Tightly organised and highly mobile gangs operating across Europe are the driving force behind major drug and sex trafficking rings in this country. The impacts of these crimes are played out with devastating effect at a local level in our communities. The advanced organisational capacities of the gangs and their sheer brutality demands a co-ordinated, concentrated approach by An Garda Síochána.

- We will establish a Serious & Organised Crime Unit to lead the fight against criminal networks operating in Ireland. The Unit will also co-operate with Interpol and other police agencies. Within the unit we will establish a Cybercrime section designated with tackling these crimes and adequately resourced to track down and prosecute offenders.

(xiv) Invest €275m in “Safe Streets”, a new IT crime analysis system and Garda Car Programme

It is vital that the Gardaí are equipped with the resources and technology necessary to combat crime. Utilising Big Data to build a more accurate image of crime trends and geographic locations is vital to directing Garda manpower to have the most impact. International experience from US cities shows the potential of improving links between data analysis and on the ground policing. Across rural and urban Ireland enhanced IT analysis backed by raw resources such as new high powered cars to help combat crime more effectively. We will:

- Allocate an additional €25m capital funding to the existing IT and Garda car programmes to boost the resources available to the Gardaí. A new Garda Resource Management IT system will help to direct resources where they are needed most, backed up by in car mobile technology.
- Invest in a Multi-annual Vehicle investment programme to ensure that the fleet is constantly upgraded and kept up to scratch with cutting edge IT to enable frontline officers react quickly and effectively.

Establish a Community Services Guarantee

The long-term success of our communities requires that they have access to a range of basic services. We believe that it is now essential to define the core contract between communities and the state in terms of what services are seen as essential. In addition, a reformed approach to planning, delivering and overseeing community services is required. In addition, we believe that engrained social problems such as serious drug abuse and cycles of disadvantage require community-level intervention before they can be addressed.

We will:

(i) Create a new Cabinet Minister for Community Support & Development, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs

Fianna Fáil will rectify the grave neglect of communities by this administration. We will:

- Create a Minister for Community Support, Rural & Gaeltacht Affairs in order to ensure that communities have a voice at the table. This will be a full Cabinet position equipped to keep community issues as a central part of key government decisions. The new Cabinet position will be charged with developing, measuring and holding to account, targets for the Community Services Guarantee.
- Ensure the Minister will lead cross-departmental coordination in the fight against the spread and damage of serious drugs.
- Task the Department with Gaeltacht affairs and the implementation of the 20 year Irish language strategy.

(ii) Set specific measures for Education, Health, Transport and key community services

Rural communities and vulnerable urban areas are being forgotten. The basic services of the state in security, health and transport are being steadily eroded by government negligence while the business life of rural Ireland is being strangled by the burden of commercial rates, declining town centres and a pressurised agriculture sector.

Stopping the decline in community services and strengthening the provision of essential public goods in isolated and vulnerable areas must involve a concerted, targeted effort at government level.

- We will set measures across key areas such as Health Services, Education provision, transport network, access to justice and Garda supports. Individual measures from different departments will be subjected to community proofing under the Community Services guarantee to prevent a limited, silo driven approach.

(iii) Increase LEADER funding & re-start RAPID and CLAR funding

The LEADER programme forms an integral part of the community sector across rural Ireland providing vital services such as child care, rural recreation and enterprise supports. In a similar vein the RAPID programme has played an important role in delivering much needed investment in neglected urban areas. The CLAR programme was the engine behind infrastructural development into otherwise unfeasible isolated areas. We will:

- Increase LEADER funding to €350m over the remaining course of the RDP programme. This represents additional funding of €20 per annum,
- Restart the CLÁR scheme and re-open the RAPID programme to help develop marginal communities across both rural and urban Ireland at a cost of €23m and €6m respectively.

(iv) Return the autonomy of the LEADER Programme

A critical part of the success and effectiveness of the LEADER programme has been its independence in carrying out its activities. Under a cynical label of reform the government has directly jeopardised that autonomy by adding in a layer of local authority control. This has damaged the fundamental community led, bottom up approach of the companies involved.

- We will work with communities to return the autonomy of the LEADER Programme by removing their alignment with local authorities.

(v) Support the Community and Voluntary Sector

The new cabinet position will be entrusted in overseeing Ireland's expanding community and voluntary sector. We will

- Task the new Minister with ensuring the sector is adequately funded and regulated to empower it to function at the heart of our communities and deliver critical services.
- Develop and implement a new strategy for the sector.

(vi) Establish a Minister for Drugs

The government has consistently downgraded the importance of tackling the scourge of drugs in cities, towns and villages across Ireland. We need to revitalise government efforts to stamp out the multi generational problem of drugs in the worst affected communities. A single lead Minister should take charge of this problem.

- We will create a Minister for Drugs.

Create a “Pathway to inclusion” for people with disabilities

Building “An Ireland for all” means ensuring that people with disabilities are supported to realise their full potential. Our “Pathway to Inclusion” aims to place people with disabilities at the heart of the community, playing an active role in their areas. The comprehensive “Pathway to Inclusion” for people with disabilities covers a number of areas and will help ensure having a disability is not a barrier to participating in the community.

We will:

(i) Recognise the cost of disability with a new €10 top up for the Disability Allowance, Carers Allowance, Invalidity and Blind Pension

The cost of disability on those directly affected and those who care for people with a disability is a significant burden on their weekly finances. Higher heating costs due to reduced mobility, transport costs, medical expenses and special dietary requirements are just some of the additional costs that people with a disability face. A core component of our “Pathway to inclusion” is detaching the payment from the other working age social welfare benefits with a top up payment.

- We will introduce a €10 cost of disability top up payment. This €10 increase will be across the Disability Allowance, Carer’s Allowance, Blind Pension and Invalidity Pension. This is in addition to the €10 working age payments increase, leading to a cumulative €20 boost for people with a disability and their carers. This will cost €123m annually.

(ii) Create a Minister for Disability at the Cabinet Table

Strong leadership is vital in bringing together the disparate elements of disability policy. As part of our “Pathway to Inclusion” we will ensure disability is given a voice at the cabinet table.

- We will change the role of Minister of Social Protection to become the Minister of Social Protection, Disability & Equality. This Minister will drive and co-ordinate disability inclusion, whilst also reinforcing the idea that disability is a cross-departmental issue, requiring a whole of Government approach with each Government Department having a responsibility in terms of disability inclusion policy.

(iii) Transferring Disability Policy to the Department of Social Protection

The current location of disability policy within the Department of Justice and Equality is not suitable. It was introduced at a time when the primary focus was on equality legislation. Over time it has relegated disability to a secondary issue and as a consequence we have seen very little progress in the area of disability over the last 5 years.

- We will place responsibility for disability policy within the Department of Social Protection. It is from this Department that many decisions are made that affect the lives of people with disabilities, and we as a consequence believe that disability policy should fall under this Department's remit.
- In addition to these administrative changes, we will also legislate to give statutory recognition to Irish Sign Language.

(iv) Ratify the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities by the end of 2016

Creating a strong, robust legal framework for disability rights is vital to ensuring people with disabilities can play a full, active role in Irish life.

- We will, as one of our first priorities, work towards ratifying the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with a Disability (UNCRPD). We recognise that this is an essential step and must be done if we are to achieve our goal of ending discrimination and achieving equality for all of our citizens.

(v) Improve the Application Process for Carers' and Disability Payments

The application processes for carer's payments will be changed to enable applicants to provide more information on the level of care being provided. Eligibility for Disability Allowance depends on capacity to work. However, decisions are made based mainly on a medical assessment. This does not, in itself, give an accurate assessment of a person's capacity to work in many cases.

- We will give people an opportunity to describe how their disability impacts on their daily life. We will direct the Department to work with the Disability Movement and voluntary disability providers to develop a fair and comprehensive system of assessing people's capacity to work.

(vi) Improve Access to Mainstream Employment Activation Measures

We will begin the process of ending the exclusion of people with disabilities from mainstream employment programmes and will specifically address the exclusion of people who are in receipt of Disability Allowance from the MOMENTUM Programme.

- We will increase the MOMENTUM Programme by 20% or 1,200 places on a voluntary basis for people in receipt of Disability Allowance. This will cost €4m annually.

(vii) Extend the Wage Subsidy Scheme

The Wage Subsidy Scheme provides financial incentives to private sector employers to hire

people with a disability. The Partial Capacity Benefit (PCB) scheme is designed for people who are on illness benefit, for at least six months, or on invalidity pension and who have retained some capacity for work and wish to work. However those in receipt of the Partial Capacity Benefit cannot avail of the Wage Subsidy Scheme. Broadening it out will encourage the employment of people with disabilities and make it easier for people with disabilities to engage with the labour market.

- We propose to extend the Wage Subsidy Scheme to those in receipt of Partial Capacity Benefit. This measure will cost €11m.

(viii) Promote and Support the Employment of People with Disabilities

Tied to our policy of improving access to mainstream Activation Measures is promoting the employment of people with disabilities and raising awareness of schemes that are available both to employees and employers to support and retain people with disabilities into employment. We will:

- Increase funding for the Reasonable Accommodation Fund by €250,000 to help employers facilitate people with a disability.
- Engage in an information and dissemination campaign to inform employees and employers groups about the range of schemes that are available to both employees and employers. To this end we will set annual targets for the take up of schemes.

(ix) Award Government Contracts on Taxi Services to Companies that have an Accessible Disability Fleet

Fianna Fáil believes that Government should take the lead in encouraging our national taxi pool to become more accessible to people with disabilities.

- We will stipulate that one of the criteria in awarding government contracts on taxi services will be based on a percentage of a company's fleet that is accessible to people with disabilities.

(x) Restore the Housing Adaptation Grant

The Housing Adaptation Grant and Mobility Aid Grants have been subject to severe cuts that have had a detrimental impact on people with disabilities. These grants are vital to make it possible for people with disabilities to remain in their own homes.

- We will restore the Housing Adaptation Grant and the Mobility Aid Scheme to their previous levels. This will cost €25.5m annually.

(xi) Increase Personal Assistance Hours by 1.3m

Personal Assistance service is a life line for people with disabilities to help ensure they can take an active part in community life. Advancing and improving the service is vital to our "Pathway to Inclusion" and helping to build "An Ireland for all".

- We will double Personal Assistance Hours with a 1.3m increase at a total cost of €30m.

(xii) Put the Personal Assistance Scheme on a statutory footing

The Personal Assistance scheme is a vital resource for people with disabilities. The scheme must be copper fastened to secure its long term role in disability assistance.

- We will legislate to give the personal assistance scheme a statutory footing.

(xiii) Move away from Congregated Settings

We support the new model for residential support in the mainstream community. The model envisages people living in congregated settings moving to dispersed housing in communities, provided mainly by the housing authorities over a seven year time frame. However, progress on this has been slow and the HSE has only prioritised the transition of just 150 people from congregated settings in 2015, a target which they did not even meet. This demonstrates Fine Gael and Labour's real lack of commitment to moving people out of congregated settings. We will:

- Allocate an additional €20 million to hasten the process of moving people from what is often unsuitable accommodation to the community.

Revitalise Irish town centres, cities and capital

Long-term pressures on the centres of our towns and cities have accelerated in recent years. We believe that vibrant commercial centres are essential for strong communities. Therefore we will implement a range of initiatives to revitalise them.

We will:

(i) Create Town Teams to lead the way in revitalising town centres

Leadership across all sectors of town life is a key component of addressing the grave challenges Irish towns face. The changing face of commerce, failure of the government to ensure a fair recovery across the country and reduced state services presents a myriad of issues to be confronted. Each town will require its own individual approach to their unique circumstances and within local authority resources. We will:

- Create a town team drawing on political, community groups, business, Garda and government department representatives across all Irish towns combined with restoring town councils. These groups will be tasked with drafting an economic plan encompassing a clear timeframe to revitalise town centres. The Town Team will be charged with a Red Tape Assessment of the burden of regulation facing their towns.
- Task the Town teams to undertake an “Empty Shop Initiative” which will earmark empty units and work with local community groups who need space to ensure they are used.

(ii) Change planning laws for town centre development

Towns are part of the fabric of Irish life. However this government has whittled away the post office network, sold-off of 139 Garda stations, overseen 160 bank branch closures and allowed empty commercial units scar this country’s towns. A core part of developing communities is the need to revitalise our towns and villages. Overly restrictive planning laws are preventing flexibility in the use of buildings and preventing a quicker response to dramatically changed economic and commercial circumstances. We will:

- Change planning laws to facilitate flexible planning permissions to allow vacant commercial units to be turned into residential units in order to attract people back into living in town centres. Flexibility on land use will encourage enhanced investment and greater footfall in town centres.
- Revise the Retail Planning Guidelines to re-emphasize the need to focus development on town centres. We will implement stricter Retail Planning Guidelines, with reduced floor space to curb out-of-town development.
- Ensure that out-of-town developments are the exceptions, requiring a special “sign off” by An Bord Pleanála.

(iii) Keep Streets Safe

Many town and city centres have become dangerous places rife with anti-social behaviour, petty crime and in particular drunken aggression. This fear has driven many people from town centres which should be lively social hubs for the whole community. We are committed to keeping streets safe for families and our elderly at all times and making town centres a focal point for all the community. We will:

- Spread the purple flag initiative to all towns to ensure they maintain the highest safety standards and are welcoming places for families. Purple Flag is an accreditation scheme that recognises excellence in the appeal and management of a town or city centre area at night.
- Create a new framework to help encourage neighbourhood watch schemes (NWS) as an innovative measure to help tackle crime amongst all residential areas including town centre dwellers.
- Establish a national neighbourhood watch council which will facilitate best practise to be exchanged. A national council will include representatives from the civil service and Gardaí. These measures combined with the increase in Garda numbers and visibility on the ground will help curb anti- social behaviour and help create a safe environment in town centres for all age groups.

(iv) Protect and strengthen the Post Office Network

The local post office lies at the heart of rural communities and towns. Its plays both an economic role in providing social welfare payments and an immeasurably important social link for residents in isolated areas. The spill over impact of post offices plays an integral part in a vibrant town. Declining revenue and changing communications patterns have threatened the viability of the post office network. This has been compounded by the fact that government neglect has jeopardised the future of post offices which now lie under a dark cloud of uncertainty. We are committed to protecting the post office network. We will:

- Support the post office network by expanding Post Office services so that they act as central offices for state payments and charges e.g. motor tax, local authority charges, hospital charges and banking services.
- Ensure that Post offices become a hub for shared community state services as well as an office for broadband access and printing facilities.
- Extend the Department of Social Protection contract with An Post.

(v) Create a Dublin City Centre Public Order Unit

The scourge of anti-social behaviour, petty crime and endemic drug abuse is scarring the city centre. This is deeply damaging for business, tourism and day to day activity in the area. A

specialised, focused Garda taskforce is required to ensure our city centre streets are kept safe day and night.

- We will create a specific City Centre Public Order unit to serve in Dublin city centre within the additional Garda resources we have provided for.

(vi) Set up a Public Transport Police Section

Security issues on public transport are a serious issue in Dublin particularly on the Luas services and late night bus services. Anti-social behaviour and intimidation are rife. Ensuring that public transport is a safe and secure way to travel for all age groups at all times is vital to maintaining its role at the heart of city life.

- We will set up a specific public transport police section within An Garda Síochána.

Improve the road network and protecting public transport

The major improvements in the road network and public transport implemented by Fianna Fáil made a vital difference to promoting balanced economic growth. In contrast, the neglect of recent years has done significant damage. The impact of recent floods has devastated an already strained infrastructure in significant parts of the country. This must be reversed and adequate support and insurance given to affected households. Developing community services means putting in place a strong infrastructure to link homes together.

We will:

(i) Establish a National Infrastructure Commission

Ireland needs to take a long term view on infrastructure projects and what this country needs over the next century. This is particularly important in light of the serious challenges of climate change and the need to upgrade our infrastructure to cope with growing demand. This requires long term planning and investment. A new National Infrastructure Commission tasked with planning ahead over a 25 year period beyond the limited 5 year cycle of current capital plans would secure our long term requirements.

- We will set up an independent National Infrastructure Commission by reforming Transport Infrastructure Ireland and drawing from the Department of Transport, National Transport Authority, Sustainable Energy Authority and Local Authorities to set out a new framework for the development of transport in Ireland over the coming years. The commission will be tasked with overseeing long term plans for a series of targets
 - Achieving 4% of GDP Infrastructure Investment
 - Decarbonising Ireland
 - A strong transport network that balances regional development
 - Making Ireland an IT nation with telecommunications connectivity
 - A secure, balanced energy mix
- The Commission's reports will be laid before the Oireachtas and subject to scrutiny. Government departments will be required to draw up plans based on the Commission's recommendations as passed by the Oireachtas.

(ii) Prioritise the M20 from Cork to Limerick

Linking together the second and third largest cities in the country is a vital piece of infrastructure for the South West Region. It is a pivotal link to help slash travel times and generate economic growth across the region. The current route is plagued by congestion and driving blackspots stymying investment across the area.

- We will prioritise the commencement of the M20 from Cork and Limerick. We envisage the project would take at least 10 years to complete even if authorisation was granted immediately. We will develop a Public Private Partnership agreement to initiate the construction of the motorway.

(iii) Boost regional and local road funding

In order to address the neglect of the road network over the last number of years significant investment is required. From 2013 to 2016, maintenance spending on regional and local roads has been approximately 48% below what is required to keep the roads in good condition. The proliferation of potholes, structural decline and dire state of disrepair in roads across Ireland demand significant action.

- We will boost grants funding for regional and local roads by €50m per annum.

(iv) Restore the Local Improvement Scheme

The Local Improvement Scheme was an important source of funds for isolated, neglected roads and lanes not taken in charge by the Local Authority. For communities in marginal areas the growing degradation of these important connections requires a small but important investment.

- We will re-invest in the Local Improvement Scheme to fund improvements in local roads and lanes at a cost of €4.5m annually.

(v) Increase Flood defence Investment and fully implement CFRAM Programme

Volatile weather conditions have ruthlessly exposed inadequate flood defences in communities across Ireland. A comprehensive, lasting flood defences structure must be put in place to withstand future challenges and protect these communities from inevitable future threats.

- We will increase investment in flood defences by €50m to over €450m in the period to 2021 and implement the CFRAM programme to ensure an enduring infrastructure is built.

(vi) Implement a permanent emergency management coordination programme

The failure to adapt and develop the coordination of action for all stages of the emergency management cycle had an important and negative impact during recent flooding. Key strategies have remained unchanged in the last five years in spite of the rising frequency and impact of major emergencies. We will:

- Give legislative underpinning to the National Emergency Coordination Centre and publish a revised national strategy by the end of 2016.
- Create an integrated emergency information portal as a single point of access for people during an emergency. This will incorporate warnings and information from a full range of agencies.
- Institute regular surveys of public preparedness for emergencies and understanding of the roles of state agencies.
- Launch a public information campaign focused on reducing the impact of emergencies and promoting safe behaviour during emergencies.
- Incorporate Safety information for use during emergencies with school curricula.

(vii) Introduce a new Flood Home & Business Insurance model

The aftermath of the December floods has seen hundreds of homes destroyed and left without insurance. Increasingly volatile and intense storms threaten to bring financial ruin on these families if their homes are flooded again. These families and communities need to be protected from future floods.

- We will work with the insurance industry to form an agreement on a new non-for profit company "Flood Protection" based on the UK "Flood Re" model. This company will be funded by a levy on insurance companies and will insure those homes unable to receive cover under the current insurance system.

(viii) Create a new River Shannon Agency

The River Shannon is the longest in the British Isles and stretches across some 360km touching 18 counties. There are numerous bodies and authorities across the River Shannon making a joined up approach difficult. The devastation of the recent floods highlights the need to protect homeowners along its banks. We need a new approach to managing the river that cuts across the different bureaucracies involved. The government's proposal simply revives a weak body it abolished in 1994.

- We will legislate to create a River Shannon agency, this will be done on a cost neutral basis through bringing together functions currently spread across different agencies.

(ix) Encourage Off-Peak Commutes: Introducing the Toll Saver Incentive

Escalating congestion threatens economic competitiveness and quality of life for commuters and inhabitants. Fianna Fáil has a number of innovative policy ideas to reduce traffic congestion on our motorways, particularly the major arterial routes linking urban centres with commuter towns, such as the M50, M1, M6, East Link and Port Tunnel.

- We will introduce a Toll Saver incentive for travelling at off-peak times. Vehicles using an e-tag will be rewarded for undertaking their journeys at off-peak times rather than at peak times via an annual tax credit. Motorists will be able to claim tax relief for 20% of their toll costs undertaken at non-peak travel periods (mid-week). Based on the costs of a round trip commute on the M50, an individual commuter availing of this scheme could save on average €200 per year. The objective of this scheme will be to encourage more users of the key arterial, tolled routes in the Greater Dublin Area to undertake their commute during off-peak times. This is estimated to cost €7m per annum.

(x) Prioritise DART Underground in future capital plans

The DART Underground project has been described by the NTA as the “missing link” in the country’s rail infrastructure. This is because of the enormous benefits it would have connecting the existing rail lines in Dublin and unlocking the capacity of the current rail infrastructure. The tunnel connecting Connolly with Heuston would treble the capacity of the rail network in Dublin, for the first time linking all existing rail lines in the Greater Dublin Area into an integrated rail network as well as doubling up as an underground metro for the City Centre.

- We believe that the DART Underground project is an important component of the future economic health and liveability of the capital city. This is a long term capital project. Fianna Fáil is committed to recommencing the project as soon as additional resources allow within the fiscal space.

(xi) Promote and expand E-Cars to help tackle climate change

Tackling climate change requires fresh thinking and a new approach to both advancing renewable energy sources and reducing pollution. E-Cars have the long term potential to slash carbon dioxide emissions and help Ireland reach its 2013 targets. We will initiate a series of measures targeted to bolster E-Car numbers to help reach the target of 10% electric vehicle usage over the lifetime of the next government. We will implement a series of measures to promote E-Car usage levels and transition away from motor cars. The public sector will take the lead in this regard. We will:

- Waive the Motor Tax for E-cars, cost €1.3m.
- Introduce Motorway toll waivers for E-cars, cost €0.6m.
- Implement free charge points for E-cars, cost €2.3m.
- Continue SEAI grants to boost E-car sales, cost €4.5m.

(xii) Enhance Use of Big Data in transport planning

Big Data will allow Local Authorities to develop a clearer picture of transport trends and changes in real time. We will:

- Utilise the major strides forward in harnessing information and creating a user friendly website for ordinary citizens to highlight issues and concerns which will help to ensure that policy is based on clear evidence.
- Use Smart Maps that encompass various layers of information which will allow local authorities and other service providers to plan big developments together with minimum disruption. The national roll out of accurate real time public transport information that tackles the problems of "ghost departures" will help ensure that taking public transport is made easy for all users.

(xiii) Continue to support regional airports

The regional airport network is a core component of our national transport network. It is essential to attracting and retaining international investment as well as strengthening transport links.

- We are committed to on-going exchequer support for the four regional airports in conjunction with local authorities and businesses. In addition we will retain the three state airports in state ownership.

(xiv) Introduce a New National Cycle Way Strategy

Encouraging more people onto bikes requires cycle ways that are genuine safe routes not simply add-ons to roads.

- We are committed to extending green ways to encourage tourism activity across the country. Local Authorities will be at the forefront of identifying and developing these routes in consultation with local communities. We will provide capital funding of €2m for this.

(xv) Protect the public transport system

At the heart of a sustainable transport system is an easily accessible public transport network. Public transport is an essential community service. In the era of climate change developing our public transport infrastructure is vital to curbing emission and placing our future development on a sustainable path.

- We will continue to invest in public transport services and increase the Public Service Obligation subvention to CIE to 2011 levels. This will cost €28.54m annually in additional spending and will be subject to a requirement that public transport fares are adjusted accordingly.

(xvi) Making Public Transport more reliable, affordable and attractive

Fianna Fáil supports as a central long-term objective, a plan to shift the modal share of travel commuter journeys away from private cars towards public transport, walking and cycling. To do this, we need a public transport system across the country and within our cities that is more reliable, affordable and attractive to use. We will use our public transport investment and PSO increase towards these aims. We will:

- Ensure Reliability through targeted Investment in bus lanes completion and removing 'pinch points', priority signalling at junctions and RTPI.
- Enhance Affordability by introducing fare freezes for three years and introducing heavily discounted fares for third level students and young people up to age 25 to encourage public transport habit creation during their formative years.
- Increase Attractiveness via Easy Mobile/Online Fare Payment platforms, Wifi, Tax Saver Packages for Park and Ride Users and Roll-out of Transport Security on Buses, Darts and Trains. We have earmarked €1m for these measures.

Give local people power over local decisions

In recent years local democracy in Ireland has been further weakened and our country now has one of the weakest systems of local government in the democratic world. We believe that a series of actions are required to empower local people to be involved in community development.

We will:

(i) Establish Town Councils across towns with a population of over 7,500 and create a new voluntary Community Councils structure

The abolition of town councils was a short-sighted, poorly thought out approach to our democratic institutions. The government's abolition of town councils has drastically increased the population to councillor ratio to 1:4800 by far the highest proportion in the Western World. It is possible to have this tier of government without significant costs for representation. We will:

- Establish formal town councils in every town with a population of over 7,500, and previous rate-setting Town Councils below that threshold, a total of 72 towns across the country. All Town Councillors, including the Mayor, would be unpaid and have access to only limited and basic expenses. The cost of this is estimated at €15m.
- We will create a new community council model. This system, operated on a voluntary participation basis and with no expenses related to representation, forms the bedrock and first tier of our vision for a new local government structure. The model builds upon the existing, relatively informal, structure of Community Councils across the country. Giving them a formal legislative role with clear duties and rolling them out across communities throughout the country marks a real devolution of power to the citizen. This roll out will be within existing local authority resources.

(ii) Establish a Community Asset Fund to own and operate community assets

Critical local assets are an intrinsic part of the social fabric of communities. Non-commercial units such as Swimming pools, football pitches, stadiums, etc. all form part of our community and sense of place. Losing these assets are a major blow to any village or town. Communities should be given the chance to buy and operate these assets as a co-operative rather than permanently lose them.

- We will establish a Community Asset Fund drawn from an initial pilot project fund of €15m earmarked from the new tax on sugar sweetened drinks. This fund will be used to fund community councils and co-ops to borrow cheaply to buy local community assets. The eligible community value assets will be earmarked in a Local Infrastructure Register

sanctioned by the Department of Environment with property owners given the chance to appeal their inclusion. If their property is on the register, landowners will have to give a six week notification of their intention to sell. If the community group expresses an interest to buy, an additional 4 months will be allotted to allow the community group time to secure finance and prepare a bid. The landowner may then sell on the open market to the highest bidder.

(iii) Create a Community Right to reclaim land

Across the country and cities a substantial amount of unused and vacant land is held by state bodies such as government departments, local authorities and the OPW. This land could be used for housing or public parks rather than lying idle. Communities and individuals should have the opportunity to buy and use that land more effectively.

- We will establish a community right to reclaim land. Under this mechanism a council, Voluntary Housing Association or community sports group may put forward a Community Right to Reclaim request to the Minister for the Environment. The Minister will consider whether the public body has plans to develop the land or requires it for strategic purposes. If not, the Minister can compel the relevant body to sell the land. If successful the community organisation can avail of the Community Asset Fund to prepare a bid for the land which will be sold on the open market by the public body involved.

(iv) Initiate Directly elected Mayors

Dublin has historically lacked a core driving strategy. The direct election of a Mayor requires a substantial review of powers and legislative clarity on the role of such a position. In principle we believe that a directly elected Mayor can fill an important role. This model can also be rolled out to other cities in Ireland based on best practice.

- We will prepare and publish a detailed proposal covering the role of a directly elected Mayor before the end of 2017. Where it is determined that the introduction of such a position is feasible we will hold city plebiscites across Ireland to determine public support for the proposal. Where plebiscites are passed we will immediately move to establish a new office of Mayor and hold elections.

(v) Reinvest the Local Property Tax in the local area

Finance is the litmus test of a truly independent and strong local government system. The government introduced a local property tax claiming it was to fund local services. In reality it was siphoned off to fund the setup and running of Irish Water and to cover over the drastic reductions in the local government grant. Flexibility and discretion is needed to ensure local people have a real say to make sure money raised locally is spent locally.

- We will ensure that local authorities are empowered to consult local people on where a certain amount of local money is spent. This would mean that a new participatory budgeting mechanism would operate through community and Town councils.

(vi) Directly support local community and sports groups

This is a key area in improving the quality of life for local residents. Local sports and cultural clubs and groups are the backbone of their areas and bring out the best of volunteerism across the country. The government can help these groups and give greater control to local people through a series of measures. We will:

- Revamp the development levy system. Major construction project levies should integrate a contribution to local sports clubs, such as land or monetary contributions. Partnerships between local clubs, community council and the Local Authority should be an integral part of the public contribution to development plans.
- Undertake a full audit of NAMA properties to identify suitable land for use by local sports and community groups. Local authorities should take the lead in developing plans for their procurement and adequate development. This work should be co-ordinated with the NAMA transfer unit in each Local Authority.
- Implement a new tax on sugar sweetened drinks which will be available for spending on sport and physical activity projects in communities across the country.

(vii) Strengthen Community Broadcasting

Fianna Fáil recognises the value of an independent, strong, vibrant broadcasting sector in Ireland. In particular the contribution of independent and local radio stations to local communities throughout the country must be protected and allowed to flourish. They have a vital role in local community life from sports to politics. With recent technological advances the way in which we access broadcasting content has changed dramatically and a charge based on ownership of a television set is now outdated. Any extra revenue received by redefining the current licence fee should be used to redress the cost to the hard pressed consumer. Fianna Fáil is focused on ensuring that the contribution independent and local radio stations make to public service broadcasting is recognised and is committed to ensuring its sustainability for future generations.

- We will ensure that a portion of any public broadcasting fee must be ring fenced to encourage and facilitate the provision of public service programming by independent and local radio stations. Broadcast Authority of Ireland funding will be a part of this.

(viii) Create a national Arts Strategy for all

A vibrant Arts and cultural scene is at the heart of a good life and a strong, vibrant community. Ireland has a strong tradition of music, dance, theatre, art and film and continues to exert global influence across a wide spectrum of pursuits. Beyond the commercial role and tourism potential the Arts sector has an even more important role to play in bringing communities and people together. Creating a space for communities to express themselves and for talented artists to thrive and flourish is an important government support.

- We will shape our Arts strategy around three key principles:
 - Protecting the independence of the arts community;
 - Ensuring a stable, sustainable and secure funding model for the arts;
 - Enabling full community engagement and benefit from State arts funding.
- In order to deliver an inclusive Arts strategy that embraces all communities in the country we will:
 - Ensure that Local Authorities implement a local arts action plan which benefits local communities and local artists and brings the arts directly to the people;
 - Re-establish the autonomy of Culture Ireland as an independent entity and increase funding by €2.3m annually to promote Irish arts and culture internationally;
 - Protect the “arm’s length principle” which promotes the Arts Council’s political autonomy in disbursing state funding to artists and arts organisations;
 - Guarantee the independence of the National Cultural Institutions;
 - Enhance arts provision in our education system and, in particular, increase music provision in primary schools through increased funding for Arts Council finance for Arts in schools programmes. We will allocate an additional €2m of funding annually for this purpose;
 - Increase Arts Council funding by €10m annually,
 - Boost funding for the Heritage Council by €5m per annum.

(ix) Protect & develop our national language

Our national language is an immeasurable cultural treasure. A century on from the foundation of our Republic the need to revitalise efforts to secure and develop the use of the Irish language is particularly important. Sadly, the current government lacks any real commitment to the language or the protection of language rights. Fine Gael and Labour have continuously downgraded the status of the Irish language. The successful roll out of an ambitious strategy for the Irish language requires on-going leadership and funding. In government we will give that leadership. We will:

- Appoint a senior minister with primary responsibility for Gaeltacht and Irish language affairs as part of the Department of Community Support & Development, Rural & Gaeltacht affairs.
- Establish a full Oireachtas committee with responsibility for Gaeltacht and Irish language

affairs.

- Address the funding difficulties of Foras na Gaeilge and Údarás na Gaeltachta with additional resources. We will allocate an additional €3m annually to the continued implementation of the Irish language strategy and a further €3m of current expenditure for projects under Údarás na Gaeltachta.
- Support the office of An Coimisinéir Teanga, protect its independence, and introduce legislation to strengthen the Official Language Act and make language legislation more effective.
- Ensure Irish remains at the heart of our Junior and Leaving Certificate Curriculum. In addition, we are also committed to examining the possibility of introducing a second Irish language option for the Leaving Certificate and Junior Certificate to cater specifically for the needs of native speakers and other fluent speakers, and to ensure that Gaeltacht schools have the freedom and resources to teach Irish to the native speaker in a manner that is appropriate and effective.
- Build on the official recognition of Irish as a working language of the EU. We will work to ensure the Irish Language has full parity of esteem with other EU languages.

(x) Implement a “21st Century Oireachtas” reform initiative

We will reform the Oireachtas to make it fit for purpose in 21st century Ireland through a number of comprehensive measures in our 21st Century Oireachtas Initiative.

In the next Dáil term we will:

- Establish a new office of Policy and Economic Oversight under the auspices of the Fiscal Advisory Council. This will operate similar to the Congressional Budget office in the USA or Office for Budget Responsibility in the UK. This will have the power to independently cost party policy proposals. The annual budget allocation for this purpose would be €2m.
- Amend legislation to allow non-members of the Oireachtas to hold the position of Minister of State (this position is referred to as ‘State Secretary’ in most countries).
- Ensure that a person proposed by the Taoiseach to hold such an office should be subject to a confirmation hearing in committee and vote in the Dáil within four weeks of being proposed.
- Strengthen the Office of the Legal Counsel and empower it to publish independent opinions on matters where the Attorney General’s is not available to the Dáil.
- Revamp Standing Orders for Dáil business to strengthen its independence of government.
- Ensure that chairpersons of all committees are allocated between groups on the basis of the d’Hondt proportional allocation process.
- Set out that the committee overseeing the work of government departments will publish a

review of the department's work based on research undertaken by the Office of Policy and Economic Oversight.

In addition, we believe that the people should be allowed to vote on more radical reforms of our political system which would bring it more into line with other comparable democracies and deliver a more expert, effective and independent government. We will:

- Propose a referendum to introduce a mixed list/PR-STV system.
- Launch a reform of cabinet to separate government from parliament and, in particular to allow outside experts be appointed as Ministers and enable Ministers to be replaced in the Oireachtas by an alternate. Ministers would continue to require approval by the Dáil, attend, answer questions and participate in debates but would not have votes.
- Allow persons who are not members of the Oireachtas to be appointed to serve as ministers.
- Implement the recommendations of the Working Group on Seanad Reform 2015.

Build a strong all Ireland community

The past five years have been marked by paralysis in Stormont and neglect by the co-guarantors of the Good Friday agreement, the Irish and British governments. The pervasive sense of malaise that has sapped the potential of Northern Ireland can be seen in the degradation of North-South institutions by this government. There is a pressing need to re-energise the institutions of the agreement and build a lasting peace in Northern Ireland. We must ensure that the peace process is about more than just the absence of violence.

Fianna Fáil always has been and remains, fundamentally committed to achieving the historic unity of our island in a single state. Unlike the indifference of this government, the issue of Northern Ireland will never be downgraded by Fianna Fáil. "An Ireland for all" means a lasting, deep co-operation between both sides of the border building towards a peaceful, consensual unification of our land.

We will:

(i) Establish a Border Economic Development Zone to foster growth in the border region

The Border zone is faced with a series of distinct threats and opportunities. The impact of the Troubles on infrastructure and geographic isolation has created a unique mixture of issues that need to be addressed. Recognising those particular set of requirements means developing a new cross border development zone to help revitalise the economy in this area. We have earmarked an initial fund of €3.5m for the Zone.

- We will establish a Cross Border Development Zone will involve a number of new features:
 - Border Development Zone Forum to address issues between the relevant bodies
 - Industry Champions to drive on business and attract investment
 - Annual Report to ensure transparency
 - Joined up Infrastructure investment such as completing the A5 and Narrow Water Bridge
 - Joint Cross Border Trade Promotion with Intertrade Ireland, Invest NI and IDA

(ii) Launch Intertrade Ireland, IDA, Invest NI Joint Initiatives to attract international investment

The Stormont House agreement set out a new framework for lowering the corporate tax rate in Northern Ireland to the same rate as the Republic, 12.5%. This represents both an opportunity and a challenge to the Republic. The IDA has developed significant capacity and earned a global reputation for its ability to draw international investment into Ireland. Utilising this existing experience and building on the work of Intertrade Ireland and Invest NI offers an opportunity to

attract investment across the whole island of Ireland.

- We will launch more joint trade missions between the IDA, Invest NI and Intertrade Ireland to market an all-Ireland economy and draw in further investment across the country.

(iii) Develop the Eastern Corridor in the new National Spatial Strategy

The links economic hubs of Dublin and Belfast should form a central part of the future of spatial planning on the island. Co-ordinated efforts to link up roads, rail and public transport connections are vital in stimulating growth and facilitating investment. Maximising the use of Dublin Airport as the primary international hub for the whole region is a core component of that. The new National Spatial Strategy represents an ideal chance to secure joined up thinking across the North and South on the long term planning for the region.

- We will ensure that the new National Spatial Strategy will be strengthened to include maximising the potential of the Eastern Corridor as an engine of growth.

(iv) Secure funding for the complete development of the A5

As part of the St Andrews Agreement in 2006, dedicated funding was earmarked for the construction of the A5 from Derry to Aughnacloy. This new road is an integral part of building a stronger cross border economy between Derry and Donegal. However the project has been beset by financial delays and planning hold ups. Over the course of the next government we will invest €98m to develop the project.

- We will prioritise working with the British Government and Northern Executive to ensure the A5 is built and its full potential across the border is realised.

(v) Build the Narrow Water Bridge

The Narrow Water bridge between Cornamucklagh near Omeath, Co Louth, with Narrow Water near Warrenpoint, Co Down is a pivotal piece of infrastructure in developing the economy in Down and Louth. It also marks a major staging post in reconciliation in the area.

- We are committed to building the Narrow Water bridge. During 2016 we will, following discussions with the Northern Executive and the European Commission, finalise the required funding. We have earmarked €20m for the project.

(vi) Increase shared Health Services

On an island with a population of just over 6m people there is immense potential for shared services to achieve real economies of scale. Rather than duplicating investment and resources we need a new way to make the most of this island's health service. This will be particularly important in the border region but also in the main care centres of Dublin and Belfast where

specialised treatment is needed.

- We will develop new protocols on North/South shared health services and ensure future investment plans have a North/South dimension. In addition a public information campaign ensuring patients know their rights to avail of services in Northern Ireland, as part of the EU will be advanced.

(vii) Build Education links with Dundalk and Letterkenny IT as well as opening up universities to more students from across the border

The border should not be a barrier to students moving to educational centres. IT centres along the border should develop joint courses with their Northern counterparts. Changes to A-Level point calculations have reduced participation levels of Northern students in Universities in the south. We will:

- Encourage universities to further rebalance the A-Level calculation system to ensure Northern students can access courses in all universities across the country.
- Assist Institutes of Technology in the border region to develop cross border courses and joint initiatives

(viii) Increase Public Transport links

Enhanced public transport links are important in building stronger economic and tourism ties between North and South. Stronger bus and rail connections as well as maximising the use of Dublin airport as the central international hub for the country will boost economic activity. Practical measures like reducing the length of time the Enterprise takes from Belfast to Connolly are serious signals of intent by both jurisdictions that establishing strong links are an important priority.

- We will continue to develop the North South railway line and invest in bus services, encompassing Dublin airport, from Dublin to Belfast.

(ix) Work to prevent Brexit

The scheduled British referendum on EU membership and resultant negotiations mark a potentially defining shift in British-Irish relations. The prospect of a fresh wall of regulations being built from Derry to Newry would deal a massive blow to years of efforts on cross border reconciliation and growth. A British exit from the EU would remove the common ground which facilitated much of the progress in Northern Ireland. Ireland cannot afford our largest trading partner and only land border state to leave the European Union.

- While not participating in the referendum in other jurisdictions we will, as a party, make our

position clear that Northern Ireland should vote to remain in the EU.

(x) Facilitate specific Northern representation in the Seanad

Having a Unionist voice represented in the Oireachtas should be a basic part of our political system. The Upper House was established in order to broaden out representation and present viewpoints that would not otherwise be heard in Parliament. The Taoiseach's nominee system is a pre-existing constitutional arrangement that can be used to ensure that voices from the Unionist community are given the opportunity to put forward their views in the Oireachtas.

- We will, through the Taoiseach's nominees, ensure that Northern Ireland is represented in the Oireachtas.

(xi) Allow all Irish citizens Presidential Votes

The President is an important political and cultural figurehead for the state and nation. As an international figure the position represents an important cultural centre point for the Diaspora and all those who consider themselves Irish across the globe. Irish citizens in Northern Ireland should have the right to cast their ballot in this important election.

- We are committed to proposing to the people the expansion of voting rights for Irish citizens resident abroad, including Irish citizens in Northern Ireland, to Presidential elections.

(xii) Tackle sectarianism

The scourge of sectarianism remains deeply embedded in marginalised communities in Northern Ireland. Symptomatic of the paralysis and crisis that has engulfed the political bodies of Northern Ireland, sectarianism continues to blight far too many communities. In order to revive the potential of the Good Friday agreement we will re-invest in tackling the sapping presence of sectarian tensions. This will enable Northern Ireland to thrive and prosper across all communities.

- We will increase funding to the Peace & Reconciliation fund by €2.3m to help build better relations between divided communities.

(xiii) Develop the Cross Border Crime Agency

The MI5/PSNI report on the continued existence of the Provisional IRA and the involvement of its members in criminality is a sharp reminder of the need to address the scourge of paramilitarism. This need is particularly pressing in the border region which has a specific set of requirements due to geography, history and its geo-political context. As agreed in the renewed "Fresh start" agreement the new cross border criminal agency similar in scope to the Criminal Assets Bureau

would integrate police forces from both sides of the border, revenue officials and Environmental Protection agencies. This will address the problems of paramilitary crime in the area by cutting the ground from underneath the criminals involved.

- We will develop and resource the Cross Border Crime Agency to tackle fuel laundering and illegal smuggling along the border area.

Ensure Ireland is a strong voice in the global community

We will:

(i) Combat Climate Change

The impact of climate change can be seen across the globe. We have a moral and civic obligation to bequeath to future generations a better world, just as previous generations left to us. Climate change is an existential threat to that fundamental obligation. The Paris Climate Change agreement has expanded out the ambition of the international community and Ireland must play a full role in helping to achieve them. In addition we have a moral obligation to assist developing countries in building a sustainable future. We will:

- Ensure that the EU supports sustainable, sensible and renewable energy policies at a European level. We believe that Europe must lead in the fight against climate change.
- Work at an EU level to ensure that our international partners keep their commitments to reduce the causes of climate change internationally. The implementation of policies to tackle climate change must ensure the safeguarding of sustainable food production systems, which are vitally important in the fight against hunger and malnutrition.
- Increase funding to the Green Climate Fund by €13m to ensure Ireland fulfils its obligations to climate justice.

(ii) Expand the Defence forces to 10,500 personnel and Reserve Defence Forces (RDF) to 4,000 personnel

The Defence Forces acts as a guarantor of State sovereignty, and provides an integral role in its Government assigned roles and tasks. Multiple global threats such as the escalation in terrorist atrocities in Europe highlight the need to have a Defence force equipped to confront a rapidly changing threat. However, the decline in numbers, marginalising of the RDF and geographic imbalance of its distribution has reduced its public role. We will:

- Restore the Force to the strength of 10,500 personnel across the Army, Air Corps and Naval Service over a five year term at a cost of €22m. This includes the restoration of the Army to a three brigade structure by re-establishing the 4th Western Brigade based in Custume Barracks, Athlone.
- Devolve control of recruitment back to the Reserve Defence Force to increase numbers to 4,000 personnel with a €1.7m investment. We will energetically reinvigorate the Reserve by extending its geographical reach to ensure that all citizens have a Reserve unit within touching distance of their homes.

(iii) Maintain our Neutrality status

Ireland has a long and proud tradition of constructive neutrality that has enabled us to play an

important role as peacekeepers across the globe. This has facilitated our ability to spearhead initiatives such as nuclear non-proliferation and the ban on cluster munitions.

- We will maintain our neutrality status as the bedrock of our Foreign Affairs policy.

(iv) Renew engagement with the Diaspora

Historically our emigrant communities abroad are inextricably linked to the fortunes of this island and always will be. Culturally, economically and politically they are an immense resource. In particular we have an obligation towards older, vulnerable communities. We will:

- Increase Funding for the Emigrant Support Programme (ESP) by €3.5m ring-fenced to ensure that the most vulnerable members of our overseas communities are supported.
- Maintain a Minister of State for the Diaspora.

(v) Increase Overseas Development Aid

Ireland has a long and rich history of assisting developing countries in providing health and education services through missionaries and non-governmental organisations. Ireland should build on this strong tradition by seeking to enhance our educational, political and economic links further with the developing world. We will:

- Commit to Ireland remaining a world-leader in development aid and will work towards the achievement of the UN target. We have earmarked an additional €80m in Overseas Development Aid towards this goal and will invest further resources as economic growth increases.
- Ensure that all aid donated by Ireland should only be granted to countries which have a strong record of accountability and transparency. The agencies who benefit from Irish Aid must also show that the money given goes to those who are most in need. A full annual report with financial statements outlining where funding goes must be produced by these agencies.

(vi) Address the migrant crisis

The unprecedented levels of migrants and refugees fleeing war torn regions in the Middle East and North Africa presents a serious humanitarian and political challenge to Europe. Ireland must play its part in assisting those in need of refuge at home and in providing help on front line camps. Refugees based here in Ireland and the communities they are placed in must be afforded the supports they need to fully integrate into Irish society. We will:

- Work with our EU colleagues and international community to help bring an end the civil war that is destabilising Syria and generating the refugee crisis to an end.

- Support a significant expansion of aid to refugees in camps in the Middle East, including the release of further EU funding for this purpose. We will double Irish funding for this purpose to €1.2m.
- Stand with others in fighting against the extremists who are using this crisis to promote fear and distrust between groups. We will insist that Europe remain true to its democratic and inclusive values.
- Continue to accommodate refugees in Ireland as part of a comprehensive international response.

(vii) Improve Direct Provision Care

Grave political instability, civil war and the escalating impact of climate change is driving the issue of migration into the centre of European debate. As outlined in the above section there is an onus and moral obligation on us as members of the European Union to accept a fair proportion of people who are seeking to escape the horrors of conflict and the ravages of war. We have earmarked €4m to improve Direct Provision. We will:

- Increase the adult allowance from €19.10 up to €38.74 as recommended by the Working Group over the lifetime of the Government.
- Raise the allowance for children from €9.60 up to €29.80

(viii) Work towards a two state solution in Palestine

Ireland was the first European Union Member State to declare that a solution to the conflict in the Middle East had to be based on a fully sovereign State of Palestine, independent of and co-existing with Israel. Fianna Fáil in Government launched that policy position in 1980 and continues to strongly support that position today. We will:

- Continue to spearhead the campaign to seek the recognition of the state of Palestine by the Irish Government and will continue to pursue this policy at an EU level.
- Support any efforts to achieve a two state solution. We are in favour of Palestine becoming a party to the International Criminal Court and will also support an EU-wide ban on certain Israeli settlement goods.

(ix) Put Irish Citizens at the Heart of Europe

The EU sets out an enormous amount of policy implemented in Ireland. It is important that at a professional level we have key personnel, who draw from an Irish perspective while working for the overall good of the union, in the upper tiers of the administration process. The EU presents strong employment and professional growth opportunities that Irish people should be encouraged and supported in going for.

- We will establish a Training Unit in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade to promote and assist Irish citizens in pursuing careers in the European Union's Institutions. This will be open to all public servants.

(x) Embrace the EU Volunteer Initiative

Irish people have a strong history of volunteerism that has made a positive impact across the far reaches of the globe. This spirit of international solidarity is an important civic and diplomatic feature of Irish life.

- We will fully engage with the EU volunteer initiative and its Irish partners to ensure as many Irish citizens volunteer abroad as possible.

4

Secure home ownership & tackle homelessness

Secure home ownership & tackle homelessness

We will build 150,000 homes, ensure every generation can access home ownership and tackle homelessness. We will:

Strengthen the Right to Own

- Retain Mortgage Interest Relief to 2020
- Establish a First Time Buyers Savings Scheme for 80,000 homes
- Tackle Mortgage Arrears and Variable Mortgage rates

Build for families by investing in 150,000 new homes by 2021

- Create a Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government
- Establish a new National Home Development Bond
- Set out a Rural Right to Live

Create Homes for all by building 45,000 new Social Housing Homes

- Establish a new €5.4bn Social Housing building programme for urban and rural Ireland
- Restore Part V in full and establish Part V teams in Local Authorities
- Set up a new Vacant /Derelict Houses Refurbishment Scheme

Help Generation Rent

- Create family tenure leases
- Deliver affordable rent units for key workers
- Improve quality of accommodation with a Local Authority Quality Certificate

Eliminate long term Homelessness by 2021

- Ensure new social housing units form part of the Home First policy
- Increase Rent Supplement levels to support vulnerable households
- Use the National Mental Health Authority to assist homeless integration

Establish an Independent Living Contract for older people

- Secure older people's finances with a €30 increase in the state pension
- Create 3,500 extra home care packages & 2.2m extra home help hours
- Restore Housing Adaption grants

- Raise the Living Alone Allowance to €15 a week
 - Abolish Prescription charges
 - Tackle isolation and loneliness amongst older people
 - Protect and develop the Free Travel scheme
-

The disastrous failure of Fine Gael and Labour's housing policy is causing immense damage throughout the country. This is an area they ignored for five years and continue to lack the necessary ambition or urgency to tackle. In fact they denied there was any problem at all until it had been allowed to develop to the level of an emergency.

The right to own a home is a central part of our vision for Ireland. We believe that owning the roof over your head is good for families and good for communities. An Ireland for all means ensuring this simple ambition is available to ordinary working families across the country. This extends across the generations and people who have worked hard for their whole lives deserve to be supported to live independently in their own home for as long as possible. That is why we have created an "Independent Living Contract for older people".

For many the simple aspiration of home ownership is slipping away as the country experiences a serious housing crisis. Acute shortage of supply in Dublin is leading to spiralling rent levels and rising house prices. Almost 140,000 people are on local authority waiting lists across Ireland. First time buyers are being frozen out of the market by limited supply and credit restrictions. Cuts to housing adaption grants are hitting many elderly and disabled people, preventing them from staying in their homes. For renter's precarious tenancies, poor quality accommodation, and soaring prices are putting young workers under more and more pressure. All the while homelessness scars our cities with 1500 children in emergency accommodation across Dublin.

We believe that action across the full range of housing sectors must be implemented as a core priority of a new government and that a coordinated effort to end long-term homelessness should begin immediately. In government we will ensure that the aspiration of homeownership is not confined to just a few but that all generations can have the ability to own a place to call home.

Strengthen the right to own

Current policy has effectively excluded many groups from the prospect of owning their own homes. We will implement a series of actions to once again open up the opportunity of home ownership.

We will:

(i) Introduce a First Time Buyers Saving Scheme for 80,000 New Buyers

The changes to lending criteria set out by the Central Bank threaten to exclude substantial numbers of first time buyers from the market. Fianna Fáil is committed to supporting first time buyers in securing a good quality home to start their families.

- We will introduce a first time buyers saving scheme to help families starting out get the money together for a deposit on their new home. This involves a 25% top up on individual's special deposit savings account. Accounts are based per person rather than per home so joint purchasers are eligible for two separate savings accounts. Government will top up savings by 25% up to a maximum of €5,000. Savers can lodge €2,000 initially into their account and can exercise one additional €2,000 lodgement every year subject to the €5,000 top up cap. Monthly savings are capped at €400, which combined with the €2,000 lodgement is a maximum first year cost of €1,700 per account. The exchequer cost based on 16,500 annual accounts would be €28.05m per annum. This would increase to €56.1m in Year 2 and €84.15m in Year 3. Accounts can be opened for 5 years and must be opened for a minimum of 12 months. In order to draw down the top up a home must be purchased within 18 months of the cap being reached.

(ii) Retain the Mortgage Interest Relief scheme

A generation of homeowners who purchased homes during the mid-2000s are being threatened by negative equity. Clear action is needed to help families starting out in life to secure their home ownership. We are committed to helping families with support in meeting the cost of their mortgage.

- We will retain the Mortgage Interest Relief scheme to 2020 to help home owners with their mortgage. This will cost €166m. Combined with the First Time Buyers Savings Scheme this will secure home ownership for an entire generation of young families.

(iii) Tackle mortgage arrears and variable mortgage rates

The long term mortgage arrears crisis is jeopardising family homes and consuming thousands of lives across the country. A major cause of the worsening and protracted situation is the

government's flawed personal insolvency legislation which is deliberately tilted in favour of the banks. We are committed to securing the family home and secure home ownership for owners working to overcome mortgage arrears. We will:

- Tackle Mortgage Arrears

- Implement our Family Home Mortgage Settlement Arrangement Bill, which would adapt the under-utilised infrastructure of the Insolvency regime to allow for a restructuring arrangement solely in respect of the family home.
- Set up a system of state and creditor funded insolvency practitioners. These would take on cases where the debtor's payment capacity is so impaired that existing Pips are unwilling to do so.
- Apply a zero interest rate to the warehoused portion of all split mortgages offered to customers in arrears.
- Prevent banks getting a repossession order even if it has failed to comply with the Conduct on Mortgage Arrears (CCMA). We will also ensure that banks and senior officials are significantly punished for breaches of the CCMA.

- Reduce Variable Mortgage Interest Rates

- Empower the central bank to intervene to force banks to reduce excessive variable interest rates

- Address the sub-prime arrears crisis:

- Extend the Mortgage Arrears Resolution Targets to the Sub-prime mortgage sector.
- Establish a dedicated mortgage to rent scheme targeting this group of loans which would potentially prevent thousands of families from being evicted from their homes.
- Require the Central Bank to publish a specific report on how the current owners of subprime loans are complying with the Code of Conduct on Mortgage Arrears. Significant fines should be imposed in cases where breaches of the Code take place.

(iv) Develop Credit Union Mortgage Lending

We believe that a strengthened Credit Union sector has an important role to play in aiding home ownership.

- We will support the development of a new Credit Union mortgage model to provide greater competition to banks in the mortgage lending market. A ramped-up role for the Credit Union movement should be based on the successful Canadian model where a new central body is established funded by local Credit Unions. Individuals will be referred to this body by their own Credit Union therefore retaining the local knowledge link while establishing a high standard of central financial control. An additional €4bn in lending can be opened up via Credit Union lending which will facilitate some 20,000 new mortgages.

Build for families by investing in 150,000 new homes by 2021 including 45,000 new social housing units

A major expansion in housing supply is now urgently needed and we will implement this with clear measures to cut through administrative burden and ensure access to credit. .

We will:

(i) Establish a new Minister for Housing, Planning & Local Government

The Housing crisis requires real, direct leadership. Even though a Minister for Housing sat at the cabinet table for three years and the current Minister for the Environment has said housing is his first priority, the failure of political leadership on housing is undeniable. Multi-faceted problems that are hammering construction levels range from the high cost of construction, credit constraints, planning difficulties. These problems demand a clear, concerted approach from government. A strong lead in government committed to creating a long term strategy to achieve a housing system that builds the right homes in the right places will be a priority for Fianna Fáil. We will:

- Re-organise the Department of the Environment and Local Government to create a new department of Housing, Planning and Local Government.
- Transfer community development and climate policy and undertake an assessment of other options for streamlining and focusing the Department on the challenge of Housing.
- Launch a monthly report on activity to be presented to a Cabinet Committee on Housing which will be chaired by the Taoiseach.
- Ensure the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform will commit to responding to all funding decisions concerning housing within 48 hours.
- Oblige each local authority to publish monthly reports on housing activity.

(ii) Create a National Home Building Bond (NHBB)

Supply is the key issue that needs to be addressed. Quality developers must be funded to build affordable, comfortable homes in the right locations such as Dublin and other high demand areas.

- We will set up a NAMA run agency that will build housing for profit to cater to the needs of first time buyers (FTBs) in Dublin and other urban areas suffering similar chronic supply problems.
- The programme will be primarily funded by a NTMA managed infrastructure bond, raising capital from different sources:
 - 1) Strategic Investment Fund Finance will be directed to invest in the bond.

- 2) Bond sales to investors on the open market, capitalising on the historically low bond rates currently available to Ireland and the international appetite for Irish investment opportunities.
- 3) The Irish League of Credit Unions (ILCU) will be invited to co-invest in the project. They have large cash reserves and as an investment that adds to the public good and addresses a need of many of their members it is a good fit to their mandate
 - The agency will manage the development. It may either become a development agency directly hiring builders and sub-contractors or may employ developers to work for them. In all cases cost control will be used as successfully as in NRA road building projects, with no post-hoc renegotiation of prices and no financial reward for delays.
 - The agency will have a small dedicated review and research team who will ensure quality housing and follow international best practice in building oversight - they will use the programme to raise the standard of Irish building in the process.
 - The agency may use land the state already owns where suitable, but the site cost will be factored into final sale price - this process will be for profit from start to finish.

(iii) Encourage Residential Development in Town Centres

Town centres are under pressure with high commercial vacancy rates and dwindling population based in the heart of the town.

- We will ensure Local authorities are enabled to introduce flexible permissions that can facilitate ease of conversion from empty commercial units into residential units. Local Authorities should also consider investing in such units for social housing purposes in order to encourage a social mix in the town centre.

(iv) Strengthen the right to live in rural Ireland

Rural Ireland cannot be left behind in future construction. Local people have the right to own a home in their community and raise their family there. Fianna Fáil is committed to defending local people's right to build and own their own home in their own community.

- We will strengthen the Planning and Development Act to protect this core right and place an onus on local authorities to provide a clear, transparent route for local people from a community to build and own there. A new shared sites initiative will provide land in each local area for local people to build their own homes.

(v) Increase the supply of family homes

There is an acute shortage of family homes, particularly in the Dublin area. Many older couples whose families have grown up and moved out would consider selling 3 or 4 bed family homes which are possibly too big for their current needs and trading down to a smaller house or

apartment. In conjunction with this measure we propose a new "Independent Living contract" with our older people to ensure they can live in their communities.

- We will explore incentives for persons who wish to trade down in such circumstances, namely:
 - Exempt the seller from stamp duty on the purchase of a new home subject to set maximums in terms of size and value.
 - Exempt the seller from Local Property Tax on their new home for a period of five years.

(vi) Revise Density Levels

Housing construction should adhere to sustainable planning guidelines. Onerous unit density criteria is having a prohibitive impact on construction levels and stoking up prices to the exclusion of low to middle income earners.

- We will revise density levels and replace them where appropriate with bed density criteria to inform future planning permissions. Density levels in city centres will be maintained to ensure that supply problems are addressed and urban sprawl limited.

(vii) Introduce 'use it or lose it' automatic planning permission zonings

Dublin needs to build the right homes in the right places. Fianna Fáil wants a housing market that rewards the building of high quality homes rather than land banking and speculation.

- We will introduce greater transparency in the land market and give local authorities new 'use it or lose it' powers to encourage developers to build and to stop land hoarding. We will encourage the Dublin councils to zone small vacant sites in the city and inner suburbs as residential with automatic planning permissions within building regulations, but with such status expiring within two years if not used.

Create Homes for all by building 45,000 new Social Housing Units

In each year of this government the number of units of social housing provided has declined. They have abandoned direct build and slashed Part V. We need to re-invest in social housing as a priority.

We will:

(i) Start a new €5.4bn Home Building Programme

Fianna Fáil will launch a new €5.4bn home building programme across Ireland up to 2021. The rising number of social housing waiting lists and its subsequent impact on the private market can only be meaningfully addressed with a strategy that has supply at its core. Our ambitious plan will add an additional 10,000 units to the 35,000 units identified by the government in Social Housing 2020. This will directly supply social housing via local authorities and voluntary housing associations financed through the exchequer. We will:

- Invest €334m above current levels per annum to fund the 45,000 units target. Building new homes to tackle the spiralling waiting lists is vital to achieving the right to a home for all citizens. It will also help address the issue of over 70,000 housing assistance recipient numbers placing further pressure on the private housing market.
- Direct the new housing building programme to be drawn up by the local authorities in consultation with the Department of Environment based on demand. The housing programme must reflect the diversified nature of housing need ranging from single member households to elderly couples. Rural homes must also be constructed to ensure that fresh life is brought into more isolated communities. Failings in local Traveller accommodation plans will be addressed in legislation.
- Allow Local Authorities to specify the required mix of social and affordable housing in the Home building programme based on local need.

(ii) Restore Part V in full

Fianna Fáil supports the principle of fully retaining Part V as a major source of future housing supply. Mixed tenure housing has an important role to play in building sustainable communities. Local Authorities should have the power to decide the appropriate nature of the mix based on local considerations but it should be kept to a minimum of 20%. We will:

- Restore Part V to 20%.
- Allow Local Authorities to set the ratio of Affordable homes and Social homes at a minimum of 5% and maximum of 10%.
- Create Part V teams in each local authority drawing from the housing and planning sections to ensure a coherent approach. They will be tasked with developing annual plans and targets, ensuring that contracts are signed quickly, smoothing the expeditious transfer

of units and drawing from development plans to target their construction in the right locations. The teams will bring together developers and housing associations to ensure safe design, location, timelines and transfer issues are acceptable.

Part V can yield up to 12,000 new units over 5 years if the target of 110,000 new private units, of which 60,000 will qualify under Part V criteria, is accomplished. The €5.4bn social housing programme will be used to purchase these units at cost price.

(III) Develop Housing Associations Finance

Housing Associations are a key vehicle in delivering more units to meet social housing demands. They are currently restricted by limited access to finance and a lack of economies of scale. We will:

- Draw on experience in Northern Ireland and the UK to develop Housing Association Bonds to empower the associations to access financial support independent of direct state aid. These bonds will encourage bolder financial thinking by the associations based on sound planning and future revenue streams. It will also alleviate the immediate pressure on the state to fund all significant scale developments. The bonds will be partially guaranteed by the state to reduce borrowing costs.
- Open the Strategic Investment Fund and facilitate private investment funds to invest in Housing Association bond issues. This is in addition to the €5.4bn Social Housing programme. At present Credit Unions hold in excess of €8 billion of surplus funds on behalf of members in deposits and investments. Fianna Fáil will work with credit unions and the central bank to mobilise part of these funds for direct social housing provision.
- Introduce legislation to strengthen, re-enforce and monitor the regulation of housing associations charged with the delivery of social housing to maintain the highest standards of governance and accountability.

(iv) Create NAMA Transfer Units

The National Assets Management Agency has a specific role in providing a broader social dividend to the state. Units not transferred to date should be vigorously pursued to allow the transfer of properties to local authorities to help meet the social housing waiting list. We will:

- Set up a NAMA transfer unit in each Local Authority drawing on personnel from the local sections, Department of Environment and NAMA.
- Task these teams with expediting the transition of homes from NAMA to Local Authorities and housing associations. Greater flexibility must be shown with regard to the building criteria used. The teams will also be charged with drafting future development plans for

NAMA lands to ensure they play a central role in addressing housing deficits in the right places. Specific targets, actions and time lines will be put in place by the teams and held to account by local authorities.

(v) Introduce a new Vacant/Derelict Home Refurbishment Scheme

The total available Local Authority housing stock has been eroded by the large number of vacant homes across the country. Local Authorities should allow families on the waiting list to move into these homes and refurbish them.

- We will introduce legislation to allow the costs of refurbishment to be gradually defrayed over time through reduced rents. This will open up more units to tackle waiting lists while simultaneously reducing the upfront costs to local authorities.

(vi) Create a new Green Deal

A more aggressive commitment to moving Ireland towards a cleaner and more sustainable energy supply is now urgent. In line with our expanded climate change commitments under the Paris deal we need to retro fit much of our housing stock to ensure the greatest possible level of energy efficiency.

- We will amend the role of the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, to develop a Green Deal Agency tasked with accessing European Regional Development Fund, EU Cohesion and European Investment Banking funds as well as private finance. The agency will be tasked with financing a new simplified, easy access scheme across all tenure types that will revolutionise home energy usage in Ireland. The agency will undertake work across a number of areas.

Social Housing Model

- Fianna Fáil will introduce a new Pay as You Go model based on the German Klimabonus example to refurbish social housing across the country. The existing 160,000 social houses in the country will be eligible for funding. Local Authorities will be able to finance the scheme via the new SEAI Green Deal Agency.

Private and Rented Housing Model

- The Green Deal Agency will provide low cost loans to private homeowners and landlords to incentivise investment in green initiatives on their homes. The primary funding behind the scheme is a pay as you save mechanism where the reduced energy bills will be used to repay the original loan taken out.

Help Generation Rent

The private rental sector faces a crisis in terms of both supply and security. This has driven up costs and undermined the sector. Action is required urgently.

We will:

(i) Establish Family Tenure to strengthen security for families and long term tenants renting their homes

The lack of security of tenure is a major issue inhibiting the development of a strong reliable rental market in Ireland. Unlike the European norm, Irish leases are primarily short term one year leases. This generates great uncertainty for families and other long term renters, limiting the appeal of renting for those for whom home ownership is not a preferred option. In particular families with children require stability and certainty rather than the current situation where tenancy can be brought to an abrupt end. We will:

- Introduce legislation that will enshrine a long term "family tenure" lease to reform Part 4 of the Residential Tenancies Bill 2004. Specifically, this involves replacing the 4 year tenancy cycle with a move towards indefinite leases which will enhance security of tenure. Indefinite leases would be voluntary for landlords and tenants to engage in to their mutual benefit. The impact of this will be assessed after 18 months and amended where necessary.

(ii) Delivering affordable rent units for key workers

Fianna Fáil is committed to achieving a genuine social mix in developments moving away from welfare only housing. Creating a new affordable rent sector earmarked for low income households and key workers with limited income will help to build vibrant new developments. This will involve attracting private investment into building projects which will then be run by Voluntary Housing Associations. 25% of these units will be earmarked for social housing and 75% for key workers with limited income such as Gardaí, Nurses, construction workers etc. Rents will be set at 70-80% of the market rate. We will:

- Facilitate this investment by enabling local authorities to establish Step in Guarantee Agreements if the Voluntary Housing Association fails to meet its obligations. In addition the Minister for Social Protection will make adjustments to pension reserved asset rules to allow pension funds to invest in this new sector. A new affordable rent sector will help to keep key workers in the city and tackle social housing waiting lists.

(iii) Improving quality of accommodation with a Local Authority Quality Certificate

Quality of accommodation remains a serious issue for many tenants. The rental sector should not be allowed to languish behind in terms of quality and comfort. Every household deserves a place they can be proud to call home.

- We will introduce a Local Authority Quality Accommodation Certificate to be issued once every three years will help to build up a strong level of quality homes. The certificate should be based on a points system across a range of criteria such as insulation, water supply, quality of the household's conveniences etc. The new certificate system will cost €10m and operate similar to the BER system to ensure the highest standards are maintained in rental accommodation.

(iv) Strengthen tenant rights and implement rent certainty measures

Spiralling rent prices are driving families out of their homes, pricing young workers out of cities and alienating potential future investment in the city. We need to introduce measures to cool down the market and curb excessive rent rises. Tenants need enhanced security to ensure stability in their home. We will:

- Implement current rent certainty measures subject to a 2 year sunset clause to allow the market to cool down and supply to come on line. This will avoid further market uncertainty, increased prices and delayed investment. The legislation will then be fully reviewed to gauge its impact on the market and whether it is still required.
- Tighten notice to quit criteria. Currently the broad range of allowable reasons that can be given for removing renters weakens tenants' rights and reduces their stability. Notices to quit that are contested by tenants will be subjected to PRTB review. Landlords will have to provide proof of intention to sell. Additionally, expanding the notice to quit duration to 6 months for leases beyond 3 years will strengthen stability. Tenants notice to quit will also be extended to two months for leases beyond one year in order to improve stability for landlords.

(v) Overhaul the PRTB

In order to re-balance rights and responsibilities between landlords and tenants the PRTB must have a ramped up role with additional resources. The government has whittled away its staff over the past four years leaving it unable to deal effectively with complaints and broader issues. Tenants and landlords are suffering with long waiting times and inadequate support as a result. We will:

- Reform the PRTB with additional duties and an increase in resources to ensure it can carry out its work effectively.

- Reduce complaint waiting times as a priority for a reformed PRTB.
- Expand the data collection remit and capacity of the PRTB in terms of rent comparison and assisting Local Authorities in quality assurance inspections will be vital in transforming the private rental market.
- Link with this expansion greater awareness of tenants' rights and responsibilities. Utilising traditional and social media to create a greater knowledge around renters' rights is important in ensuring all households have access to the legal entitlements.

These measures will be financed within the PRTB's registration fee revenue.

Eliminate long term homelessness by 2021

Eliminating long-term homeless should be an absolute priority for the next government.

We will:

(i) Ensure new social housing units form part of the Housing First Policy

Our goal to eliminate long term homelessness by 2021 reflects a driving ambition that building “An Ireland for all” must include all citizens and achieve basic sense of decency. We need to rediscover a real sense of ambition in tackling serious social problems such as homelessness, not simply grow accustomed and insensitive to it. Constructing some 45,000 new social housing units by 2021 will address the long term issue of supply of affordable units for households. It is vital that local authorities co-ordinate to ensure that these homes are made available for vulnerable households who have slipped through the administrative cracks and under severe pressure ended up homelessness. The “Home First” strategy is vital to underpinning a long term solution to the complex factors behind many families and individuals becoming homeless. We will:

- Ensure that the required number of the 45,000 new social housing units are made available as part of the “Home First” strategy.
- Allocate adequate funding to address rough sleeping on our streets as a matter of priority.
- Ensure the new National Mental Health authority plays a central role in helping and assisting homeless people integrating into a community.

(ii) Increase Rent Supplement levels to support vulnerable households

Combined with the range of measures around supply an additional short term measure to staunch the increase in homelessness numbers is required. Bolstering rent supplement levels focusing on the cities and subject to a rolling review of its impact on the market will help to keep households on the edge from falling into homelessness.

- We will increase rent supplement levels by 10% nationally to support vulnerable households at a cost of €32m. This increase will be targeted in Dublin and other high cost rental areas.

(iii) Use the new National Mental Health Authority to support community integration

Many homeless people suffer from a number of mental health and addiction problems. In order to effectively tackle homelessness we need to support their integration into communities. Wrap around services are vital for vulnerable people to secure and remain in a home. We will:

- Develop a national strategy for the health of those who are homeless in Ireland. This will include a review of the funding mechanisms for homeless health, and will focus on

addressing the addiction, mental health and primary care needs of those who are homeless.
- We will use the new National Mental Health Authority to assist in the Housing First strategy.

Establish a new “Independent Living contract” for older people

We will:

(i) Commit to an “Independent Living contract” for older people

Having worked hard and raised their families, older people deserve to live a full and dignified life. Welcome advances in healthcare will help older people to live longer, active lives. People who reach retirement age can expect to enjoy many more years of healthy active living. This presents a real opportunity for the state to support and encourage active ageing and independent living.

- We are committed to an “Independent Living contract” for older people that will guarantee over 65s can stay in their own home if possible or accommodate them in a safe, secure and suitable home to spend the later stages of their life in their communities. We are committed to supporting elderly people to live independently as long as possible.

(ii) Secure older people’s finances

Older people have taken a series of hits from this government. The cuts to Home Adaptation grants, axing of the Bereavement grant, quadrupling of prescription charges, medical card cull, abolition of the Telephone allowance have all hit older people with fixed incomes hard. “An Ireland for all” means enabling and empowering older people to live full, independent lives. Financial security is a core part of that. This will help keep families together across all generations and strengthen communities. The state pension is the basic foundation of older people’s finances, they rely on it to pay the bills and keep going week to week. It is vital to ensuring older people can live full independent lives. There are a range of measures costed in this manifesto, summarised below which will directly financially benefit older people and secure their budgets. We will:

- Increase the state contributory and non-contributory pension by €30 a week
- Increase the Living Alone allowance by €6 from €9 to €15, at a cost of €60.5m
- Abolish water charges, worth €60 to an older person living alone and €160 to an older couple
- Abolish prescription charges
- Reduce the drug scheme payment threshold to €100
- Hold a constitutional referendum to protect private pension funds from government levies
- Move to address the anomaly in contributory pensions

(iii) Increase Home Care Packages by 3,500 and Home Help Hours by 2.2m

Fianna Fáil believes that the funding allocated to enable older people remain at home provides not only the best value for money but also the most humane result for older people. As part of

our commitment to ensure older people remain independent in their own home for as long as possible.

- We will introduce 3,500 extra home care packages and 2.2m extra home help hours to help older people stay at home at a cost of €93m.

(iv) Restore Housing Adaptation Grants

We must invest in helping older people live in their own homes with their families, in their communities. Spending money on home adaptation grants will ultimately save money on long term care. We will:

- Fully re-store the housing adaptation grant by €25.5m to allow older people and people with disabilities to live independently in their homes.
- Set waiting time targets that will be published on-line quarterly to ensure that delays will be kept to a minimum and best practise exchanged between local authorities.

(v) Promote specialised accommodation for older people

Building on from the Empty Nest Initiative that facilitates elderly people downsizing if they choose, it is important to promote specialised accommodation. Specialised accommodation will be at the heart of the community and enable older people to live independently and actively. Creating specialised units will also enable more effective care such as home help and reduce isolation. We will:

- Ensure that private developers of care based developments negotiate specific arrangements for Part V requirements for specific older people accommodation.
- Amend the Planning and Development Act 2000 to include a provision for specialist accommodation for older people in development plans.

(vi) Support those who want to work beyond 65 years of age

The “Independent Living Contract” emphasises the need to enable older people live full and engaged lives. For many this will involve continuing in the workplace as they feel fit and able to contribute. There are people above 65 who are eager to continue to make a real difference in a company or the public service.

- We will work towards removing compulsory retirement of persons at the age of 65 and make it unlawful to require a person to retire at or above the age of 65 unless there are clearly specified grounds justifying such compulsory retirement such as competence and performance. Certain defined occupations could be exempted on a rational basis.

(vii) Specific unemployment assistance for over 50s

People over the age of 50 face particular difficulties in getting back into the workforce following redundancy. Many feel that they are being pushed out of the workforce by ageism and prejudice against older workers. We need to start thinking creatively about how to encourage firms to hire experienced workers with specific skills. We will:

- Give a specific mandate to Intreo to positively assist those aged 50 years plus to access employment. Professional and approved recruitment companies are more knowledgeable of the range of job vacancies in the private sector best fitted to the over 50 job seekers and of the requirements of such jobs.
- Introduce a scheme whereby Intreo, will appoint Recruitment companies on a regional basis to provide advice and assistance to the over 50s in applying for jobs with payment substantially related to successful placements.

(viii) Protect and develop the free travel scheme

The free travel scheme introduced by Fianna Fáil was a seminal moment in empowering a generation of older people. It has enabled countless pensioners to live at home by giving them the freedom to move about their communities and beyond. It directly tackled social isolation more effectively than any other measure and as a side effect boosted the domestic tourism industry. After a lifetime of service and work it is recognition of their contribution and changed circumstances. A threat to the Free Travel allowance is a threat to older people's role in their community and to their capacity to live at home. The free travel allowance is a core part of the "Living at Home" contract. We will:

- Fully protect the free travel pass for all pensioners and work with private and public operators to keep services open across as many routes as possible.
- Increase funding to the scheme by 10% with an additional €8m in spending.

(ix) Tackle loneliness amongst older people

Isolation is a growing problem for the quality of life as people grow older. As part of our "Independent Living Contract" we will commit to promote active ageing. This means directly tackling loneliness with a new focus on supports and services for older people across education and amenities. We will:

- Encourage access to facilities - public and private - to enable older people stay fit and healthy. This will include providing special recreational amenities in public parks and spaces. We will also encourage and facilitate all universities, Institute of Technologies, and further education colleges to review their curriculum, course timings and access so as to be more age friendly.

- Amend the Sports Capital Grants system to allow funding of Community Centres which will help facilitate elderly social groups.

(x) Institute an Older People Social Entrepreneur Fund

Major strides forward in life expectancy open up new opportunities for older people to launch new careers. Having built up a wide array of skills through their lives it's a chance to contribute to their communities and break down the barriers of isolation. However many are prevented from that by a lack of credit due to their age.

- We will set up a small social entrepreneur fund of €5m to give seed money to over 60s with fresh ideas for social entrepreneurship. The aim of the fund is to support older, experienced people to introduce new, innovative ideas with real social impact.

Secure home ownership & tackle homelessness

