

**Social
Democrats**

Affordable Lives

*Our plan to cut your
cost of living*

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Vote for better.
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CONTENTS

Tackling the Cost-of-Living Crisis	3
Our Immediate Proposals	4
Making Life Affordable	7
Making Housing Affordable	8
Delivering Affordable Homes	9
Bringing Rents Under Control	10
A Tax on Vacancy and Dereliction	12
Lowering Your Household Bills	14
Ending Healthcare Costs	17
Making Childcare Affordable	19
Reducing the Cost of Education	21
Dealing with Transport Costs	22
Making Insurance Affordable	23

Tackling the Cost-of-Living Crisis

Ireland's cost-of-living crisis is having a huge impact on people's ability to make ends meet and to afford some of their most basic needs. While many of the drivers of rising inflation are beyond control of Government, **there are still many measures that can be taken that would ease the burden on Irish people.**

From the beginning of this crisis, measures taken by Government to mitigate it have been poorly targeted. At the outset, there was €12.4 million in energy credits that went to holiday-home owners, and this was followed by a plan to repeat this three times more.

Budget 2023 contained some measures to be welcomed, but **it was clear that the priority did not lie with those most in need:** the most expensive measures in the Budget were permanent tax cuts for the better off, while others with less resources had to make do with one-off payments and inadequate increases in core social welfare payments.

The Social Democrats have made a number of proposals that would help deal with the rising cost of living, including:

- Adequate increases to core social welfare rates, which would **better reflect the increasing cost of living.**
- Income tax changes that **prioritise low-and-middle income earners.**
- Extending eligibility for the **Fuel Allowance.**
- Cutting the cost of **Childcare fees** and **Public Transport.**
- Making primary and secondary **education genuinely free.**
- Improving household **energy resilience and cutting bills** with solar panels.
- Increasing the **Minimum Wage** to €12.00.
- Extending **VAT and excise duty cuts** on fuel.

Our Immediate Proposals

This document contains a large number of policy measures to cut the cost of living. Many would need a long timeframe for implementation; those are dealt with later in the document. The following are **measures that could be taken quickly by Government**, including in a mini-Budget or emergency Budget if they so decided.

Supporting Workers

We would support workers through a combination of income tax reductions, direct payments, and wage increases for the lowest paid.

- Create an **Energy Crisis Subsidy Scheme** for households. Our Alternative Budget 2023 included a plan to pay **direct cash transfers** to households on a graduated basis, **related to income**.
- Increase the **Minimum Wage** to €12.00, as a step on the road to a **real living wage**.
- **Alter the income tax system to prioritise low-and-middle income earners**. Our Alternative Budget 2023 included a focus on Tax Credits, which provide for workers on a more equal basis, rather than changes to tax bands which disproportionately benefit the better off.
- Extend **VAT and excise duty cuts** on fuel.

Supporting the Vulnerable

We would support the most vulnerable in society through a combination of core welfare increases, increases to targeted payments, and one-off measures.

- Increase core social welfare payments **by an amount that better reflects the increases in the cost of living**.
- Increase the weekly **Fuel Allowance** amount from €33 to €48 and expand eligibility for the Fuel Allowance to **Working Family Payment** recipients.

- **Raise the Qualified Child Increase** for over 12s and under 12s by €12 and €7 respectively to €60 and €47.
- Implement a **Cost of Disability payment at €20 per week**, as a first step towards creating a payment that reflects the additional costs that people with disabilities face.
- Create a **€100 million Hardship Fund** to deal with extenuating circumstances in this crisis.
- Include **financially vulnerable households** in the definition of vulnerable for power disconnections.
- Require energy suppliers to **make all tariffs available** to new and existing customers.

Education

- **Make primary and secondary education genuinely free:**
 - Free school books
 - Free School Transport
 - No more voluntary contributions.
- Cut the **third level registration fee**.
- Increase the **SUSI grant** and expand eligibility criteria.

Childcare and Family Supports

- **Cut Childcare fees by 60 per cent** over two years.
- Ringfence capital funding to work towards a **public model of childcare**.
- **Extend parents benefit by 3 weeks**, bringing paid parents leave to 10 weeks.
- **Extend paternity benefit by 2 weeks**, so paid paternity leave is at 4 weeks.

Energy Resilience

- **100,000 homes fitted with solar panels.**
- Double the **solar grant** for those ineligible for the Warmer Homes Scheme.
- Massive rollout of solar panels to **schools and other public buildings.**

Health

- **Free GP care for under 12s**, expanding the service to more than 155,000 additional children.
- **Improve eligibility to GP visit cards** for people in their 60s.
- **Reduce all prescription charges** to 50c with a cap of €5 per month.
- **Cap car parking charges** for patients undergoing hospital treatment.

Housing

- **Ban Rent increases.**
- **Tax Vacancy and Dereliction**, to bring more units back into use.

Transport

- **Cut public transport fares by 30 per cent.**
- **Reduce off-peak travel fares by 50 per cent.**
- Increase funding to the **Rural Transport Programme and Local Link.**
- Make the **Bike to Work Scheme more inclusive** with a complementary grant scheme focussing on those outside the workforce.
- Extend **VAT and excise duty** cuts on fuel.

Making Life Affordable

Even before the current rise in inflation, Ireland's **underinvestment in public services** meant that services the public in other countries can rely on to be subsidised or free at the point of access – such as healthcare, transport, and childcare – must be paid for in full and out-of-pocket here. The **lack of protection for consumers** means that many of us pay very high bills for basic services such as utilities, waste, insurance and broadband. And, of course, we are living in the midst of yet another **housing emergency** where hundreds of thousands of people simply can't afford an appropriate home.

These costs make Ireland one of the most expensive places in the world in which to live. They add significantly to the cost base of the economy and undermine competitiveness. This makes it harder to create and attract sustainable jobs and businesses. **The Social Democrats are committed to tackling these high costs.**

Our main goal is a society and economy where the cost of living is significantly lower than even prior to the current cost-of-living crisis. Our budgetary focus in government would be on reducing living costs, including the cost of public services, rather than the usual government-focus of giving people a couple of euros a week through small tax cuts that erode the tax base. **There is no gain for a person in getting an extra fiver if basic household costs rise by more.**

Throughout our policy platform we have highlighted the critical need to switch to a system where investment in public services is the main priority for Government. We would focus on:

- Making **housing more affordable**.
- **Bringing down the cost of bills** including insurance and energy bills.
- Providing parents with **affordable childcare** options.
- **Reducing healthcare costs**.
- Making primary and secondary **education truly free**.

Making Housing Affordable

Whether you are happy renting, own your own a home, or are saving to buy some day, the cost of keeping a roof over your head remains one of the heaviest burdens people face, and for many it has been increasing rapidly. For the second time in little more than a decade, we are struggling through a savage housing crisis. **Homes are unaffordable, rents continue to rise, and large numbers of first-time buyers are effectively locked out of owning a home.**

As a key overall objective, the Social Democrats want to change our housing system so that the clear aim is to **deliver good quality housing at the lowest possible cost to purchasers and renters**, rather than the highest possible profit to developers and land speculators.

Central to delivering housing supply is **prioritising the use of public land to build affordable and social housing**. We believe exploiting public land-banks should be the absolute priority of government. Time and again we have seen that **the market cannot be relied upon to deliver housing people can afford**. Instead the State should, and indeed must, step in. Developing public land banks is the only certain way of delivering housing faster and at affordable prices in the short to medium term. The next Government must take the housing crisis by the horns and deal with it directly.

We would:

- Begin an **unprecedented programme of house building**, with a delivery target of **20,000 homes a year**. We would increase capital spending to match this ambitious target.
- **Build a mix of one third affordable purchase homes, one third affordable rent, and one third social homes on publicly owned land**, to ensure sustainable communities and a strong tenancy mix.
- This mix can be varied based on local Housing Need and Demand Assessments.
- Contract builders to build on publicly controlled land to deliver social and affordable homes (for both purchase and rent) in socially mixed communities on **sites that**

are developed to a masterplan with prices set in advance by the State using a Housing Delivery Agency.

- This gives much greater control of the timing and price of new housing supply.
- Legislate to prohibit the sale of state land suitable for building homes.

- **Deliver affordability by driving down the costs of building on public land** by tendering for new housing at scale to take advantage of economies-of-scale, ensuring advanced planning permission, and having funding streams in place.
- These steps in place means that a multiplicity of builders can build on sites rather than developers, keeping costs low.

Delivering Affordable Homes

The Social Democrats would **introduce a new Affordable Housing Scheme**.

- We would use the **extensive residentially zoned public land that is available to public authorities to build homes** that are affordable to rent or buy. The Ó Cualann model, which has delivered affordable housing in Dublin, Cork and Waterford, is an excellent example of what can be done with the right kind of model. We would scale up delivery of housing on this basis.
- We would also **strengthen the hands of Local Authorities** when negotiating the cost of Part V housing (both social and affordable) by providing that where developers are stalling in negotiations the local authority will acquire land from within that

development from the developer within a specified time period.

- We would also **remove leasing as an option for Part V delivery**, putting a halt to the scandalous situation where instead of local authorities buying properties as social housing, they are increasingly entering into long-term leasing deals – paying eye-watering rents for up to 30 years – before handing the keys back to the developer or the investment fund.
- **Schemes that focus on boosting demand do not make housing more affordable, regardless of what they claim.** They serve solely to benefit developers and artificially inflate prices, and should be scrapped.

Bringing Rents Under Control

In recent years, private rent prices have increased to an astronomical degree. Figures from the Residential Tenancies Board show that the standard rental property in Ireland cost €1,397 per month at end Q3 2022, an 87 per cent increase from their recent low of €745 in early 2012 (€652 difference). Average earnings increased by less than one third of that over the same period.

The Social Democrats would ban residential rent increases for at least 3 years.

The previous rent cap of 4 per cent per annum was too high; it was five times the rate of inflation at the time it was set. It did not apply across the whole country and was too easily evaded by some landlords. Above all else, it didn't work. **Rents remained at record levels and were rising by more than 4 per cent, even in rent pressure zones.** There is no justification for any further increases and the government's ban on rent increases in Rent Pressure Zones (RPZs) from exceeding general inflation (subject to a new cap of 2 per cent per annum) is not adequate. **Rent increases should be banned in full.** This would be key to stopping the flow of families into homelessness.

Other measures to ensure greater protection for renters:

- We would give far greater commitment to affordable for-purchase housing schemes, alongside **Cost Rental projects** in the vein of the Vienna Model.
- The Social Democrats would legislate to provide for **tenancies of indefinite tenure**, so that tenancies can't simply be ended at the end of each 6-year cycle.
- We would ensure that REITS and 'Cuckoo' Funds pay a fair amount of tax, greatly reducing their activities which are driving up purchase prices and rents, and depriving many renters who are hoping to buy a home of the opportunity to do so.
- We would introduce the **Deposit Protection Scheme**, a new legal definition of deposit to mean one month's rent, and a rental debt mediation scheme.
- **No-fault evictions must end.** Tenants that pay their rent and are not in breach of their rental agreement should not be subject to arbitrary eviction.

- We would significantly **increase penalties for rogue landlords and rogue tenants.**
- We would **limit sale of property as a grounds for terminating a tenancy** by amending Section 34 of the Residential Tenancies Acts and update legislation so tenants of Buy-to-Let properties in receivership are transferred to the receiver and on to a new landlord.
- We would **ban all sales of properties to vulture funds**, legislate to ensure that **no families can be evicted into homelessness**, and change the legal definition of a legal definition of landlord to include banks and receivers.
- Unacceptable practices such as soliciting bids and demanding detailed personal data show the need for strong regulation of estate agents. There must be **penalties for soliciting bids on rental homes.**
- We would **limit ancillary charges that landlords** can apply - such as bin collection and car parking that in some cases are being used by landlords to side-step current rent caps. We would also ban the taking of deposits to view properties for rent.
- We would legislate to afford **greater protections to licensees** in tenancy situations.
- At present, tenants in home share situations where the total rent is above €3,333 per month face stamp duty on top of their rental bill. As rents rise, more and more renters will fall into this category. This is a grossly unfair tax and only makes a bad situation worse. We would **scrap this stamp duty.**
- Far more inspections need to be conducted, and compliance must be **enforced by an enhanced and empowered** Private Residential Tenancies Board.
- The age profile of tenants is increasing, meaning that people are renting into older age. Long-term leases provide security of tenure for older tenants. As noted above, we would **legislate to provide for tenancies of indefinite duration** so they can't simply be ended at the end of each 6-year cycle.

Finally, the Residential Tenancies Board must work for both renters and landlords if the rental sector is to be a functioning sector. There are many good landlords, but we would **strengthen the Residential Tenancies Board** so that it is in a much better position to regulate the rental sector. Too often tenants have found themselves turfed out of their homes at a whim of a landlord. We need **far better enforcement of the law in relation to rents and security of tenure**, better information for both tenants and landlords, and a far more efficient dispute resolution process to serve tenants and landlords fairly.

A Tax on Vacancy and Dereliction

The Social Democrats have been calling for super-tax on vacant and derelict homes, to encourage landlords to bring them back into use. Prolonged vacancy and dereliction of residential homes cannot be tolerated in the middle of a housing crisis. This is especially true when letting or refurbishing these homes is the cheapest, quickest, and most environmentally friendly, way to quickly add to the available housing stock.

A tax on vacant homes was first promised by Government in 2016, but never materialised. Budget 2023 included a tax that was three times the rate of the Local Property Tax, which sounds big until you realise it amounts to 0.3 per cent of the value of the property, at a time when annual increases in house prices have been around 10 per cent. **It is now time to introduce a tax with reel teeth; one that provides a genuine incentive for the owners of these homes to bring them back into use.**

The Social Democrats would **immediately introduce a vacant homes tax of 10 per cent of the value of the property**, calculated on an annual basis. This would be levied on any residential property that is vacant for more than twelve months.

Fair exemptions to the tax would apply, including where a property is:

- for sale
- undergoing significant refurbishment
- subject to a probate application or other legal proceedings
- owned by someone who is in long-term care, or in hospital

The Social Democrats would also immediately introduce a **tax on derelict residential property calculated on an annual basis at 10 per cent of the value of the property.**

The purpose of this tax is not to raise new revenue, though the additional revenue would be useful to fund the building of additional affordable housing. Its main purpose is to signal to property owners that vacancy and dereliction, in the middle of a housing crisis, will no longer be tolerated, and to bring much needed vacant and derelict homes back into use.

A role for the Cost Rental model

The Social Democrats believe **Cost Rental housing should be an important pillar for delivering affordable rented homes**. Cost Rental is secure rental accommodation where rents are set at a level that covers the cost of providing the homes over a period of time, usually several decades. It is a key part of housing in many European countries, including Austria, Denmark and Finland.

Cost Rental should be publicly-provided publicly-owned housing. Whether provided by central government, local authorities or approved housing bodies, the goal should be to provide rental accommodation that is sustainable, high in quality, and affordable for low and middle-income earners.

A **move away from rents set only by the 'market'** will help to provide many households with a more affordable alternative to the private rental sector, where the focus is on charging maximum rents. Instead, Cost Rental provides greater certainty to tenants, who know that rents will only change based on changes in the cost of providing their home. This is a very different experience to the uncertainty of many renters in the private sector.

In countries like Austria and Denmark, all money raised from rents in the Cost Rental sector must remain within the system. The money is constantly recycled to fund renovations or new buildings.

Rents collected from older Cost Rental buildings help pay for new developments, so that over time the need for public capital investment can fall, and the social housing sector becomes more self-sustaining. This would be an improvement on the current situation, as investment continues even when the economy is not healthy. **To guarantee the recycling of funds in the Irish Cost Rental system, legislation must prevent providers from extracting funds.**

Cost Rental schemes could be potentially funded through the Housing Finance Agency, the European Investment Bank, the Council of Europe Development Bank, or various EU-level funding schemes. Ways to leverage money on deposit at Irish financial institutions should also be examined. The state could also assist through the provision of low-cost finance arrangements, loan guarantees, or preferential access to land.

Lowering Your Household Bills

Tackling Long-Term Energy Costs

Even before the current cost-of-living crisis, Irish households were paying some of the highest electricity prices in the western world.

Reports suggest that over a million electricity and gas customers are not availing of the best offers for their household circumstances. **The Social Democrats want to drive down the cost of electricity and gas bills** by setting a far more aggressive approach for pricing and competition in the sector, and by investing in a new national retrofitting scheme for households.

As well as the actions already noted, we would:

- At household level, roll out a **massive investment in solar panels** (see next page).
- **Require energy suppliers to make all tariffs available to new and existing customers.**

The Commission for the Regulation of Utilities (CRU) should direct energy suppliers to offer existing customers the same deals available to new customers. This has recently been done by the CRU's British equivalent, Ofgem, in the United Kingdom.

- Expand existing **retrofitting grant schemes** and introduce a pay-as-you-

save home insulation loan scheme so even those with without cash up-front, can avail of energy grants and pay overtime through savings in their energy bills. We would widen the benefits under the current scheme and set aside funding to recruit energy advisers to help households understand the benefits and savings of investing in their home and help them through the process.

- We would **expand the CRU** to recruit additional staff and allow for a far more consumer-oriented approach to fair competition in the utilities sector.

Time to go “BIG” on Solar

The Social Democrats are focused on creating more household energy reliance, as well as a more sustainable Ireland. **Individual households and homes must be made more resilient to energy price and supply shocks.**

In Government we would commit to installing solar panels on 100,000 homes over a two-year period as part of a sustained state-led effort to harness the power-generating capability of the technology. Around one million homes in Ireland are suitable for solar panels but do not have them installed.

We would create an initial €200m fund to provide grants to households to install solar panels, reducing household emissions and cutting electricity bills by an average of up to 40 per cent over the course of a year.

The initial tranche would be targeted at low-income households, using the same eligibility conditions as for the Warmer Homes Scheme. There would be a parallel move to install panels on public buildings, including the provision of grants for schools. Funding will be eventually scaled up to a point where 100,000 homes and buildings per year are being fitted.

In the short-term this will require increased funding to train more registered installers. The installation process would be most efficient if housing estates were targeted by installers who can fit out an area of similar houses quickly, in one go. There's a strong case for Local Government bulk-buying the solar panels to allow households to avail of further economies of scale. A standardised approach has the potential to cut costs by up to half. We would also double the solar grant for those who do not qualify for the Warmer Homes Scheme.

At present, planning permission around solar panels depends on the size of the roof in question. **This should be changed to allow a more flexible approach.**

Dealing with Waste Charges

Ireland currently does not have a dedicated Regulator to protect consumer interests in the waste sector. This means that the State has very little control over what waste companies charge or how fairly they deal with their customers or how competitive the market is. We need **a strong regulator that will put environmental standards, strong competition and fair pricing** at the heart of the waste industry.

We would establish the CRU as the interim regulator for the waste industry so that consumers can be adequately protected. This would also fund far better information for consumers on recycling and re-use to help bring bills down and protect our environment.

Protecting Consumers with Disabilities

It is important that we **recognise that people with disabilities face specific disadvantages as consumers that may result in higher household bills**, and therefore ensuring that all regulators have fair price protections in place for people with disabilities and that these protections are properly notified to customers and enforced vigorously by the relevant authorities.

The Cost of Living with a Disability

Despite improvements in funding in recent years, **the experience of people with disabilities in Ireland continues to be one of social exclusion.**

People with disabilities consistently have **among the highest poverty rates of any group in Ireland**, three times that of the general population, while more than two in five people with disabilities are experiencing deprivation at any one time.

Many disabled people were already struggling before inflation took hold, and will now have simply fallen further behind the rest of society. Government needs to **recognise the findings of the Cost of Disability report**, which showed that living with a disability in Ireland often means significant additional costs just to have the same standard of living as others.

The Social Democrats would:

- Use the findings of the **Cost of Disability report** to inform the direction of future policy.
- Create a pathway so that by a combination of the Disability Allowance and Cost of Disability payments, **people with a disability are brought above the poverty line.**
- Begin by introducing a **€20 per week Cost of Disability payment** as a first step to address the significant additional costs of having a disability.
- Increase core social welfare payments **by an amount that better reflects the increases in the cost of living.**
- Begin making provision for the funding requirements identified by the **Disability Capacity Review.**

Ending Healthcare Costs

Through the roll-out of Sláintecare, the Social Democrats want to significantly bring down healthcare costs. The full implementation of the cross-party Sláintecare plan will greatly reduce the cost of things like:

- **GP visits**
- **hospital charges**
- **dental visits**
- **prescription charges**
- and the **cost of medication** to the health service.

On top of the aims contained within the Sláintecare plan, we would make **GP care completely free**.

Most importantly, with the Social Democrats in government, Sláintecare would deliver a health service that we can depend on; one where patients will be seen more quickly, and **everyone will be treated according to their need and not their ability to pay**.

This will remove the fear many people have about giving up expensive private health insurance, which essentially functions as double taxation, forcing citizens to pay twice for healthcare.

Making Childcare Affordable

Irish parents pay some of the **highest costs in the world for childcare**. Despite some recent improvements, childcare remains a huge expense for many families. The Social Democrats have supported the introduction of the National Childcare Scheme. However, the scheme as currently constituted falls far short of meeting the needs of those parenting and ameliorating the costs of raising a family in Ireland. **For many Irish parents, especially those with more than one child, childcare represents the cost of a second mortgage.** In addition, many parents don't qualify for support under the scheme either because their income is not deemed low enough or their child is not deemed young enough.

In Government we would invest an additional €140m per annum in Core Funding for Childcare in order reduce fees by 60 per cent over two years.

We would also ring-fence capital investment to increase direct public provision of childcare. It is the long-term aim of the Social Democrats to establish a **national public childcare service delivered directly by the state.**

The Social Democrats have consistently called for a 'New Deal' for families, including a suite of policies that would lead to improved living conditions and a lower cost of living for families. That suite has included additional investment in childcare, healthcare, education and housing, additional paid and unpaid leave entitlements, and a greater work/life balance.

Ireland lags far behind other countries in terms of childcare support and provision, parental leave, and supports for new parents. In Government we would facilitate greater work/life balance for working families by increasing paid leave so that the total paid leave for parents covers the first 12 months of a child's life.

The Social Democrats also recognise that it is **not just parents using the formal childcare sector who face high costs.** And neither are these high costs confined to just the youngest families.

Many families adjust their childcare arrangements as their families and work arrangements change over time. Many take time out from work to care for their family, use a Nanny/Au Pair, the formal childcare sector, or family members, or move in and out of childminding. Most of these choices entail costs, either directly or through **income-foregone**. So, it's **important that all childcare arrangements are respected and supported by the state**.

As well as our proposed funding model for the sector which would reduce fees significantly for parents, the Social Democrats would introduce the following key measures to support parents and their families:

- We would introduce **additional paid parental leave** from the end of maternity and paternity leave to the child's first birthday.
- We would provide a **new Early Years Payment to cover children from the end of paid parental leave until entry into preschool**.
- We would **significantly improve support under the National Childcare Scheme** to allow far more families with children under the age of 12 to qualify and to improve supports under the universal element of the scheme.
- Parents with young children who have not yet reached pre-school age would be given the choice of the Early Years Payment or assistance under the National Childcare Scheme.

Reducing the Cost of Education

Making Primary and Secondary Education Truly Free

The Social Democrats are committed to the introduction of **truly free Primary and Secondary Education**. We would do this by:

- Funding 100 per cent of the costs of school books, the school transport scheme, and other classroom resources.
- Abolishing voluntary contributions for families.
- Restoring capitation payments to pre-financial crisis levels.
- Legislating to ensure all school uniforms and other requirements are affordable.
- Begin the phased expansion of the Hot School Meals Programme.

All of this would cost just an extra €113m annually at primary level, and €140m to do the same at second level. **While not an insignificant amount of money, €253m would represent around a 2 per cent increase in the Education budget**, but there are few policy measures that would have as transformative an effect on the lives of families with children who live on the margins.

Tackling Third Level Fees & Improving Supports

The Social Democrats would reduce the cost of Third Level education by:

- **Reducing third level fees** by phasing out the student contribution charge.
- Increasing the **student maintenance grant (SUSI)** rates by 10 per cent.
- Increasing the **student maintenance grant income threshold** by 10 per cent.
- Recognising the work of **Postgraduate Research Students** and guaranteeing fair pay and working conditions.

Dealing with Transport Costs

The cost of transport and commuting is a huge burden to many. Investing in public transport would not only put extra money in people's pockets, but it would also play a key role in our efforts to tackle the climate crisis. We would:

➤ Reduce off-peak fares by 50%

Reduced fares for off-peak travel on public transport would encourage people to leave their cars at home and use public transport. Traffic is back at pre-pandemic levels while public transport is at just 60 per cent capacity. This imbalance must be addressed.

➤ Cut regular fares by 30%

The Social Democrats have long been committed to **lower public transport fares**. The cost of travelling on public transport in Ireland has been too high, even outside of the current cost-of-living crisis, and is often substantially more than the marginal cost of making the same journey by car.

This incentive does not work in the public interest. We would make **substantial investment, subsidising public transport so that fares can be reduced.**

We are also keen to **examine alternative no/low-fare models**, and would establish a no/low fare pilot in a large town or city, for example Galway, to examine how such a scheme could work in Ireland.

➤ Increase Funding for Local Link

Local Link is vital for rural Ireland but also for the overall sustainability of our public transport system. Increased funding, allowing for more routes and a more regular timetable can contribute to reducing transport cost in rural Ireland.

➤ Improve the Bike to Work Scheme

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

We would also expand the definition of **'eligible equipment'** under the Bike to Work Scheme to include child seats and trailers designed to safely carry children.

Finally, we would improve the Bike to Work Scheme rate to €1,500 for bikes, and create more realistic limits for certain categories including up to €2,000 for ordinary E-Bikes, with a higher limit of €3,000 for E-cargo bikes.

Making Insurance Affordable

Affordable insurance is fundamental to the long-term interests of our country. High insurance premiums add very significantly to the cost base of our economy. The higher they go, the higher they push up all other prices and drive up the cost of living. Businesses fail, local services cease operation, and communities can't get insurance for events.

While the Central Bank has started to produce statistics and investigate the basis on which insurers have been increasing premiums, the Social Democrats are not satisfied that the Central Bank's approach is sufficiently consumer-focussed. It **does not collect enough basic data** – particularly in relation to premiums. And it is not active enough in relation to vulnerable customers, market concentration, and market volatility in relation to insurance.

- The Social Democrats want to see a **new Consumer Affairs Committee established**, whose sole focus is on outcomes for consumers. Regulators should expect to have to answer far more regularly for their actions or inaction.
- Such a Committee can play a valuable role in bringing about accountability, and also highlighting where there are gaps in legislation or deficiencies in powers that are available to regulators

Motor Insurance

Despite reported falls in the cost of car insurance, it is still far too high. It is to be welcomed that action is being belatedly taken, however it is still not going far or fast enough. Central Bank statistics now show that motor insurance costs in Ireland have risen by 42 per cent in the last decade despite a 2.5 per cent reduction in the average cost of individual claims over the same period.

- The Government's **reform programme has been far too slow and ineffective**. The Social Democrats would introduce better settlement guidance for the judiciary to help reduce claims costs.

- We would **end discrimination against drivers of older cars** and new or **returning entrants to the insurance market**, improve non-litigation methods for claims settlement to reduce legal costs, and make it easier to switch insurers and thereby drive competition.
- We would also take measures to **tackle insurance fraud** and recruit extra Gardaí to better enforce road traffic law.
- The Social Democrats believe that the **Book of Quantum** should be recalibrated so that court awards are benchmarked against international evidence instead of simply Irish historical awards. This should help to significantly lower awards for minor injuries, help lower legal costs, create less of an incentive for fraudulent claims, bring Ireland into line with pay-outs in other countries, and, with better regulation, reduce premiums.

Home Insurance

Home insurance premiums also remain too high. While reforms listed elsewhere would help reduce premiums in this sector as well, there are still far too many households struggling to receive reasonable quotes due to the threat of flood.

- The Social Democrats would **boost funding for flood defences** to help drive down the cost of home insurance.

The image features a background of overlapping, semi-transparent purple triangles of various shades, creating a low-poly, abstract pattern. At the bottom, there is a solid white horizontal bar.

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