

**Social  
Democrats**

# Invest in Better

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***General Election  
Manifesto 2020***

***Hope for better.  
Vote for better.  
Vote Social Democrats.***

**#VoteforBetter  
#SocDems**

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## Invest in Better

This election offers a real choice.

One option continues our current path. The same old ways of doing politics. Failing on our climate targets. Crisis after crisis caused by leaving health, housing and other public services to the market.

The Social Democrats want to help move Ireland in a new direction.

We stand for a uniquely Irish version of the Nordic model. One that builds on Ireland's strengths, but addresses the systemic failures of public policy. Unlike others, we don't believe we can slash taxes across the board and improve public services. Above all else, we stand for investment.

Investment in people. Investment in homes, in healthcare, in transport, in environment, in time.

In this manifesto, we are outlining policy with investment at its very core.

Our politics are based on quality public services which serve the public interest. We seek to reshape work/life balance. To build a society which gets it right for children. To recreate an economy which is greener, but fairer too.

These politics are rooted in integrity, honesty and a desire to restore trust in public life.

People across Ireland hope for better. With the policies outlined here, we are asking them to vote for better in this election by voting Social Democrats.

## Housing: Homes within Reach

Housing is the greatest challenge this country faces, and yet Ireland is failing its people. For the second time in a decade, we are struggling through a savage crisis in housing and homelessness. Housing is unaffordable, rents continue to rise, homelessness is at record levels, and large numbers of first-time buyers are effectively locked out of owning a home.

Right now, in all aspects of housing policy, Fine Gael has chosen the most expensive method of delivery. From the chaotic HAP system to purchasing luxury units from private developers, to giving REITS free reign of our rental market, to relying on privately-owned land banks for most of the for-purchase housing available - Ireland has one of the most expensive housing delivery systems in the world. This has to stop.

The Social Democrats believe that **housing is a fundamental right**; one that is needed to ensure that our people can live dignified lives without undue financial hardship, precarity or stress. To turn the tide, we will need to **radically rethink public policy, and reimagine the social contract**. As a key overall objective, the Social Democrats want to change our housing system around 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**.

### Our Housing Priorities Are:

- Maximising the use of public lands to **deliver an actual build of 100,000 homes over the next 5 years**.
- Introduce a **nationwide rent freeze** until increase in housing supply drives down the cost of housing substantially
- **Legislate to stop land hoarding** by introducing an effective specific tax, by closing all loopholes and by eliminating all tax breaks for REITS and 'Cuckoo' Funds
- **Eradicating homelessness** in the lifetime of the next Dáil through a Housing First strategy
- Introducing legislation to reserve **20% of housing in private developments for affordable housing to buy or rent**, in addition to the current 10% social housing

## Building on Public Land

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 the next Dáil.

Time and again we have seen that **the market cannot be relied upon to deliver housing**. Instead the State should, and indeed must, step in. Developing public land banks is the only certain way in the short to medium term of delivering housing faster and at affordable prices. The next Government must take the housing crisis by the horns and deal with it directly.

We will:

- Begin an **unprecedented programme of house building**, with the Land Development Agency being set a delivery target of 20,000 homes a year with as much front-loading as possible based on capacity. **This would deliver 100,000 homes over the lifetime of the next Dáil**. As outlined in our Alternative Budget 2020, we will increase capital spending to match this ambitious target.
- **On publicly owned land, we would build one third affordable purchase homes; one third affordable rent and one third social homes** to ensure sustainable communities and strong tenancy mix. This division will be kept under review to ensure those most in need of housing have a home.
- 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.
- **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 Affordability

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 O’Cualann model in north Dublin remains an excellent example of what can be done with the right kind of focus.
- We would like to see far greater commitment to affordable for-purchase housing schemes alongside **cost-rental projects** in the vein of the Vienna Model.
- We will 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 introduce legislation to reform Part V of the Planning Acts to **reserve 20% of housing in private developments for affordable housing (in addition to the current 10% social housing)**. This will ensure a stronger social mix in private developments by updating legislation and Ministerial guidelines to ensure pepper-potting.
- This new scheme would also provide clear guidance for local authorities and Approved Housing Bodies as to **how cost rental and affordable purchase schemes should be allocated**, particularly in regard to how we assess what people can afford.

### What is ‘Affordability’?

The Social Democrats believe any new system should take into account peoples’ individual circumstances by considering factors such as differences in the cost of living in different parts of the country.

That is why we propose that, as well as opening up social and affordable housing to a broader tranche of the population, that we need to **radically rethink how we define affordability**.

The Social Democrats propose that alternative methods, particularly **‘residual’ income**, be used as the desired starting point for assessing housing assistance needs.

Residual income essentially refers to the amount of money that a household has left over once they have met all of their essential needs. For example, what

would be left for a couple with young children once they have paid for reasonable prices for childcare, healthcare, the cost of disability, education expenses other essentials?

This far more holistic approach to assessing affordability would allow Ireland to better take account of the tens of thousands of people who appear to be in a sufficiently strong financial positions, but, in reality, struggle to make ends meet every month.

Not only would this system be fairer, it would also allow the state to increase investment in social and affordable housing, whilst still fully complying with state aid rules regarding public investment in housing being targeted at particular groups, as residual income provides a stronger basis than gross income for justifying the need for public investment in housing.

**We would investigate a comprehensive affordability test, based on this approach, which would be evidence based and would have new strict criteria to determine affordability fairly.**

## Ending Homelessness

The current homelessness crisis is an entirely predictable emergency. Yet it is within the power of the next Dáil to put an end to it once and for all. We believe the next Dáil must have the political will and courage to do whatever is necessary to eliminate homelessness within its lifetime.

- International best practice shows that the **Housing First** approach is key to tackling the problem. We are committed to ensuring far greater roll out of 'Housing First' system to provide safety and stability to the most vulnerable homeless people in Ireland.
- We would allow greater discretion to front-line workers in terms of rental support where there is a risk of homelessness/eviction, by **extending Homeless HAP to the whole country** and by ensuring the HAP scheme can provide **discretionary uplifts**.
- We will develop a **targeted strategy to end the scandal of families living in hotels and family hubs for long periods**, and to ensure the a proper housing solution is available.
- We would **increase funding for homelessness spending and services**, including investment in family case managers, and reform of welfare laws in relation to under 25s experiencing homelessness.

- Many people are effectively homeless, for example couch surfing with friends or in other precarious situations, but not presenting to services. We must **establish the levels of hidden homelessness and take steps to ensure their housing needs are met.**
- In the last five years the number of 18-24 years olds in homelessness has doubled. There is an urgent need for a **dedicated Youth Homelessness**

**Strategy** to tackle this shameful statistic. The Strategy would be specifically tasked with establishing the levels of homelessness among **vulnerable young people**, in particular the levels of homelessness among **LGBT+ young people**, among **people leaving institutional care** and in others who may be particularly vulnerable to homelessness, as both national and international research and experience shows.

## Protecting Renters

In recent years, private rent prices have increased to an astronomical degree. The most recent figures from the Residential Tenancies Board show that the standard rental property in Ireland now costs €1,243 per month, a 67% increase from their recent low of €745 in early 2012 (€498 difference). At the same time, average weekly earnings only increased by 10% over the same period, from €699 to €768 (€69 difference, or €296 in a month).

The Social Democrats propose, **a complete freeze on all residential rents.**

The current rent cap of 4% per annum is too high. It is five times the rate of inflation. It does not apply across the whole country and it has been too easily evaded by some landlords. Above all else, it hasn't worked. Rents remain at record levels and are rising by more than 4%, even in rent pressure zones. There is no justification for any further increases. A complete rent freeze will be easier to implement, and it will be key to stopping the flow of family homelessness.

Other measures to ensure greater protection for renters:

- The Social Democrats would legislate to provide for **indefinite contracts**, so that tenancies can't simply be ended at the end of each 6-year cycle. Furthermore, we would introduce the **Deposit Protection Scheme** and a new legal definition of deposit to mean one month's rent.
- 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.

- We would **limit the sale of property as a grounds for terminating a tenancy** by amending Section 34 of the Residential Tenancies Acts and update legislation to ensure that tenants of Buy-to-Let properties in receivership are transferred to the receiver and then 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
- We would significantly **increase penalties for rogue landlords and rogue tenants**.
- Examine legislating to afford **greater protections to licensees** in tenancy situations.
- At present, tenants in home share situations where the total rent is above €2,500 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 will **scrap this stamp duty**.
- **Establish a Rent Register** as proposed in our Residential Tenancies (Amendment) Bill 2018.
- Review of the **inspection system** to ensure good quality accommodation is available to rent.
- We will clarify the law to prohibit the practice of landlords who ask prospective tenants to bid on rents and introduce much clearer penalties for people soliciting bids on rents.
- 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.

## End Land Hoarding

It has been clear for some time that land-hoarding has been a significant part of the housing crisis. Land is being held back from development while its value increases. Sites are being flipped from one speculator to another. It is particularly galling to see sites formerly controlled by NAMA or other state entities being traded in this “pass-the-parcel” process with little supply at the end of it. Therefore, the Social Democrats propose to put an end to this by legislating for much stronger anti-hoarding measures.

We will:

- Replace the vacant site levy with an **effective specific tax on land- hoarding, in the form of a site value tax** (with appropriate but limited exemptions) that is variable by local authorities but is set at an annual rate that exceeds inflation in land values in that local authority.
- Bring more transparency to the system, by legislating to **record and publish statistics on land price inflation**, and introducing a **price and ownership register for all land** so that the extent of land oligopolies can be properly tracked and responded to

## End the preferential tax treatment of so-called 'Cuckoo' funds:

It is scandalous that a phenomenon that is driving up the cost of housing in Ireland is supported with special tax-breaks from the State. It is time for the tax break introduced for REITs in 2013 be repealed.

## Challenge our Relationship with Land

We have seen two housing crises in the past decade. If we want to prevent more, then we need to engineer a wholesale change in our relationship with land.

Since the Kenny report of 1973 we have stopped short of significant land reform in Ireland. That report set the State a challenge of very significant changes to the way in which the land market worked in Ireland. Some of the key issues of concern were never addressed. The Social Democrats believe we should be looking again at very radical change in this area where the State defends the public interest by having a far more prominent role in land banking, concentration of ownership and land pricing. This will almost inevitably mean significant Constitutional reform.

To this end, we are committed to a referendum to reform Article 43 of the Constitution to better reflect the common good so that issues in relation to both private rented accommodation and upward only rent reviews on commercial property can be addressed.

The Scottish Government has recently established the Scottish Land Commission. It is examining all aspects of land policy in that country and specifically looking at issues such as concentration of ownership, community ownership, vacant units, compulsory sales orders etc. It is recognising land as the key resource that it is and looking at how to get the best out of Scottish land. We would build upon this model, by tasking our proposed Housing Delivery Agency to undertake a complete review of land policy and charge it with bringing forward clear recommendations and an implementation strategy within 18 months - with legislative and constitutional changes to be made within two years.

This review would examine:

- Concentration of ownership.
- Windfall taxes from land rezoning.
- Land value capture.
- Compulsory purchase and compulsory sale.
- A workable land-use site levy and land-hoarding taxes.
- Public land-banking.
- Commercial upward only rents.
- How we could provide a right to housing/shelter.
- The relationship between banks and property.
- Barriers to the introduction of alternative tenure options, for example temporal ownership, and co-operative housing
- Restricting the right of ownership in certain cases - such as foreign ownership, and how all of this fits into Constitutional Reform on property rights and the public good.

Since the Famine, indeed long before, land has been at the heart of so many of Ireland's ills. The single biggest gift we could give to the next generation would be to once and for all resolve our issues with land that serve to undermine social rights and public provision, and that fuel the high cost of living and impact the long-term competitiveness of our country. Finally, we could show that Ireland can actually learn from the mistakes of the past.

## Constitutional Change

### Right to a Home

We believe that everyone should have a right to a place to call home. This right to housing should be enshrined in the Constitution in a way that would place a significant responsibility on the Government to vindicate this right through its actions – laws, policy and services. **We would hold a referendum which seeks to put this right to a home in the Constitution.**

### Rebalance Article 43

Article 43 of the Constitution seeks to balance private property rights with the common good. The problem is that, too often, the common good loses out. This holds us back on issues such as nationwide rent caps, rent certainty and addressing upward-only rent reviews.

Successive governments hid behind a conservative interpretation of this provision to avoid taking the radical steps needed to deal with our dysfunctional housing sector. If we are to put the common good at the heart of our efforts to bring the housing crisis to an end, we need certainty around Article 43. In the absence of a challenge through legal action, **we would favour bringing forward a referendum to let the people decide if the balance should be weighted more towards the common good.**

## Properly establish the Land Development Agency

Its current output targets are too low, its ongoing budget is unclear and the legislation for the Agency has still not been passed.

As we have said for some years, we need a proper housing delivery agency that takes a hands-on approach to ensure the delivery of affordable supply and engages extensively in public land-banking so that we can start to move away from a reliance on development that is led by the private sector. **We would reestablish the weak Land Development Agency as a proper powerful Housing Delivery Agency with teeth and targets to deliver on an ambitious home building programme to deliver 100,000 homes over the lifetime of the next Dáil.**

This body would also be task it with establishing the appropriate forum to develop a **long term housing strategy for Ireland**.

## Older People's Housing.

Most older people wish to stay in their communities. However, there often comes a point when many find their homes are no longer suitable for their needs yet there are no alternative options for them within their local community. As a result, it is not uncommon for older couples or single people to continue living in three- or four-bedroom houses.

By providing better housing options to older people, they could continue living independently for longer, enjoy better health, and stay in local communities among friends and family. In turn, the existing stock of family homes that are larger than needed, expensive to maintain or ill-suited to changing mobility needs could be freed up for the thousands of families searching for a suitable home.

We will introduce a range of new measures to provide these options:

### Designate housing for older people:

**Designated developments for older people could be built on many of the small infill sites in our cities and towns, while new estates could include a mix of older people's homes.** This would enable people to move to more suitable, affordable accommodation within the same neighbourhood or even estate. There are some models of dedicated housing schemes in Ireland, but there is no standard, consistent model in place. However in Germany, housing estates designate 10 percent of their stock for older people, which makes it easy for empty-nesters to downsize within their own estates. Close to a third of older people would feel positively about moving if it better suited their needs. Purpose-

built, designated homes would address mobility challenges and safety concerns, as well as enable longer independent living and better social inclusion.

We will meet the clear demand by **introducing such a designation for purpose-built homes for older people by reforming the planning law to ensure that older persons housing is provided as part of every new development** and improve the supply of privately built step-down housing.

### Renewed Step-Down Housing Scheme:

The models for both sheltered housing and the Financial Contribution Scheme already exist in Ireland, and they could be easily resumed. Both have the added

advantage of freeing up family homes for council use, which could be refurbished and let to families on the housing waiting lists.

We would **activate and extend the Financial Contribution Scheme for Older Persons so that older people who want step-down housing in a sheltered housing setting can do so** - currently several hundred people are on a waiting list for such a scheme in Dublin.

### Revise Fair Deal Scheme:

The Fair Deal Scheme provides financial support to help pay for the cost of care in a nursing home. Right now, there are over 13,000 homeowners on the scheme but only 740 of them lease their home. Some properties are occupied by partners or family, but that still leaves thousands of vacant houses. More often than not, they are left empty because rental income is assessed as part of the means test for the scheme.

We will **introduce new legislation to reform to remove the barriers to letting a vacant home**, if one wishes.

## Additional Housing Priorities

There are a range of other actions which the Social Democrats would prioritise to ensure that we had a functioning, effecting housing system that was fair, accessible and affordable. These include:

### New Measures to free up Vacant Homes

At a time of crisis, it is unacceptable that thousands of homes lie vacant, often for years, that would be suitable for long term renting, for no legitimate reason. The Social Democrats would:

- Introduce a **vacant housing levy** for vacant homes (duration to be set by each local authority with appropriate but limited exemptions applying) and set down a higher levy the longer the home remains vacant;
- **Reform the Fair Deal Scheme to remove financial barriers to letting a vacant home;**
- Recruit a **vacant homes officer in each local authority** where there is a housing shortage to work with home owners to get vacant stock back into use as quickly as possible.

### Assisting AHBs

Approved Housing Bodies (AHBs) are crucial partners in building homes that are affordable to buy or rent and social homes, at the scale that they are now needed. One of the key difficulties they encounter is raising the funds necessary to build at the scale they would like to. Borrowing of the main AHBs is considered by the EU as part of Government borrowing. This must be addressed urgently.

**We will work towards reclassification of Tier 3 AHBs to 'off balance sheet' status to enable additional funding to be raised by AHBs for the delivery of homes.**

## HAP & Rent Supplement:

HAP needs to be thought of as a short-term measure – a very costly measure - that has to be phased out by an ambitious home building programme. In the immediate term we would **improve HAP and Rent Supplement levels, improve tenancy sustainment interventions and make Homeless HAP available nationwide.**

However, while these income supplements are necessary to support people in accessing housing during the current crisis, we recognize that the system of paying public money to private landlords is unacceptable. Our proposal for a nationwide rent freeze in conjunction a vastly increased delivery of social and affordable homes will remove the need to rely on the private rental market.

Additionally, there are significant delays in accessing and processing HAP. These delays are unfair on both tenants and landlords. We would **resource Local Authorities to ensure they have the adequate resources to process new HAP payments speedily.**

## Fire Safety

The Social Democrats wish to see several measures to improve fire safety standards for existing and future housing stock: We commit to the re-instatement of a rigorous independent building control inspection system by local authorities - this system can be self-financing as is the case in the UK and can arguably reduce the costs of construction by reducing the BCAR costs.

We further commit to a national audit of social housing stock to ensure compliance

with Part (B) of the fire safety regulations - this should be risk based with a particular emphasis on higher density developments built over the last 10-15 years including timber frame estates.

## Taking estates in Charge

There remains a very significant problem across the country with housing estates not yet taken in charge by the local authority at all, or in a timely manner. There is a job of catching up to do, as a legacy of the crash which needs to be addressed. Resources need to be allocated to local authorities to deal with these estates.

## Ensure the housing needs of people with disabilities are met.

We commit to ensuring a minimum of 7% of social housing to meet universal design standards and ensure that every social housing pipeline project demonstrates at Capital Appraisal Stage the inclusion of a minimum 7 % of fully wheelchair accessible housing with higher percentages applying for areas of higher need.

We will promote the uptake of adaptation and mobility aids grants to enable independent living for persons with disabilities as too many Councils don't spend their full allocation.

## Apartment and Estate Management

We will undertake a review of apartment and estate management, and work to develop a sustainable model.

## Spend funds on Traveller Housing

We will seek to ensure that funding allocated for Traveller housing is spent by Local Authorities, and implement the

report of the Traveller Accommodation  
Expert Review Group.

**Review Social Housing Income Limits**

We will review income limits applied to  
social housing so that more people can  
qualify, and ensure they are reviewed in  
line with inflation.

## A Health Service: When you need it, as you need it.

One of the most basic functions of a republic is to put in place the necessary services to keep people well and treat them when they are sick. As Irish citizens, it's not too much to expect decent healthcare. Yet the sad reality is that we just can't depend on our public health service. It has been broken for quite some time.

Our health service is not set up to best meet the needs of Irish people. The system is far too dependent on hospitals and much of the care that could take place in local health centres happens in hospitals where it is more expensive and waits are longer. The different parts of the system don't work well together and this creates huge gaps and inefficiencies. And there is too little accountability for managers, senior medics, and ministers.

### Developing Sláintecare

The old excuse was that there was no plan. That excuse no longer stands up. The Sláintecare report was agreed by an all-party committee and launched in May 2017, based on proposals from the Social Democrats, for the development of a national public health service, available to everyone.

The Social Democrats are proud to have led the way to agreement between all the political parties on the way forward for our health services. This means that, for the first time, a change of government shouldn't mean chopping and changing the vision and direction for the health service, allowing for long term strategic planning for health needs.

Sláintecare sets out a road-map to move from a crisis-driven approach to one that focuses instead on community care, prevention, and equal access for all.

Sláintecare will mean:

- Free health services in our communities.
- Quicker access to public hospitals.

- Community care teams for older people and those with mental health and addiction needs.
- Diagnostics like x-rays and scans provided locally.
- Thousands more doctors, nurses, speech therapists, and public health nurses.
- An increase in hospital bed capacity and an end to the trolley crisis.

It will turn our healthcare system around. When Sláintecare is implemented, we will finally have a health system that is comparable to other European countries, based on need and not on ability to pay.

## Implementing Sláintecare

However, follow-through from government has been much too slow. No ring-fenced budget has been set aside and only a small number of reforms envisaged by Sláintecare have been delivered so far. The Minister for Health hasn't made the necessary budget available and has indicated that funding for Sláintecare will only be decided on a year-to-year basis. The disappointing pace of change since Sláintecare was agreed seriously calls into question the commitment to change of Fine Gael, supported in government by Fianna Fáil. We need more than lip service to change, we need action, with deadlines and resourcing.

And while this foot-dragging goes on, there are record waiting lists – now in excess of a million people – and the trolley crisis continues. The evidence for the failure of the current system is overwhelming; full commitment to implementing Sláintecare is the way to finally fix things and bring about the long overdue change we need.

## Fully commit to funding Sláintecare

Delivery of the Sláintecare reform programme is the Social Democrats' primary health policy. Unlike other parties, the Social Democrats have shown total commitment to the plan and factored it into budget planning. Fully-funded implementation would be an absolute red line for any potential discussions on coalition after the election.

If we continue with the current disorganised approach to the health service, costs will escalate beyond the capacity of the State to deal with them; waiting lists will become even longer; and Irish people will become more and more dependent on an expensive private sector to deliver care.

The implementation of Sláintecare will mean that patients will be seen quicker, that **everyone will be treated according to their need and not their ability to pay**, and health problems will be prevented rather than allowed to fester at greater cost to patients and the tax-payer in the long-run.

There really is no option but to reform.

Sláintecare is ambitious and will take real courage and determination to be seen through. It will cost approximately an additional billion euro each year for the next five years and an additional half a billion euro in the following four years. This will fund improvements in hospital bed capacity, in preventative care, in hundreds of new primary care staff, in services for children and people with disabilities, and in significant improvements in e-health, community diagnostics and additional primary care centres. The investment required will pay significant dividends over the long term.

## Specific actions within Sláintecare

The Social Democrats' priorities for action are:

### ➤ A lower cost, more effective model of care:

- **Abolition of Home Care waiting lists** through investment in providing home care packages and step down facilities. This is a vital aspect of ensuring patients' needs are met and maximising hospital efficiency. At any given time there around 700 people in hospital who are ready to be discharged if the necessary home care support was available. A further 6,000 people have been approved for home care packages but they are not currently being provided access to those services.
- **Expanding diagnostic services**, such as x-rays, in local Primary Care Centres to make services more accessible to patients and cheaper to provide.
- Investment in **Primary Care Centres and Urgent Care Centres** with diagnostic facilities.
- The phased extension of **free GP Care** including a new GP contract and the recruitment of salaried GPs by the health service.
- Additional funding for **dementia and Alzheimer's services** and for **palliative care**.

- Improvements in a range of **supports for people with disabilities** including extra personal assistant hours and an assistive technology passport plus set aside funding to allow for the full monitoring of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities.
- Investment in **neurological services**.
- **Providing health services that prevent illness and intervene early when symptoms emerge:**
  - Roll-out of **chronic care programmes** such as for asthma and arthritis.
  - Additional funding for **mental health** including counselling, community programmes, and adult mental health teams.
  - Extra funding for **addiction and dual diagnosis services** beginning with the restoration of Drug and Alcohol Task Force funding to pre-austerity levels, creating an emerging needs fund, and dealing with the developing crack cocaine epidemic.
  - Improved funding for **housing adaptation grants**.
  - Funding for **improved maternity services**, and resourcing for a full sexual health strategy including **affordable contraceptives, abortion services and a period poverty initiative**.
  - Recruitment of **extra psychologists** for the National Educational Psychology Service.
- **Building capacity in Primary Care:**
  - Massive investment in **new primary care staff**, including public health nurses, speech and language therapists, physiotherapists, general nursing, dieticians, occupational therapists, GPs, Child and Adolescent Mental Health services, psychology services, neurological services, and case managers for acquired brain injury.
  - Political commitment to a long term vision for the health service provided by Sláintecare will give confidence to health professionals at home and abroad and improve recruitment and retention.
  - Greater resources for **community eye-care** based on the recommendations of the Primary Care Eye Services Review Group report.
  - Improvements in **dental care**
  - Immediately expedite the **recruitment of 1,000 therapists** and other front line healthcare workers.

### ➤ Other reform measures:

- Reducing the **cost of medication** to the health service through reform measures.
- Reducing **prescription charges** for patients.
- Removing hospital **inpatient charges**.

## Tackle Addiction and Substance Abuse

We also understand that addiction requires a health-based approach, with a focus on harm-reduction and prevention based on international best practice.

We need a holistic approach to tackling the issue of drugs in Ireland, taking both health and socio-economic factors into account.

- **Examine best practice models regarding decriminalisation of the possession small amount of drugs for personal use** in line with the Portuguese model
- Recognise the frequent need to treat mental health conditions and addiction simultaneously, and ensure appropriate availability of **dual diagnosis services** throughout the country.
- Introducing **drug-testing facilities** across the country, and ensuring they are present at festivals and areas with high concentrations of night-life.
- Provide **medically supervised drug injection facilities** in urban centres.
- Expand the provision of **addiction services** across the country.
- Expand service provision for **pre and post natal substance addiction supports** for pregnant people and children affected.
- Fund and fully implement the **National Drugs Strategy** as a matter of urgency.
- Propose the expansion of availability to **anti-overdose drugs**, particularly to emergency services.
- Increase funding for the **Drug and Alcohol Task Forces**.
- Fully enact and implement the **Public Health (Alcohol) Act 2018**

## Reproductive Healthcare

The Social Democrats fully supported the repeal of the eighth amendment and the subsequent provision of abortion services in Ireland. However, there are still shortfalls in the legislation which leave many people across Ireland without access to free, safe, legal and local abortion services. We will;

- Support the **creation of safe access zones around medical facilities which provide abortion services**. People have a right to access basic healthcare without risk of harassment and intimidation. We will legislate according to international best practice in this area.
- Ensure that **full access to abortion care is available across the country**.
- Support the **rollout of free contraception**. This will allow people control of their reproductive rights, regardless of income.
- **Regulate the predatory practices of rogue agencies**, which provide medically inaccurate and distressing information to pregnant people in vulnerable positions.

## Medicinal Cannabis

Social Democrats support access to medicinal cannabis via prescription.

## Putting people with disabilities at the heart of all decisions.

**People with disabilities face some of the biggest challenges in our country.**

At the last Census count (2016), 13.5% or 643,131 people in Ireland had a disability and most people will at some stage experience some form of disability at some point in their lives. This is a normal percentage statistic for a European country.

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

Simultaneously, Ireland has, in comparative terms, a significantly high dependence on the provision of **informal care support by family members.** Questions must be asked as to the continued viability and sustainability of such reliance in light of the changing demographic and socio-economic realities of modern Ireland.

**It doesn't have to be like this.**

### **A Rights-based approach**

In 2006, the United Nations agreed on a series of interpretations and guidelines in the form of the **UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities** (UNCRPD). In 2018 Ireland became the last EU country to ratify the UNCRPD. While ratification is welcome in itself, and long over-due, it has had little effect yet on the actual lives of people with disabilities as **so much of our national legislation remains out of sync with the Convention**, and transitioning to a **social model of disability inclusion** continues to be de-prioritised.

In addition, the Government did not ratify the **optional protocol** to the Treaty - having made repeated and continuous commitments to simultaneously do so. This protocol makes a significant difference to disability rights as it would provide for a mechanism of independent oversight by civil society. Without it

the Government is not answerable to the UN nor subject to possible inquiries by it.

Without the commencement of this legislation and a means to enforce the rights within the Convention, it will mean that **disability rights in Ireland will still depend on the charity of who is in Government** and where we are in the economic cycle.

**Rights with such conditions are not really rights at all.**

It is little wonder that large swathes of disability legislation are **still waiting to be fully commenced**. This includes the Disability Act 2005, the Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) Act 2015, and the Special Educational Needs Act 2004. Each of these must be progressed to ensure a rights-based approach to disability and the full participation of people with disabilities in our society.

### Funding Services

In addition, the **funding system for disability services needs to be completely overhauled**.

As pointed out by the Independent Review Group report in February 2019, the majority of disability services are provided by **not-for-profit organisations**. 80% of residential places for people with disabilities are provided by such organisations and overall two thirds of services are provided by not-for-profits.

Given this dependence on the sector, it is **imperative that there is a sustainable funding model** in place. Unfortunately, this is simply not the case with a fundamentally flawed system in operation that entails protracted and unnecessary stand-offs between the HSE and not-for-profit providers - very much impacted by the conflict of interest within the HSE between the focus on the acute hospital medical system and the need for community based social care and supports.

The reality is that disability services have not yet recovered from cut-backs introduced in the recession and in some cases the level of services have actually reduced. The people caught in the middle of this, of course, are vulnerable service users. We are now seeing several providers so stretched that they are unable to maintain services, with the reserves of many providers exhausted. Indeed, some providers put the funding shortfall in the sector at over €30m.

Yet again, despite the formal adoption of the UNCRPD, **people with disabilities and their families are being forced to seek charity and to campaign for their right to decent services.**

Furthermore, sections 8 to 23 within Part 2 of the Disability Act which was passed into legislation in 2005 contained several critically important requirements for the agencies of the state to provide essential assessments and maintain records and statistics so that government could accurately identify the level of need in society and make appropriate planning possible. Successive governments have avoided commencing this legislation, with the consequences being a **lack of transparent and reliable information with which to inform national decision making** and thereby avoid decisions regarding appropriate funding.

### Funding Supports

Critical to realising **much better participation for People with Disabilities in Irish society** is vast improvements in supports and protections. A range of measures are required across housing, health, transport, income and grant support, consumer protection and employment protection.

## Objectives

The Social Democrats main objectives in terms of Disability Policy are:

- to see key legislation enacted and commenced to promote and protect the rights, quality of life and independence of people with disabilities
- to put in place long range national support planning
- to invest in far greater supports, to put the disability sector on a proper financial footing
- to have the UNCRPD protocol fully ratified in Ireland

## Implementation

The implementation of these objectives will require a wide range of measures across governance and legislation, policy and structural, service and supports areas. The following actions are necessary:

### Governance and Legislation

- Base the position of a **Super Junior Minister for Disabilities in the Department of the Taoiseach** to ensure a whole of Government, cross departmental approach to disability is under the aegis of and the responsibility of the Taoiseach of the day.
- **Fully commence the Disability Act 2005 and the Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) Act 2015** with specific and urgent emphasis on resource allocation to facilitate immediate implementation of sections 8 to 22 of the Act with respect to all citizens with a disability.
- Pass legislation including the **Disability (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2016** and new legislation on the **Deprivation of Liberty**
- **Sign the Optional Protocol** and having a clear action plan with budget lines and timelines for implementation, monitoring, reporting, enforcement and other follow up actions associated with the UNCRPD.
- Introducing a **statutory right to Home Care and Personal Assistance**
- **Commence in full the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004 and the Irish Sign Language Act 2017**

### Policy and Structural

- Establish that the term “**subject to resources**” shall be interpreted as being relative to the entire resources of the State, taking account that current disability supports are already relatively disadvantaged.
- Facilitate the perceived lack of funding for the conducting of **Independent Assessments of Need**, as described in section 9 of the Disability Act, by utilising the precedent established by the Department of Finance / Revenue Commissioners wherein a framework and system of Self-Assessment will be utilised to identify and benchmark the level of supports provided and the national level of unmet need, facilitating appropriate reporting and service planning to the responsible Minister.
- Fund sufficient staff so that the implementation of the UNCRPD can be effectively monitored
- Increase the levels of Transparency and Accountability for monitoring the real wellbeing of our disabled and carer communities and vulnerable members of society by **delegating powers to Local Authorities and Local Elected Representatives for local wellbeing monitoring and assessment** and to hold central government and state departments and centralised

agencies to account for failing to effectively plan or meet the needs of the local disabled community.

- Put in place a **fit for purpose planning infrastructure and a stream of additional supports** for People with Disabilities to deal with housing, transport, poverty, health access, and several other areas of concern
- Overhaul and **modernise the means testing and financial compensation to family carers of people with long term incapacitating disabilities**, and review the option to provide Refundable Tax Credits and PRSI Pension rights to those with limited earnings capacity due to performance of their caring role
- Vastly improving the **number of and access to primary care health staff and rehabilitative staff** as promised under **Sláintecare**;
- Restore the **Rehabilitative Training Allowance**
- **End barriers to disabled people entering or remaining within the paid work force** such as inadequate educational provision, continuing benefit traps, discriminatory access rules and attitudes;
- **Ensure that the target of a minimum 6% employment rate** for people with disabilities for public bodies is fully implemented, and **extended to public sector contractors**, and seeking to raise this target over time; Ensure that there is proper transparency and monitoring of these measures with the intent that new employment opportunities are provided for people with Intellectual / Sensory / Physical disabilities and autism and mental health conditions.
- **Emulate the Scottish model on Article 20 of the EU procurement directive** to encourage far greater use of the directive in Ireland. Set formal binding targets and proper reporting arrangements for the use of Article 20 by public procurers in Ireland. This will provide better work opportunities for people with disabilities.
- Seek to improve funding under the **Wage Subsidy Scheme** and link to changes in the National Minimum Wage
- **Recognise the extra costs of living for people with disabilities** and, where appropriate, their carer families (as highlighted by the Minimum Essential Standard of Living research) and helping them to stay out of poverty through a specific **cost of disability payment**;
- 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;
- Improve regulations and funding conditions so that **access to buses, trains, and taxis is vastly improved for people with disabilities**;
- Improve **financial supports for disabled transport users**, including the reintroduction of a mobility grant scheme and eliminating notice time

- for travelling for mobility-impaired customers who require assistance;
- Improve audio and visual alerts on transport services;
- **Make our public and private transport system fully accessible** – in terms of fleet, stops, platforms and other access points;
- Change tendering rules to encourage much greater **availability of wheelchair accessible taxis**;
- Improve Road Traffic laws to ensure easier **enforcement of parking rules for disabled parking bays**;
- Amend rules so that more people can qualify for **Carers' Allowance**, introduce better training for carers of people with high needs, and **improve supports for carers in terms of training, respite and respite options**;
- **Set a minimum of 7% of social housing to meet universal design standards**, and ensure that every social housing pipeline project demonstrates at Capital Appraisal Stage the inclusion of a minimum 7 % of fully wheelchair accessible housing with higher percentages applying for areas of higher need.
- Adequate supports must also be in place to enable people live independently; We will insist on the **disability-proofing all new construction projects** so that housing is fully accessible, and streetscapes are designed with the specific needs of people with disabilities built in
- Ensure Local Authorities **review their approved social housing lists** and identify the number of people and households who require wheelchair accessible housing and maintain a register of all wheelchair accessible social housing in their area and occupancy status.
- Improve access to and benefits under **Housing Adaptation schemes** and to funding for **assistive devices**
- **Increase the number of psychologists** under the National Educational Psychological Services;
- Introduce an **Assistive Technology Passport**
- Develop and publish a **National Strategy for Autism**, beyond simply health services, to include far better supports for families supporting a person with autism, including more respite hours, and more special needs assistants for schools
- Develop training for special needs children into the **curriculum for teacher training**
- Implement the **National Dementia Strategy (NDS)**, improving homecare and community supports for people with dementia, and integrating dementia into the Chronic Disease Management Programme.
- **Expand the number of playgrounds, pools, gyms, parks and green spaces and venues that are universally designed.** In particular, we want to ensure that all future recreational projects include accessible changing facilities - accessible toilets which include a hoist, adult sized changing bench and larger space for additional assistants, to ensure the health, safety and dignity of those with disabilities and mobility issues.

- **Improve employment supports for Deaf people** so they can access the reasonable accommodation fund to use it to access interpreting services.
- Ensure public bodies follow the **ISL Act**

## Service and Support

- **Reverse the recent unacceptable cut to disability services** in the HSE 2020 service plan
- **Adopt the recommendations in the Independent Review Group Report to address the basic funding deficit in the funding of services** in the disability sector.
- In line with the recommendations of the IRG report, we are committing to providing funding to **bridge deficits**, the introduction of **multi-annual budgeting**, a clear long-term agreement on what is to be funded, and a **streamlined process for accountability**. There needs to be strong governance arrangements for the sector but in a way that minimises costs, compliance-burden and duplicated work across different regulators and funders.
- We support **the full restoration of pay to workers in Section 39 organisations** and are anxious to see this completed as soon as possible.
- **Improve personal assistant and other individualised social care services** so that people with disabilities can live independently;
- **Provide community neuro-rehabilitation teams** in each of the Community Health Organisations areas, and inpatient rehabilitation services at both national and regional level to ensure timely access to rehabilitation;
- **Improve investment in residential care** and providing an adequate amount and adequate quality of **respite care**;

## Making Mental Health A Priority

Mental health care in this country is currently a piecemeal system that lets many fall through the cracks. Primary and community care is much disorganised and varies greatly across the country, and emergency care is not fit for purpose. This results in unnecessary distress for patients and families, and, too frequently, avoidable tragic outcomes. While the government has repeatedly launched initiatives urging people to 'get help', people in distress often find that that help is not forthcoming.

Recent research shows that almost 10% of the Irish population over the age of 15 has a 'probably mental health problem' at any one time. One fifth of young people from 19-24 and 15% of children aged 11 to 13 have had a mental health disorder. Growing demand for mental health services throughout the system has not been met with proportional increases in staff and resources for mental health services. There are huge waiting lists, as we have highlighted many times, for referrals to child and adolescent mental health services, and at the end of 2019, more than 8,000 people were waiting for a primary care psychology appointment, many of whom were children.

The Social Democrats aim to create a mental health care system which is proactive and community-based, while also overhauling acute and in-patient care to ensure those who do reach a crisis point receive the best standard of care possible. Evidence-based practice and compassion would form the backbone of this system, and it would fit within the broader framework of Sláintecare.

Sláintecare had a key focus on mental health. It recognises that much of the mental health services are difficult to access and focussed on acute services which were significantly understaffed, that community mental health services remain significantly under-resourced and that services were overly reliant on medication rather than on psychological and counselling services.

The full implementation of Sláintecare is a core part of the Social Democrats approach to addressing mental health. We will make mental health care a high priority within the health system, ensuring that those with mental health issues are no longer treated as second-class patients. A global revolution in

mental health care is underway, and Ireland should be a leader in care rather than a country clinging to outdated and under-resourced models.

## Approach to Mental Health care

Our approach to addressing mental health is to:

1. **Fully implement Sláintecare**, including increasing the annual budget allocated to mental health services to 10% of the overall health budget. Currently approx. 6%.
2. **Improve public education on mental health** and launch evidence-based prevention strategies.
3. Ensure effective and **timely primary and community mental health care** is accessible to all.
4. Ensure **better funding and organisation of acute and in-patient services**, so that those in crisis receive immediate and compassionate care.

## Our commitments on Mental Health:

### Sláintecare

Fully funding and implementing the provisions and 10-year plan of Sláintecare. This would include:

- Expand primary care to provide a much wider range of services in the community, including expanded mental health services
- Increasing funding to **10% of health budget for Mental Health**
- **Fully staff Child and Adolescent Mental Health** Teams by year 5.
- **Expand Adult Community Mental Health** Teams by year five
- **Expand Old Age Psychiatry** – by year five
- Expand **Child and Adolescent Liaison service** by year 5.
- Expand **Intellectually Disability Mental Health** services by year five

## Education and Prevention:

- Increase and update school **SPHE education on mental health and wellbeing**.
- Emphasis on **mental wellness** as a spectrum within all public campaigns.
- Ensure that all **primary schools have referral access to a child psychologist**, who would also engage with schools and pupils on topics such as mental wellbeing and **anti-bullying**.
- Ensure that all **secondary schools have a guidance counsellor**, and referral access to educational and clinical psychologists.
- Launch a general awareness campaign on **mental illness prevention**, in schools, primary care, etc. There would be an emphasis on proactive mental wellbeing, similar to heart health. This would include a self-care toolkit and web resources.
- Support the mental health of the population **through lifestyle measures in other policies, such as improved work-life balance** and reduced cost of living.
- Promote/Introduce mental health and wellbeing initiatives in the **workplace**
- Ensure good funding for **mental health research**.
- Develop a **new national strategy on Suicide** to replace Connecting for Life which is due to expire this year

## Primary and Community Care:

- **Significantly reduce waiting times** for Child and Adult Mental Health Services and address the significant regional imbalances in waiting times – an issue the Social Democrats have continually highlighted.
- Massive investment in the **recruitment of extra psychologists** for the National Educational Psychology Service and the Child and Adolescent Mental Health services under Sláintecare.
- More **standardised primary care treatment guidelines** for conditions, to ensure everyone receives the best standard of care.
- **Every GP would have a mental health team to refer to**, consisting of psychologists and a psychiatrist, counsellors, and access to allied professionals.
- **More assisted living and 'step-down' facilities** for those leaving in-patient care, and more supports for independent living for those with chronic mental health conditions.
- Ensure **adequate facilities for all services**.
- Ensure **timely and effective access and referral process** for adjunct professionals, eg social workers, occupational therapists, mediators and marriage counsellors, etc.
- Provide **support groups and advice/education for family members**.

- Vital services currently provided by state-funded non-profits will be incorporated into more unified public system. **The role of non-profits in advocacy and adjunct service provision will still be supported.**
- **Improved dual diagnosis** (addiction and mental illness) counselling and community services.
- **Increased neuropsychology services** (for issues like dementia and brain injury).

## Acute and In-patient Care:

- Establish **dedicated mental health emergency services**. These would be co-located with a general emergency department and have access to a sufficient number of psychiatric in-patient beds.
- **Improve links between in-patient and community teams** to ensure cohesive follow-up and care plan after discharge, including tenancy sustainment.
- Provide a greater number of dual-diagnosis beds.
- Establish a **24 hour HSE mental health crisis and advice line**, accessible to all and promoted in particular to vulnerable populations

## Legislation:

- Bring forward legislation to update the 2001 Mental Health Act so that it complies with international human rights standards

## Honest Politics – Open Government

**Trust** is vital for a healthy democracy.

If the public are to have trust in our politics and government, then **transparency** and **integrity** must be the defining features of all decision-making.

**Accountability** should not just be a buzz word, but a meaningful component of all our systems of governance and oversight. Individuals and organisations must pay the price for malpractice, corruption and reckless behaviour. We must develop a culture that is focused on serving the people of Ireland, not powerful interests who have the ear of ministers and officials.

It is clear that our government and our political system have not fully embraced transparent decision making or a culture of open government and good governance. The all too cosy nexus between business and politics is alive and well.

Too often, decisions on the **allocation of significant state resources** are influenced by the interests of well-connected individuals and organisations without proper recourse to evidence-based analysis, equality proofing, poverty proofing or regulatory impact.

**Inadequate governance and accountability systems are at the heart of cost overruns** involving massive amounts of public resources that could be spent elsewhere. Repeatedly, we see that questions are asked after the fact and answers are hard to find, particularly when paper trails run out and memories falter.

In addition, Ireland does **not have an effective means of preventing, detecting and prosecuting corruption and white-collar crime**. Various Tribunals and Commissions of Inquiry have come and gone with little consequences for corrupt and illegal behaviour.

The Social Democrats have a plan to open up government and improve accountability whilst also tackling corruption in politics and public life. We

believe this can restore confidence and trust in our politics and our democracy while encouraging civic participation.

Honest Politics – Open Government sets out a number of proposed measures under the following headings:

1. Establish an **Independent Anti-Corruption Agency**:
2. Strengthen **Transparency and Accountability** in Decision Making
3. Establish an **Irish Electoral Commission**
4. Institute Meaningful **Oireachtas Reform**
5. Rebalance **Political Funding**

## Establish an Independent Anti-Corruption Agency

Ireland does not have an effective means of preventing, detecting, and prosecuting corruption and white-collar crime. Various Tribunals, Commissions and Oireachtas inquiries have come and gone with **little consequences for corrupt and reckless behaviour**.

More than ten years on from the banking collapse, serious questions remain about the capacity of our criminal justice system when it comes to detecting and successfully prosecuting **white collar crime**. Anti-corruption law is spread across a range of legislation, and responsibility for preventing and prosecuting corruption is spread across a multitude of agencies. Piece-meal reforms in recent years have fallen short of what is needed to protect government decision-making from being unduly influenced by vested interests.

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

The Social Democrats first proposed the setting up of an independent anti-corruption agency in a motion brought to the Dáil in December 2015. Our detailed proposals are based on best-practice internationally and cover corruption in both the public and the private sphere. Without a dedicated and properly resourced agency, we will continue to see a range of laws on our

statute books which meet international standards, but which lead to few actual consequences for corrupt behaviour.

We propose to **establish a new Independent Anti-Corruption Agency (IACA)** to:

- Tackle white collar crime and corruption in the corporate world and political sphere;
- Operate as a **standing Commission of Investigation** ending the need for expensive ad hoc Tribunals;
- Assume the **anti-corruption remit** of the Standards in Public Office Commission, Office of the Director of Corporate Enforcement, Registrar of Lobbyists and the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission;
- Act as an advisory body to several other public bodies;
- Monitor and investigate **public procurement** activities;
- Conduct sectoral reviews and initiate **investigations** as and when necessary;
- Work with a newly established Dáil oversight committee, (the **Public Interest Committee**) to oversee IACA and Ministerial resource allocation decisions;
- Propose updates to anti-corruption legislation, including setting minimum standards for eligibility to hold public office, require serving politicians to declare significant liabilities as well as assets, further reforming the law on lobbying, and strengthening gift and hospitality rules for public servants.

The Social Democrats' full proposals for an Independent Anti-Corruption Agency are set out in a detailed policy document, Independent Anti-Corruption Agency, available at: [www.socialdemocrats.ie/IACA](http://www.socialdemocrats.ie/IACA)

## Strengthen Transparency in Decision-Making

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

In recent years there have been revelations of **unfettered access for bidders for large state contracts to the corridors of power**. Time and time again, when state contracts were being awarded, the right questions have not been asked. And time and time again, the public has paid the price for **shoddy governance**

**and poor administration** which has led to cost over-runs and delays, including the National Broadband Plan and the National Children’s Hospital.

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

To achieve this, we will:

- Introduce an **Oireachtas Committee vetting procedure for all senior appointments to public bodies**. This would have the effect of introducing objectivity and oversight into the process and would ensure that appointments are made on the basis of merit, suitability and qualification rather than political connection.  
  
By limiting ministerial discretion in this way, consistency and openness could be achieved and efforts made to bring about inclusivity and diversity in respect of the profiles of appointees.
- **Remove all political involvement from judicial appointments** and promotions by establishing an independent body
- **Poverty-proof all legislative, policy and budgetary decisions** and introduce an **evidence-based system of resource allocation**.
- **Equality-proof all legislative, policy and budgetary decisions**.
- **Replace the Official Secrets Act 1963** with legislation that strikes a better balance between maintaining state security and protecting whistle-blowers in reporting wrongdoing.  
  
The Act was written in very broad terms and has been misused as a means of blocking public-interest led disclosures. Such broad reaching restrictions are no longer necessary.
- **End ‘no minutes’ practices** by requiring public officials to make accurate records of key government decisions and actions – and to keep these for as long as they are needed for accountability purposes. If records of important government discussions and decisions do not exist, there should be a presumption that they have been destroyed or there was negligence or maladministration.
- Reform the Ministers and Secretaries Act, to **make senior civil servants accountable for their actions**.
- **Introduce a clear and transparent system of resource allocation**, where allocations are based on objective, pre-constructed and evidence-based criteria
- Actively and enthusiastically participate in the **Open Government Partnership** initiative by prioritising reforms which have the strong backing of civil society and which have the potential to be truly transformative.
- Introduce an **e-governance platform and publish more extensive data in open source** to bring about a more open and transparent form of governance and a general

presumption of openness in relation to State-held data.

- Improve and urgently enact the long-delayed **Public Sector Standards Bill 2015** which would go some way towards implementing the recommendations of the Mahon Tribunal and address future conflicts of interest by TDs, Ministers and office-holders. The Bill has not progressed beyond committee stage in almost three years.
- Create a **'legislative footprint'** for all Acts of the Oireachtas to ensure full transparency in how our laws are influenced. A comprehensive digital footprint would allow the public to see in one place the input of different

groups and individuals in shaping legislation at different stages in its legislative journey. It would summarise all external input, including submissions received by public officials and representatives.

- **Make lobbying activities more open** by reforming the Regulation of Lobbying Act 2015, including the recommendations of the Standards in Public Office Commission (SIPO) which administers and enforces this law. SIPO should be resourced to conduct thorough spot checks of a proportion of all lobbying returns filed and to 'name and shame' lobbyists who contravene the law by publishing its investigation reports.

## Establish an Irish Electoral Commission

The Irish electoral process enjoys a consistently high level of trust on the part of the Irish electorate; but we can do better. In particular, the mechanisms of our electoral process are disjointed and are under-performing, the inaccuracy of the electoral register is a prime example of how lack of coordination can lead to duplication and inaccuracy.

At present we depend on a combination of bodies to operate our electoral process – this includes the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government, individual local authorities and Referendum Commissions established to administer individual referendums. The Social Democrats aim to change this by establishing a new Irish Electoral Commission to be headed up by a Chief Electoral Officer of Ireland.

We believe that **Irish electoral politics must instead be administered by an overarching independent statutory body**, an Irish Electoral Commission.

This body would take full responsibility for overseeing and regulating all facets of the electoral process would strengthen existing levels of trust in the

electoral process, streamline its administration, and provide a **transparent one stop-shop for citizens to interact with on all matters electoral**.

### Remit of the Irish Electoral Commission

The remit of the Irish Electoral Commission ('the Commission') would extend to all areas of the electoral process, including **voter registration; boundary divisions; campaign oversight; political financing; voter education and political online advertising**.

The Commission would also assume the electoral and referendum related functions of the Referendum Commissions formed to take responsibility for individual referendums, the Standards in Public Office Commission (SIPO) and local authorities around the country.

In addition to its responsibility for direct electoral engagement, the Commission would also conduct research and explore options to enhance and improve all aspects of the electoral process. The electoral commissions of other jurisdictions regularly trial and implement new options to increase mobilisation and make voting more accessible, the Irish Electoral Commission would operate in a similar way to identify and implement best practice initiatives aimed at continually strengthening the electoral process in Ireland.

**The Commission would be a permanent statutory body** with financial accountability to the Comptroller & Auditor General. This is to be distinguished from the temporary, albeit highly successful and respected, Referendum Commissions founded to take responsibility for specific referendum campaigns.

Full powers of regulation, sanction and enforcement regarding matters of electoral politics would rest with the Commission and this includes taking responsibility for administering a **single unified electoral register** for the Irish state. This would replace the 31 separate electoral registers maintained at present.

It is intended that the **Commission would promote increased awareness, understanding and engagement with the electoral process**. This would be brought about through:

- **Centralised management of the electoral register** to ensure more accurate measures of voter turnout and better strategies to increase voter participation;
- Overseeing the **selection of voting locations** to ensure the needs of the electorate rather than the needs of government institutions are central to such decisions;
- Providing **wider access to postal voting**;
- Improving **voting rights for recent emigrants**;
- Rollout of on-going and thorough **voter education initiatives** aimed at mobilising citizens, increasing participation in the democratic process and educating voters as to how the system works and how they can maximise their electoral choices.

## Institute Meaningful Oireachtas Reform

The Irish Oireachtas is one of the weaker parliaments in liberal democracy.

While much needed reform has happened over the last number of years in the Oireachtas to strengthen the ability of members and the institution itself in carrying out the fundamental functions of parliament, we believe there is still much to be done.

We will:

- **Redistribute power to a reformed local government system** to remove localism from national politics.
- **Reform the whip system** to rebalance the power dynamic between Parties and members of parliament

We would investigate the introduction of a lined whipping system similar to the British Houses of Parliament. This system helps parties and government to distinguish between policy positions that members are absolutely bound to support, issues they are strongly advised to support and issues the party would prefer they support.

In adopting such a tiered approach, it may be possible to maintain the

stability of parliament on urgent matters of confidence and supply, while also respecting the voting rights of individual members.

These potential reforms could have the effect of increasing the accountability of individual parliamentarians for their voting choices and is aimed at strengthening the role of the Dáil and Seanad as deliberative forums.

This will only improve the workings of the Oireachtas as a whole, if these measures are adopted on a cross party basis.

- **Strengthen Oireachtas Committees and place them at the centre of the legislative process.**
- Require that **public representatives declare significant liabilities as well as assets.** This would be introduced as part of improvements to the Public Sector Standards Bill 2015.
- **Eliminate salary top-up payments** made to committee chairpersons, whips, and members of the Houses of the Oireachtas Commission.
- **Reform and make appropriate, accountable and transparent all expenses and allowances paid to members of parliament.**
- The legislative process should not end with enactment. legislation must be subject to **post-enactment scrutiny** to ensure it operates as originally intended.  
This is to be achieved by attaching a brief outcome report to all new legislation setting out the precise intention of the legislation and identifying an appropriate Oireachtas Committee to conduct the assessment.  
Reviews would take place approximately one year after enactment and, where amendments are identified as necessary, committees would appropriate action.

## Rebalance Political Funding

Politics is currently funded in such a way as to protect the established Parties and this makes it extremely difficult for new alternatives to emerge. Our political funding model therefore acts as a barrier to the on-going development and evolution of our political system, making the system less responsive to the needs and wishes of the voters of Ireland.

It is vital that this problem be addressed. We propose to **reform the two streams of political funding** - parliamentary and electorally-based - as follows:

- Change the distribution mechanism for parliamentary funding and resourcing to be much more **transparent and accountable** in now members access and control over resources. This would safeguard the equal capacity of members to do their jobs and would rebalance the power dynamic between Parties and members of parliament;
- Change the **distribution mechanism for funding under the Electoral Acts** to prevent qualifying parties from receiving a proportion of the shared fund that is larger than the proportion of 1st preference votes received in the preceding general election. This proposed reform would divert political funding to the Irish Electoral Commission to fund political education and outreach work aimed at providing support and voter engagement for small parties, new parties and under-represented groups.

## A New Deal For Parents

Parenting is the most important job that any of us will ever do. After all, the future of our country depends on it.

Yet, in Ireland, we do so little to support parents. We are so far behind other countries in terms of childcare, parental leave, supports for new parents, and basic public services for children.

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

We want a **New Deal for Parents**.

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

Below, the Social Democrats are proposing a range of measures including the following:

- Introducing a **right to flexible work** options
- **Helping with the costs** of raising children
- Respecting and **supporting all childcare choices**
- **Public services parents can count on** in areas such as Education and Health
- **Ending Child Poverty**
- Promoting **healthy and active lifestyles**
- Protecting children **on-line**

## Improving flexible work options for Parents

The Social Democrats have a strong commitment to **extending and vastly improving entitlement to Parental Leave and flexible work options** in Ireland.

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

In the last Dáil we published a Bill which extended unpaid parental leave to six months and raised the qualifying age from 8 to 12 years, and we fought hard to get it through the Houses of the Oireachtas. **As a result, new parental leave entitlements came into force in September of last year.**

Based on feedback on this Bill we believe there is huge public demand to extend both paid and unpaid parental leave much further. **Parents want the option of spending time with their children while also retaining a right to return to their employment.** This is not too much to ask.

The Social Democrats favour the **extension of paid parental leave** so that in conjunction with paid maternity leave, paternity leave and existing paid parental leave, the **first 12 months of a child's life can be covered by paid leave.** The amount of leave would be set at the level of Maternity Benefit and would be state-funded. It would be shareable between parents.

We would like to see the overall amount of paid and unpaid parental leave extended to the European average of around **100 weeks per child.** We would also like to see the general child qualifying age for unpaid parental leave extended to 16 years. We will significantly relax the qualifying criteria on how parental leave can be taken as the rules are currently far too strict.

It is clear from the uptake of the existing limited flexible work options that there is a high demand for these options. In addition, there is **growing interest among workers and employers in providing for a 4-day working week.** This is already available and promoted in many other countries and the outcomes have been generally very positive. The demand for more flexible working is especially strong from parents of young children, those caring for an older

person or a family member with a disability, and generally where people are seeking a better work/life balance.

We will establish a Commission to research, **trial and set out a pathway to the introduction of a right to flexible work** including working from home, term-time working and a 4-day week, and to ensure that it works for parents, families of all types, and for large and small employers.

We also recognise that parents of children with disabilities and certain carers have particular demands on their time and require further flexibility. We will **raise the qualifying child age for unpaid parental leave to 16 years and to 18 years for children with disabilities**. We will provide for this and other flexibilities through a **new Family Leave Act** in consultation with representatives from those sectors.

## Supporting All Childcare Choices

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 recent introduction of the National Childcare Scheme. However, the scheme as currently constituted, falls far short of meeting the needs of those parenting and the very expensive costs of raising a family in Ireland.

According to Pobal childcare costs continue to rise with the average fee for a full-time place now at €184 p.w, €110 p.w for a part-time place and €73 p.w for a sessional place. In each case the rate of increase is above the general rate of inflation so it's a case of a bad situation becoming even worse. Costs are significantly higher in urban areas, with average full-time weekly fees now over €200 per week in parts of Dublin, Wicklow and Kildare. **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.

These major gaps significantly raise the cost of living for such families and represent a very significant barrier to employment, especially for women and people parenting b. **Parents have a right to expect that like other developed European countries, childcare should be accessible, affordable and adequately supported by the state.**

However, 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 of 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.

A 2017 CSO report on the childcare choices for children aged 0-12 yrs (see Table below) showed that 70% of children were minded by a parent, 16% by family or a friend, 13% by a crèche, and 10% by a childminder. For pre-school children, 62% were minded by parents, 19% in the formal childcare sector, 17% by a family or friend, and 13% by a Childminder.

Types of Childcare Used	% of children aged 0-12	
	2007	2016
Parent / Partner	75	70
Unpaid relative or family friend	9	16
Paid relative or family friend	3	3
Childminder / Au Pair / Nanny	9	10
Creche / Montessori / Playgroup / After-school facility	9	13
Other	1	1

*Source: CSO, July 2017 – Figure add up to more than 100% as some families use multiple types of childcare.*

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**.

In addition, the Social Democrats are keen to ensure that the childcare sector is placed on a sustainable footing and that **childcare workers are valued both in terms of wages and training**. This is not only in the interests of the workers themselves but also parents and children.

The Social Democrats will introduce **four key childcare measures** to help parents to support their families:

1. As above, we will introduce **additional paid parental leave** from the end of maternity and paternity leave to the child's first birthday.

We would set aside funding to ensure that no parent is worse off when transferring from existing community childcare subvention schemes to the new National Childcare Scheme

2. We will provide a **new Early Years Payment to cover children from the end of paid parental leave until entry into preschool**.

4. We will **improve direct funding to the childcare sector to help improve employment conditions and training, and to improve sustainability**.

3. We will **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.

We will also seek to reduce the administrative burden on the sector through direct assistance from County Childcare Committees.

We will **deal with insurance hikes in the sector through significant reform of Ireland's claims regime and the regulation of insurance companies**.

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.

We will introduce a single Early Years and School Age Childcare Agency. If childcare fees continue to increase in line with subsidies, we will introduce measures to cap them.

It is the long-term aim of the Social Democrats to **establish a national public childcare service** and as a first step we would **pilot this public provision** of childcare in areas where there are the most acute shortages.

## Supporting Parents through Better Public Services

### Education

The Social Democrats are committed to the introduction of **truly free Primary and Secondary Education**. This would mean investing in schools to improve school capitation grants, school transport, and book schemes to ensure that schools **end the practice of seeking voluntary contributions from parents**.

We will also ensure that school managers adopt a principle of cost-minimisation in relation to school uniforms and other school costs.

We will invest in **new primary school teachers, supports for special needs**, and strive towards the full commencement of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004 so that parents with children with special needs do not need to be eternally campaigning for their child's rights.

### Healthcare

Our Sláintecare proposals will provide for the **expansion of frontline primary care services**.

It will mean that **basic services that are key to a child's development such as public health nursing, speech and language therapy, and eye, ear and dental services will be significantly improved** so that parents can rely on them if their child needs them.

Research by Barnardos has shown that thousands of children still wait very lengthy periods for basic health services such as speech and language services. Our own research has highlighted **completely unacceptable waiting times in Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services, in psychology and many other**

**streams of child health services.** These waiting times would be significantly reduced under our proposals.

### Parental Support:

We will campaign for better direct supports for parents and improve peer supports.

We would like to extend existing initiatives whereby mothers/parents in the same community that have children in the same month are invited to come together 1 day per week for advice on parenting. This takes place over 1 month - from that point, if parents wish to continue to meet, they can.

As part of the full roll-out of Sláintecare we will provide **additional funding for public health nursing** and we would like to see some of this investment going to **dedicated child and family public health nurses.**

Investing in public health nursing will also allow for a **much sharper focus on breast-feeding.** We are keen to take a number of measures to support breast-feeding by ensuring maternity services are properly resourced to support new mothers, by extending entitlement to breaks to breast-feeding mothers, by requiring large workplaces to provide breast-feeding rooms and a small fridge for breast-feeding mothers who wish to pump, and by **establishing a breast-milk bank in the Republic.** Ultimately, we would like to move towards the much-heralded Australian model for support for first-time mothers.

## Ending Child Poverty

**It's a huge indictment of our country that about 100,000 of our children grow up in consistent poverty.** In practical terms, this means they live in a household with a very low income and go without basics such as adequate food or heat, or they face social exclusion.

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

As an over-riding aim the Social Democrats want a **clear target set down in the next Programme for Government that consistent child poverty, as currently measured, will be eliminated as early as possible within the lifetime of the next Dáil**. This is very readily achievable. This is a make or break issue for us entering Government.

We feel strongly that the **Taoiseach needs to lead a cross-Department approach on ending child poverty** and should be directly accountable for achieving that target.

We also feel that we need to significantly **improve how we measure child poverty. Current measures are completely inadequate**. The focus on income is far too crude and there should be a far greater emphasis on actual outcomes for children. In particular, the effect of homelessness, parental health or addiction issues, the high cost of living or the absence of key health or education public services are not adequately factored into how Ireland currently measures child poverty.

Some of the main measures we advocate include:

- Set **official all-of-Government target of ending Consistent Child Poverty by the early 2020s** – led by An Taoiseach; Change the recently published Roadmap for Social Inclusion to incorporate this specific goal.
- **Replicate targeted area-based investment** similar to the YoungBallymun programme in other disadvantaged areas to allow larger numbers of children to benefit from a programme with proven success in improving learning and well-being outcomes.
- **Provide free primary education** to all children to cover the costs of transport, books and classroom resources.
- Increase **funding for TUSLA and recruit additional social workers, childcare workers, social care workers and other front-line staff** to deal with the chronic shortage of intervention and prevention services for highly vulnerable children.
- Expand the National Childcare Scheme (as above).
- Introduce a new **Early Years Payment** for all parents of young children and support the introduction of paid parental leave and extended unpaid parental leave (as above).
- Increase the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance.
- **Improve funding to the DEIS programme** and target the needs of

- disadvantaged students outside these areas.
- Expand the number of **special needs assistants**.
  - Prioritise housing and **end the practice of children living in hotel rooms, hubs, and other emergency accommodation**.
  - **Extend the school meals programme** on a priority basis to ensure that all children have access to nutritious food.
  - Implement a range of programmes and initiatives of **support to parents in the critical 0-3 stage of development**, focusing on parental well-being and early infant development.
  - Roll-out Sláintecare which will provide for the **expansion of frontline primary care services, including speech and language therapists, occupational therapists and public health nurses**.
  - Introduce a statutory Child Maintenance Service.
  - **Poverty-proof all Budgets**.

## Promoting Active and Healthy lifestyles

One in four of our children are overweight or obese – with marked differences depending on family income. Three in four adults over 50 are overweight or obese. **Ireland has the fourth highest level of overweight and obese men in the EU and the seventh highest for women.**

We have a problem. It's time we faced it.

**Obesity in children is almost entirely preventable.** There are multiple factors involved including diet and nutrition, food affordability, education, activity and exercise.

We need action in a host of areas including promoting active lifestyles, portion-sizes, the availability and affordability of high calorie food/drinks, weight management programmes, parental and child education, food labelling, reformulation of food and drink, marketing and advertising restrictions, taxes, and public health campaigns.

**A key factor is also the amount of quality time available to parents** – this impacts on parents ability to cook proper food, the amount of activities their children can be involved in, and the amount of time children spend on screens.

It is one of the reasons why the Social Democrats have placed so much emphasis on extending leave and flexible work options for parents.

The national action plan on obesity – A Healthy Weight for Ireland - sets a very good framework for the problem but is very weak in terms of concrete actions, timelines and budgets. It is over-reliant on voluntary codes of practice and does very little to address the bombardment of our children with inappropriate food marketing through broadcasting.

The Social Democrats will address these weaknesses by drawing up a **new national plan on obesity**. To ensure there is proper buy-in from all Departments, this plan will be headed by the office of An Taoiseach, and Departments would have to report to An Taoiseach through a new National Implementation Office.

As part of this plan we will:

- Introduce a **ban on all food advertising aimed at children**.
- Improve labelling and nutrition information on food and drinks, and the public's understanding of it.
- Introduce a **sweet snack tax**.
- Ensure that “**no fry zones**” are put in place within 400m of all schools, where practicable, as has happened in Wicklow.
- **Ban vending machines** in schools.
- Require all schools to have **healthy food policies** and provide guidelines on school lunches.
- Increase **exercise time** in schools.
- Invest heavily in **sport and recreation**, ensuring that there are grant allocations on an annual basis and that qualifying criteria are strongly skewed towards driving participation.
- Promote **safe cycling** as a viable option for children.

## Protecting Children on-line

The digital age brings both opportunities and significant challenges for children and parents.

Children are far more exposed to on-line material, social media and computer gaming with many companies seeking to improve their commercial reach by actively and in some cases aggressively targeting children.

The Social Democrats wish to **protect children from over-zealous consumerism and marketing**, and to provide parents with better information on how to deal with on-line bullying issues, social media concerns, and over-use of computer games.

The Social Democrats commit to:

- Supporting the roll out of the new **Digital Rights Commission**
  - Developing a new **National Strategy on Children's Cyber Safety and On-line Bullying**
  - Much better public awareness campaigns for parents and children on **on-line safety issues and digital well-being**
  - Enacting legislation to reflect the Law Reform Commission's recommendations in its publication, "Report on Harmful Communications and Digital Safety".
  - Ensuring the continued **prohibition of the use of children's online data for commercial marketing purposes** by keeping the ban on the practice of 'profiling' for under 18-year-olds.
  - Developing new public health guidelines and awareness campaigns
- for the maximum length of time children of various ages should spend playing computer games.
- Establishing a **review of how loot boxes and some in-game purchases are targeted at children**, a review of the extent to which they constitute gambling and a review on whether or not these should be banned in games with certain age-ratings.
- We would also set down a requirement for a new warning system on computer games sold over-the-counter to alert parents that the game includes in-game purchases and/or loot boxes.
- Introducing new regulations to prevent over-the-counter sales of computer games to children who are under the age-rating for the game (as in Britain)

## Justice and Equality

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

### Support Gardaí and Prevent Crime

The Social Democrats will:

- Invest heavily in Community Policing, restoring the numbers to at least pre-austerity levels – the numbers of community gardai in Dublin alone were cut by 43% from 510 to 298 (2019, 2009).
- Maintain the Special Criminal Court. We recognise the need for one currently to address very serious gangland crime.
- Fully implement the Policing Service for the Future plan.
- Ensure Gardaí have the resources required to improve responsiveness such as civilian staff to free up Gardaí time and an adequate number of squad cars.
- Make sure hiring for the Gardaí reflects the make-up of the population and provide language training for community policing officers.
- Hire, train and empower Gardaí to handle white collar crime and fraud.
- Invest in youth facilities to help prevent young people entering crime.
- Legislate to prosecute adults who groom children to commit crimes on their behalf.
- Ensure a strong Garda presence is not only felt in neighbourhoods, but that it is viewed as a welcome and reassuring by placing community policing at the centre of community building and engagement
- Strengthen Joint Policing Committees by ensuring there is practical local involvement and decision making. Statutorily empower Councils and local area committees to call representatives of the Gardaí before them to address how they intend to tackle issue of significant local importance, such as low level drug dealing, misuse of scramblers and quad bikes, and other forms of antisocial behaviour.

### Oversight of Justice

In line with the recommendation of the Commission on the Future of Policing, we will establish a new Independent Office of the Police Ombudsman, alongside an Ombudsman for Victims of Crime to ensure victims of crime should also be able to access a quick, clear and independent complaints We

also commit to ratifying the Optional Protocol to the UN Convention Against Torture (OPCAT).

## Tackle Image-Based Sexual Abuse

We will criminalise image-based sexual abuse, by amending the Non-Fatal Offences Against the Person Act to prohibit the creation and/or sharing of private sexual images without consent.

## Courts Reform

- We are committed to adequately funding the Civil Legal Aid Scheme, and will conduct a root and branch review of the system to examine how best to provide services on the basis of need and the functioning of the financial means test.
- We recognise that a properly functioning and accessible court services are essential to providing access to justice, we will conduct a full review of existing facilities and allocate appropriate budget to develop dedicated Family Law and Children’s Court at Hammond Lane.
- We will establish a Statutory Maintenance Authority, separate from the family courts, to manage payments of family maintenance.

## Address harassment and hate crimes:

We will:

- Introduce robust hate crime legislation, in line with international best practice, to recognise the compound impact on victims of these forms of crimes and prevent their occurrence.
- Review and update our hate speech legislation to ensure it is fit for purpose and capable of adequately prosecuting hate speech regardless of whether it is conveyed verbally, in writing, or online.
- Develop a new National Action Plan Against Racism.

## Sentencing and Rehabilitation.

We will:

- Examine the suitability of the current prison model with a view to improving rehabilitation and lowering recidivism.
- In place of frequent warnings or suspended sentences, make greater use of community service overseen by probation officers.
- Establish a multi-agency Mental Health Task Force to examine the high rates of mental health issues amongst the prison population
- Ratify the Optional Protocol to the UN Convention Against Torture (OPCAT) and establish a National Preventive Mechanism.

## Domestic Abuse

The Social Democrats are committed to provide adequate resources for the implementation of all aspects of the Istanbul Convention, in particular providing the necessary number of domestic violence refuge accommodation throughout the country. We will also resource specialist services to provide court support to victims of domestic violence in criminal proceedings.

## Sexual Violence

According to the 2002 SAVI report one in four children, one in five women and one in ten men will experience sexual violence in their lifetime. We know that the current system and culture means that only around 10% of incidences of sexual violence are reported to the Gardaí. The Social Democrats are committed to making things easier for people to report and access the services needed to help them after experiencing sexual violence.

We will:

- Ensure equal access to access specialised services for victims of sexual violence, regardless of whether or not they are reporting it as a crime. Initial care (emergency contraception, first aid, antibiotics and STD testing etc) should be available through primary care centres. Treatment will be victim led to ensure they are listened to and their care needs met, if they wish they can be referred to a sexual assault treatment unit (SATU). SATU centres must be made available in every community health organisation. Each CHO area will have a sexual violence team who can travel between primary care centres to reduce the amount of traveling victims must do during a time of great trauma.

- Introduce consent education primary school level in all schools, teaching children about consent and body autonomy to help create an open culture where children feel safe to discuss if they have experienced sexual violence.
- Commit to ensuring that the legislative and justice process is as easy as possible for victims to navigate. We believe victims need to be guided through the legislative process by a liaison officer who explains the whole process to them start to finish. We also believe there is clear need to examine extending limited representation to complainants throughout trials where the main issue is credibility.
- Resource Rape Crisis support services to ensure there are no waiting lists for access to therapy services.

## Traveller and Roma Equality.

The systemic discrimination against Travellers across generations has resulted in stark inequalities between Travellers and Settled people.

The Social Democrats will take a holistic approach to improving the living conditions and socio-economic opportunities of the Irish Traveller community.

We will:

- Oppose all discriminatory practise and language towards Travellers and support.
  - Expert Group on Traveller Accommodation, and the National Roma Needs Assessment.
- Support Traveller inclusion within community programmes and decision making on a local level.
- Support the Oireachtas recommendation to include a Traveller within the Taoiseach's eleven Seanad nominees.
- Implement the recommendations of the National Traveller Roma and Inclusion Strategy, the Independent
  - Establish a National Traveller Health Action Plan to identify the specific physical and mental health needs of the Travelling Community, and implement the findings.
  - Require Local Authorities to use the entire allocation of their Traveller Accommodation grants.
  - Allocate resources to support Travellers in all levels of education.

## Migration and Integration

### End Direct Provision

Direct Provision was only ever intended to be a short-term solution, yet in practice it is entirely unfit for purpose and has become a national disgrace. We are committed to ending Direct Provision and replacing it with not for profit accommodation which affords dignity, minimises institutionalisation, and protects the physical and mental health of all those awaiting a decision on international protection.

We would also:

- Better resource the International Protection Office to ensure applications are processed in a timely manner.
- Immediately introduce a new independent inspection model to conduct regular, unannounced monitoring and inspections on existing centres.
- Increase the Daily Expenses Allowance in line with other Social Protection payment rate.
- Extend the ombudsman's jurisdiction to the application process for international protection and any inspectorate for direct provision.
- Investigate appropriate systems to allow those awaiting decisions to access driving licences.
- Ratify the Optional Protocol to the UN Convention Against Torture (OPCAT) and include Direct Provision centres within the scope of places of detention.

### Immigration and Integration

We will

- Establish a path for regularisation of undocumented migrants.
- Legislate to provide Irish born children normally resident an entitlement to citizenship rights.
- Introduce greater transparency and consistency in our system by reviewing the current Immigration and Residence legislation to ensure clear statutory criteria for immigration-related applications and appeals is applied in all cases, and the need for independent appeals mechanisms.
- Adequately resource INIS, GNIB, and the DBEI Employment Permits Section to ensure efficient processing of applications.
- Extend voting rights at general election level to settled migrants.
- Fully implement the National Migrant Integration Strategy.
- Ensure all Local Authorities have Local Integration Strategies in place

## Transport

One of the starkest differences between Ireland and other European countries is its poor public transport system. Under successive Irish Governments, one abandoned or delayed public transport plan has followed another.

The failure of successive Governments to properly plan, fund and deliver public transport programmes means that each of us live daily with the consequences. We have no rural public transport to speak of. Our capital city is one of the most congested in the world, and many of our other towns and cities are not much better. We have severe urban sprawl with poorly planned car-dependent communities. Our rail network is sparse. Cycling is not safe. Pedestrians are only rarely considered. Air pollution is unacceptably high. We incentivise the most environmentally damaging forms of transport and leave people with very few options to reduce their carbon footprint.

**This impacts every aspect of our lives from our economic competitiveness to the time we spend with our families.**

The Social Democrats support the **public transport measures** outlined in the National Development Plan and we will honour each commitment made in it. But we believe Ireland can do so much better.

### 10 Priorities

Below we set out our top 10 priorities on transport during the next Dáil term.

#### 1. Give Public Transport greater priority in the National Development Plan

The Social Democrats support all of the public transport measures contained in the **National Development Plan (NDP)** and are committed to seeing that they are delivered on time, on budget and **in full**. However, the National Development Plan sets aside €11.8bn for Roads and €8.3bn for Sustainable Mobility.

If we are ever to get to a place where Ireland has a public transport system we can rely on, then **that ratio needs to be completely rebalanced**. This is crucial if the NDP is to deliver not just the “greening” elements of the public transport programme but crucially to add significantly to carrying capacity. The Social Democrats would seek to restructure funding within the NDP to significantly boost funding to Public Transport.

#### 2. Ringfence Windfall gains for the DART Underground Project

The absolute key to building more rail capacity in Ireland is the **DART Underground project**. This is a game-changer not only for Dublin but for all commuter counties in its vicinity – and it is a project that will benefit possibly half the population of the State.

However, the building of this project is not currently funded under the 10 year National Development Plan. The Social Democrats believe it was a **serious error to omit the DART underground project from the 10 year plan** and that Ireland simply can't wait until the end of the decade for another decision on whether or not it will finally be built.

The mid-term review of the National Development Plan will be an opportunity to examine projects that are not currently funded under the current plan. As a condition of entering Government, **the Social Democrats will insist on any exchequer windfalls, such as from greater than expected Corporation Tax, or any possible Apple dividend, to be set aside to fund this project rather than going to debt reduction**. This will be a wiser investment of state funds, save us money, and boost competitiveness in the long term.

### 3. Reduce Public Transport Fares

The Social Democrats have long been committed to **lower transport fares**. The cost of travelling on public transport in Ireland is too high 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 will **invest substantially in additional public transport subsidies so that fares can be reduced**.

We are also keen to **examine alternative no/low-fare models**, such as exists in Luxembourg, Estonia, Germany, Austria etc. In Government, the Social Democrats will establish a no/low fare pilot in a large town or city, for example Galway, to examine how such a scheme could best work in Ireland.

In line with our commitments in education, we will **remove charges for school transport**.

### 4. Invest in Safe Cycling

In our policy on cycling the Social Democrats have outline dozens of commitments to help **promote safe cycling as an alternative to the motor car**. This includes:

- Significantly improved Funding for Cycling
- Proper Segregation for Safe Cycling and Improved Infrastructure
- More Cycling Greenways and Urban Bike Schemes
- Safer Cycling to School
- Better Enforcement
- Improved Cycling Tax Schemes
- Cycling Officers & Training

Our cycling policy also includes a commitment to significantly improved Funding for Cycling so that in the short-term **10% of the Land Transport Budget is spent on cycling** and in the medium term **20% of the Transport Capital Budget is spent on cycling and walking**.

## 5. Increase funding for Local Link to €100m

**Local Link is vital for rural Ireland but also for the overall sustainability of our public transport system.** It helps alleviate rural and urban isolation for older members of our communities, who may no longer be able to drive themselves.

It acts as a small, community-based bus service to transport children to school and can help foster a sense of independence in children and mean that parental traffic is reduced. It encourages shopping locally and reducing the need for car parking. And of course, there are considerable climate change mitigation benefits. Current funding, standing at €21m, is completely insufficient to develop a strong and reliable Local Link network.

The Social Democrats would **increase funding for Local Link to €100m and seek to improve this over time.**

## 6. No more Privatisation

Public Transport is a public good. The Social Democrats aim to keep it that way. **We will oppose any attempt to privatise bus routes.** At the same time we will insist on very high customer services for all operators. Public bus routes can only be sustained if they provide a reliable service that people can depend on and value.

In particular, we are keen to see a vast improvement in the area of accessibility for people with disabilities. We will strengthen accountability by requiring public transport providers to account for local services and targets at monthly Council meetings.

## 7. Active Travel to Schools

**Every child should have a safe route to school.** We will promote walking and cycling as the optimum modes of transport for children travelling to school. We acknowledge the good work of the Green Schools Travel Programme in relation to active travel and we will seek to build on this.

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

We will continue to support the cycle bus initiative, such as the Galway Cycle Bus, and seek to emulate it right across the country. Funding should be made available for community initiatives such as these that promote active travel to schools.

We will adopt a new **national strategy on the weight of school bags** to further encourage young children to cycle to school. And we will improve funding for cycle parking spaces in schools.

## 8. A Proper Land Development Agency

Good land-use is an integral part of good transport planning and provision. It is our long-held belief that we will only get good land-use planning if we have a national body with real teeth to engage in public-land banking. Over a year after the body was announced,

the legislation for the Land Development Agency has still not been passed. The legislation drafted by the Fine Gael led Government would have provided for a body that was far too weak with little powers to engage in public-land banking and would remain completely reliant on the co-operation of other state bodies.

The Land Development Agency legislation is crucial to the future of housing and public transport in Ireland. In Government, the Social Democrats will place an absolute priority on the issue of land reforms – **we will legislate for a strong Land Development Agency with appropriate powers of compulsory purchase; we will establish a review of all land issues as Scotland has done in recent years**; we will introduce a proper land-hoarding tax, and we will bring forward a referendum on rebalancing the public good with property rights.

In addition, we will establish **new directly elected mayors** in our major cities who will take responsibility for transport planning. We will ensure that all new major developments have adequate provision for **electric vehicle charging infrastructure**.

## 9. A new Public Transport Policing Unit

The Social Democrats support the creation of a **new policing unit specifically for Public Transport**. The public will not use public transport unless they consider it safe to do so. Similarly, the lives and livelihoods of transport workers should not be put at risk because of a lack of garda presence.

## 10. Buses and Bus Connects

The Bus remains the workhorse of the Irish public transport system. The Social Democrats will **improve funding for the expansion of public bus fleets**. We will support the National Transport Authority and Local Authorities in giving greater priority to buses wherever possible on our road network. We will improve funding to address pinch-points. We will support the roll-out of tag-on and tag-off across our bus-network.

The Social Democrats support the improvements envisaged in Bus Connects. Notwithstanding this, there are numerous issues that must be worked through with local communities and we will ensure that this happens.

## Combating Climate Change

Climate Change is one of the great challenges of our time. The actions we take or fail to take now will affect our country and our planet for generations to come. Yet this challenge also presents an opportunity. The Social Democrats take the climate crisis extremely seriously, and consider it to be a matter of urgency for the next government.

We have never had a government in this country which has treated climate change or the environment as priority issues, and that must change. We want to guarantee our future environmental, social and economic health by implementing robust domestic emissions-reduction legislation with credible, incremental national and sectoral plans, based on ambitious but attainable goals. In line with European Commissions current proposals we aim to more than half our CO2 emissions by 2030.

### Just Transition

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

We will establish a **Just Transition Task Force** to work with affected stakeholders in develop transition plans to ensure the deliver our targets while maintaining the principles of fairness and proportionality.

While **we support the principle of a carbon tax, it must be designed to incentivise people to change their behaviour towards the environment.** The simple fact is many people are not in a position to change how they keep their homes warm and how they travel. Supports need to be put in place to give people real alternatives before a carbon tax can work as it should. We will **ringfence the income from carbon taxes to fund the retrofitting homes,** improving electric vehicle infrastructure, and other potential measures

designed specifically to increase the viability of a low carbon lifestyle to all people regardless of income.

## Meeting our Clean Energy Needs

Meeting most of our energy demand through renewable sources is not merely an aspiration, but a necessity.

We will:

- **Fulfil our commitments in the Paris Climate Agreement.**
- Fully exploit our offshore wind potential by establishing a new **Offshore Wind Development Agency** with a specific mandate to attract investment.
- Establish a **Marine Spatial Plan (MSP)** for their territorial seas.
- **Grant aiding small-hydro schemes**, particularly if associated with community projects.
- At household level, we would continue to support **grants for solar panel installation**. As technology improves, we would also commit to the exploration of the potential of solar power to offer some level of back-up generation on clear, calm days.
- Explore the **building of more biogas facilities** to generate energy from decomposing organic matter such as cow manure or brown bin contents.
- We would create a credible plan to achieve full deployment of **smart grid infrastructure**.
- Set down a **new environmental levy on each tonne of sand, gravel, crushed stone and other aggregates** extracted from the ground or lifted from the surface and used in construction to encourage the recycling of aggregates and the much more sustainable use of our natural resources.

## Phasing Out Fossil Fuels

While offshore wind energy is being planned and built, there would be a need to continue the use of fossil fuels in the interim, and possibly in small amounts on very calm days in the future.

The Social Democrats would do our best to handle this transition responsibly, in ways which minimise the effect on the environment and aren't punitive towards the less well-off.

We will:

- Uphold the **nationwide ban on fracking**, and legislate to end the importing of fracked gas from abroad.
- **Phase out offshore drilling for oil and gas** to protect our marine health and tourism and seafood industries,
- **Reduce subsidies for non-renewable energy** over the next five years, and incentivise renewable alternatives.
- Expand existing **retrofitting grant schemes** and introduce a pay-as-you-save home insulation loan scheme.
- Introduce a nationwide **ban on smoky coal**.
- Legislate for a new **Clean Air Act** to increase monitoring and enforcement of pollution.
- Continue to **phase out peat-burning power stations**, and explore the possibility of converting some into power-generating biogas facilities or waste incinerators to maintain employment in those areas and reduce the amount of waste going to landfill.

## Waste and Recycling

Ireland's waste system is a mess. The current system does not work for the consumer and does not work for the environment. In the past number of years the Social Democrats have worked to highlight unscrupulous and unfair charging by the waste industry, the growing problems with plastic packaging, the need for transparency in the sector, and the urgent need for a regulator.

The present Government has made little progress in tackling these issues.

## Regulation and Competition

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.

The Social Democrats are demanding **the creation of a strong regulator that will put environmental standards, strong competition and fair pricing** at the heart of the waste industry. We are proposing that the role of the Commission for the Regulation of Utilities should be expanded to incorporate waste.

## Reducing, Reusing and Recycling

- establish **new targets for the percentage of domestic households and businesses that have recycling bin and compost bin services**, with a particular focus on apartments and rural areas.
- New specific targets will also be introduced for **recycling in places of employment**.
- set **new targets so that food waste generated by the cosmetic demands of supermarkets, for instance, the shape and size of vegetables, is very significantly curtailed**. We would also ensure that large grocery chains and fast food outlets meet their responsibility of ensuring that all surplus edible food is offered to charities before entering the waste system
- establish a **fundamental review of the effectiveness of the Repak Scheme** in terms of how we approach waste and the respective roles of producers, retailers and consumers. In particular, we need to re-examine responsibilities of retailers in terms of reducing the amount of plastics used for the packaging of products, especially loose products.
- **reinstate funding for the development of recycling centres** and expand the number so that there is at least one civic amenity centre close to the population it is meant to be serving.
- Charges for bringing disposable items to public facilities should be uniform across the country and should be pitched at a level that discourages dumping.
- support the **creation of more social enterprises such as the Rediscovery Centre, Food Cloud, and Recreate Ireland** . We would also examine how the tax code or a preferential commercial rates policy could help promote better second-hand markets and **repair businesses**.
- **Provide far better consumer information on recycling** – what can be recycled, where and what bin can it go in. We would also regulate to ensure that anything sold in this country with a recyclable label on it is actually recyclable here.
- **improve education on recycling, reducing and reusing in our schools**.
- explore through European institutions the possibility of **reduced VAT rates for the repair of goods** and how better regulation could ensure goods are longer lasting and repairable.

## The Plastic Problem

Plastic has become endemic in our culture. It is now almost impossible to avoid purchasing daily necessities without also having to purchase some plastic packaging. In Ireland in 2018, only 34% of plastic packaging was recycled, while 39% was incinerated and 31% went to landfills.

The Social Democrats recognise that there is an **urgent need to reduce the demand for and supply of plastics**, and as well as supporting EU-wide initiatives in the area, we commit to the following measures:

- In the short term, **we would impose a levy on plastics that cannot be readily recycled in Ireland** (eg: many soft plastics, black plastics). In the medium term, we would put the onus back on large producers to recover plastics that they produce or stop using plastic in their production.
- We would seek to **ban microplastics** (found in some cosmetics, some synthetic clothing, and other products).
- We would introduce a **deposit return scheme for recyclable containers** (and other waste streams where possible) building on the excellent examples in Norway, Sweden and Germany.
- We would **strenuously promote the development of re-fill options in retail** to minimise the unnecessary production of more plastic containers and we will encourage more local authorities to provide refill water dispensers so that the demand for plastic bottles is reduced.

## Disposal and Exploitation of Non-Recyclable Waste

- We would resource the **proper enforcement of illegal dumping fines**.
- We would strongly insist on the principle that waste is treated/disposed of as close as possible to where it is generated.
- We would seek to reduce emissions from the sector by creating a far bigger focus on re-using, recycling and preventing waste.
- We would seek to **exploit emissions** from the sector. One strong example of this is the proposal to use excess heat from the Poolbeg Waste Incinerator in Dublin to supply energy to homes and businesses that will be built on the nearby site of the former glass bottle factory. We would strongly support further examination of **district heating opportunities** using waste heat.
- We would insist on **transparent emissions monitoring** for all waste facilities. We believe current systems

are inadequate, especially in respect of waste incinerators.

- We would insist that the EPA and Local Authorities meet their responsibilities in terms of only allowing waste operations on suitable sites and under strict and enforceable conditions. We would insist that the assessment process is properly complied with.

- We favour the introduction of a **levy on aggregates such as sand, gravel, and crushed stone that are extracted from the ground** and used in construction and we would set it at a level to encourage the recycling of construction and demolition waste and to reduce the amount of waste being landfilled. All proceeds would be set aside for the environmental fund.

## Education

Everybody, regardless of background, means or postcode, has a right to the best education possible. It is the **single greatest driver of opportunity, quality of life, social equality and economic growth**. Ireland should be a republic in which every child has the opportunity to achieve their potential – that can only happen with a well-funded and modern education system. It means investing in early years professionals, teachers, principals, lecturers and professors, and making a real commitment to lifelong learning. Resources must be carefully targeted to where they are most needed, and every effort must be taken to ensure access across all socioeconomic backgrounds.

**A modern Irish democracy must respect and reflect the diversity of Irish society and the citizens which it serves.** Increasingly, a significant number of parents feel that they have no option but to send their child to a school which does not align with their belief system. Although there have been some attempts to introduce pluralism to the Irish education system, 95% of State-funded schools remain under the control of religious congregations. This is no longer reflective of the country we live in and the Social Democrats believe that reform is urgently needed.

Furthermore, our ambition is to **provide universal equality of opportunity to a world class, globally competitive third-level system**. It's clear that significant investment in higher and further education is required to address chronic underfunding, significant demographic demand, and to maintain, protect and enhance quality. Apprenticeships should be valued and promoted as a real alternative to university.

We recognise that our primary, secondary, third and fourth levels rest on a foundation of pre-school education. Details of our plans for this are contained in our Childhood policy.

## PRIMARY AND SECONDARY

### Make Primary and Secondary Education Truly Free

- **100% public funding of school books, the school transport scheme, and classroom resources.**
- Seek an **end to the state subsidy of fee-paying schools** over the course of the next Government.
- **Abolish voluntary contributions** for families.
- Restore capitation payments to 2010 levels.
- Legislate to ensure all school uniforms and other requirements are affordable

### Invest in our Schools and Teachers

- **Reduce class sizes at primary level**, progressively aiming for the 20:1 ratio.
- Increase funding for substitutes and supervision at both primary and second level – all pupils and students should be given the opportunity to be taught by a qualified teacher, and to engage in extracurricular activities
- Resource schools for the further provision of **ASD Units and special classes**.
- Invest in **continuous professional development** for teachers and principals and more Assistant Principal/Special Duties posts.
- **Restore pay parity** for teachers and introduce greater security in employment conditions
- Provide funding for more **Special Needs Assistants** and ensure greater job security.
- Invest in **science infrastructure and equipment**.

### Create a Secular and Inclusive Education System

- Establish a Citizens' Assembly to make recommendations to the Oireachtas on how to move towards an **entirely secular education system**.
- Remove 'faith formation' from the school day and provide it as an after school option. Use the 150 minutes per week allocated to this in the Primary Curriculum for a new ethical education programme as part of SPHE, along with enhanced time for other subject areas including Physical Education
- Rigorously follow-through on **school divestment** as per recommendations from the Forum on Pluralism and Patronage.
- Review and update of the **National Action Plan on Bullying** (2013), including providing specific prevention initiatives targeted at protecting minority groups.

## Target Disadvantage with Additional Supports

- Ensure that **class sizes in DEIS schools are reduced** proportionately.
- **Expand the DEIS scheme** throughout the country.
- Establish multidisciplinary teams in and across DEIS schools to support students at risk of early school leaving.
- Increase funding for **Education Welfare Service** and alternative education programmes such as Youth Encounter Project.
- **Increase funding for CAMHS and other supports for students' mental health and wellbeing**, including providing referral access to psychologists in every school. These measures are further detailed in our Mental Health policy.
- Invest in more significant speech and language support shared between schools
- Develop and implement a 10 year Whole-of-Government Strategy for **adult literacy, numeracy and digital skills**.
- Enact a **Plain Language Bill** to require that all information for the public from government and State bodies is written and presented in plain language.

## THIRD LEVEL & FURTHER ED

### Reduce costs and improve supports for students

- **Reduce third level fees** by phasing out the student contribution charge.
- Reduce the 'no maintenance support' area of students' commute from 45km to 25km.
- **Increasing funding to the SUSI grant scheme** by 7%, and eliminate the delays in payments which cause significant stress and hardship for students.
- **Reinstate maintenance grants** for post-graduate students.
- Recognise the work of Postgraduate Research Students and guarantee fair pay and working conditions.

### Substantial Investment in New and Existing Apprenticeship Schemes

- Springboard+ to be adapted to include school-leavers.
- **Promote digital apprenticeship** programmes through initiatives like the UK's "Tech Partners" scheme.

- Investigate the introduction of an '**apprenticeship levy**' to encourage major companies to develop their own apprenticeship programmes.
- Greater funding for apprenticeships in state bodies and semi-state companies
- Ensure improved participation in apprenticeships for women and for people with disabilities
- Reform junior apprenticeship scheme for post-Junior Cert students.
- A national campaign to inform students, parents, teachers and counsellors about the advantages of apprenticeships.

## Invest more in Research and Development

- **Increase R&D budget** to 2.5% GNP (brings two-fold return on investment), including increasing university staff and investment in 'basic' research to balance applied research.
- **Greater investment in Teagasc** to support farmers in the changing world environment, particularly by promoting research related to climate change and future options for sustainable agriculture.

## Foreign Affairs & Northern Ireland

We are proud of Ireland's diplomatic and cultural reputation on the world stage and are committed to using our international standing to promote peace, equality, and human rights internationally.

**We support the efforts by the Government to have Ireland take a non-permanent seat at the UN Security Council for the 2021-2022 term** and would engage actively with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade to leverage this platform to promote our foreign affairs agenda.

We will:

- Work to ensure the enactment of The **Occupied Territories Bill 2018** which would ban trade in goods and services between Ireland and illegally occupied territories.
- Realise Ireland's longstanding commitment to **0.7% GNI target for Overseas Development Aid (ODA)**.
- Work to achieve a **solution to the conflict in Syria** at all relevant committees including utilising our position on the UN Security Council if elected.
- We **oppose any expansion of PESCO** into areas which have the potential to interfere with our tradition of military non-alignment.
- Seek the **recognition of a state of Palestine** and promote efforts to achieve a two-state solution on the basis of the 1967 borders.
- We **oppose the routine use of Shannon Airport as a stop-over the US military** and would work with the airport authorities to develop a future business model for the facility that does not depend on the income that this generates.

## Brexit and Beyond

With the departure of Britain and Northern Ireland from the EU, there is a clear need to re-examine our relationship with Britain and the future of Northern Ireland. We are committed to fostering the closest possible relationship with the UK, support further cross-border collaboration, and prioritise our shared role as co-guarantors of the Good Friday Agreement, the St. Andrews Agreement and the 2020 Northern Ireland Agreement. We welcome the return of devolved power-sharing and look forward to the

delivery of the reforms that were promised as part of the agreement to reconvene Stormont.

**We believe that a United Ireland, achieved by consent, has the real potential to benefit the people of the entire island economically, politically and culturally.** We will therefore work towards achieving this in a spirit of mutual respect of all peoples who share this island and based on a foundation of Social Democratic principles.

## Human Rights and Corporate Responsibility

We will champion human rights and accountability across **business** – this will level the playing field for all businesses and ensure that communities who have been exploited can access justice. We need a global approach to address the adverse human rights impact of corporations. We will ensure Ireland is a global leader in this regard.

The Human Rights Council has developed an intergovernmental working group to develop legally binding rules to regulate the actions of transnational corporations. This is a historic opportunity to develop a UN Treaty on Business and Human Rights which will benefit communities and human rights defenders throughout the world.

We will ensure that Ireland supports the UN Treaty process and champions global accountability, ensuring access to remedy for victims of human rights violations. We believe Ireland should ensure that Irish companies are not complicit in human rights violations, either directly or indirectly through business relationships. As part of the implementation of the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights we will implement mandatory human rights due diligence, including reporting on human rights practices outside of Ireland.

## Defence Force Pay and Conditions

The Social Democrats understand and value the work of our Defence Forces both past and present. We take the role of our Defence Forces extremely seriously and **hold great pride for the work done by them both at home and abroad.**

Consequently, we cannot ignore the **current crisis level retention issues** that the Defence Forces are currently facing. Despite a number of high-profile recruitment campaigns, there has been an overall drop in the numbers serving in the Defence Forces. At the same time, we are hearing stories of families of Defence Forces members struggling to put food on the table and relying on social welfare payments to get by on a week to week basis. This is an **affront to the men and women who serve our country with distinction.**

The Social Democrats will treat our Defence Forces with much greater levels of respect in terms of appropriate pay, high quality working conditions and the work life balance that they deserve. We will actively engage with members of the defence forces, their families and veterans to ensure they are truly involved in the decision-making process to move forward together.

We will:

- Establish a **Defence Forces Pay Commission** to tackle the retention crisis and establish a level of pay that reflects the dedication that our soldiers and the dangers they are exposed to
- Develop a defined role for the Reserve Defence Force, enabling them to play an active and meaningful role. Thus allowing them to truly support the Permanent Defence Forces.
- Review Single Public Service Pension Scheme in relation to Defence Force members in an effort to improve retention.
- Properly implementing the **Working Time Directive** (WTD).
- Review the **accommodation standards.**
- Progressively increase recruitment to the Defence Forces over time.

## Arts at the Heart of Irish Life

Every person in Ireland has a right to participate in arts and culture in their everyday life.

Our policy recognises that **arts and culture underpin our overall wellbeing and creativity, our innovation, and our social cohesion.**

We recognise that the arts have a vital role in **stimulating innovation** through creative thinking, helping to drive growth and giving us an economic edge in a globalised world. We understand ourselves and others through culture - connecting our past, present and future. Artists help **shape our collective sense of self** through reflection, provocation and imagination. Freedom of artistic expression and challenging the status quo strengthens democracy and accountability.

In upholding the arm's length principle and transparency of all funding, we assure the independence and integrity of our cultural sector. For too long, the arts have been siloed and suffered chronic underinvestment - we have the lowest levels of arts funding as a percentage of GDP in Europe. Placing arts at the heart of education, public policy, and economic thinking, and strengthening the cross-departmental approach pioneered by Creative Ireland will positively transform these vital areas.

Capital investment in arts and culture must be carefully balanced with current investment in the work of arts practitioners, through the Arts Council and Culture Ireland.

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

### Here, we recognise the importance of the Arts as:

- **Core to who we are as a people**, fostering joy, human connection, and understanding.
- Key to our continued success in attracting foreign direct investment and nurturing the “smart” economy through incorporating arts and humanities, giving us **STEAM from STEM** (Science, Technology, Engineering, Maths).

- Key to the **success of the Irish film industry**, with further potential for the growth of film studios.
- A **vital part of our education system**, encouraging key 21st century skills of creativity, innovation, resilience and adaptability.
- A cornerstone of a stronger, **more equal economic recovery**.
- A **beacon of our creativity**, soft power and reputation internationally.
- A central component in our current and future success in the **tourism** sector.
- Enabling better human-centred design processes for our **built environment and infrastructure**.

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

We will drive success in the Arts by:

### Investment & Innovation

- Develop a roadmap for **progressive increases in total arts funding** to bring it in line with average EU spending over 5 years, with a focus on current expenditure to practicing artists through the Arts Council and Culture Ireland.
- Establishment of **special commercial rates** for creative/arts spaces as well as “rates holidays” for new projects.
- Enhanced supports for **indigenous film and publishing industries**
- Encourage **affordable live/work spaces** for artists and creative practitioners
- Ensure the Dept of Social Protection & Employment Affairs/Intreo that has a framework for **understanding irregular/freelance work**
- Renew section 481 for **film investment** post 2020
- Introduce mandatory requirements for **local authority arts spending**
- Encourage **funding of creative industries and arts activity** via Local Enterprise Offices and LEADER funds and Enterprise Ireland
- Establish formal links between Enterprise Ireland and non-profit cultural funders such as the Arts Council to **unify policy between non-**

**profit and for-profit creative industries**

- Introduce **multi-annual funding for essential arts organisations** to allow for long-term planning decisions
- Ensure **planning legislation** takes cultural and creative spaces into account for all public developments
- Invest in **physical infrastructure** needed in the Arts sector such as studios, galleries, theatres and work spaces. These spaces should be accessible and present throughout the country
- Support the establishment of **Night Mayors** in each of our major cities
- **Revitalise our night-time cultural economy** by legislating for later opening hours for venues and bars, as well as extending the hours of public transport systems
- Ensuring the **Irish media sector is protected and remains a robust industry** which challenges and informs the country
- Establish a review of the Defamation Act 2009 and legislate accordingly

**International**

- **Increase investment in Culture Ireland** to enhance our global reputation and create more opportunities for Irish artists and international collaboration; and restore independent oversight of its organisation
- Establish a **dedicated research and development fund for European cultural projects** so artists can fulfil the ambitions of the Global Ireland plan

**Education & Equality**

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

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

Over the lifetime of the next government, we aim to:

- Ensure **universal access to arts education at both primary and secondary levels**
- Refocus education investment policy from **STEM to STEAM**
- Expand the **Creative Schools programme** and ensure it continues beyond the life of the Creative Ireland initiative

- All **National Cultural Institutions** to **take action to promote equity**, diversity, inclusivity and accessibility
- Introduce **Drama and Theatre Studies** as a **Leaving Cert** subject
- Support the **rebalancing of arts curricula** to ensure a more equitable gender representation.

## Animal Welfare

The Social Democrats strongly advocate animal rights, and recognise animals as intelligent, sentient beings capable of complex thought and of experiencing pain and suffering. As a guiding principle, we believe that the State should strive to ensure that animals:

- Live lives free of pain and discomfort in so far as that is possible
- Are strongly protected from cruelty, neglect and abandonment
- Live a “life worth living,” even within the context of food production

The Social Democrats are eager to **maintain the relatively high standard of animal welfare that exists within the farming industry** in Ireland. Economic and commercial pressures have contributed to a global drift towards intensive systems of farming, so-called ‘factory farming’, which often subjects animals to extreme pain and suffering.

Our goal is to ensure that these practices do not become common in Ireland, and to stop any existing practices that cause such suffering.

The Social Democrats are making the following commitments in relation to animal welfare and rights:

- In the 32rd Dáil, we have voted in support of the **Animal Protection (In relation to Hares) Bill, 2016** which sought to ban the use of live hares in hare-coursing. We have also expressed our support for the Prohibition of Wild Animals in Circuses Bill. We will maintain support for both Bills.
- We will maintain our position **against fox-hunting and fur-farming**.
- We support a **phasing out of the state funding to the greyhound racing industry**.
- We favour the **banning of live exports** of animals to countries that have poor animal welfare protections, and the raising and enforcement of standards in relation to long journeys and animal transport vessels.
- We will **improve animal welfare standards** as they apply to farming practices in Ireland, including pigs, sheep, cattle and chickens.
- We are in favour of harsher penalties for animal cruelty.
- We would **ban all experiments on animals that are not related to genuine medical research**
- We would improve resources to boost enforcement of animal welfare laws
- We would improve resources for TNR (Trap, Neuter and Return) services.

- We would ensure that all zoos report animal welfare incidents, including deaths, on an annual basis.
- We would seek to progress **higher targets for the chipping of cats, dogs, and equine animals.**
- We will push for a **full review of our dog-breeding legislation** as recent research from NUI Galway has shown that Irish legislation is decades behind other jurisdictions. The current legislation controlling so-called “dangerous breeds” gives people a false perception that other breeds are not prone to aggression. We need a complete overhaul of this legislation so that is based on evidence and places far more responsibility on owners of all breeds of dogs.
- We are also seeking a commitment from each local authority to adopt a **dog-walking strategy** that will seek to balance the interests of dog-owners, dogs and other park users.

## Workers' Rights and Precarious Employment

The most successful countries in the world are social democratic. Their thriving economies and stable societies have not happened by accident. They are a product of aggressively **supporting sustainable indigenous business with an underpinning of dependable public services and strong workers' rights**.

Elsewhere, we have set out how we will support the growth and sustainability of Irish-owned and Irish-based business. Here we set out proposals supporting the rights of employees.

The Social Democrats believe that every worker deserves a decent wage, a sense of security and fair representation. In Ireland today, even trained professionals like childcare workers are often denied a living wage, and vast numbers of workers live in poverty. **Widespread precarious contracts – disproportionately affecting women and young people** – result in poor conditions, low productivity and few opportunities for development. While we welcome the substantial fall in unemployment, we still have **far too many workers under-employed or working in precarious jobs**.

The Social Democrats will ban exploitative work practices, support organised labour, collective bargaining, and the ICTU Charter, and pass strong, enforceable and practical laws to address all forms of precarious employment.

Finally, we recognise that **wages are only as valuable as the standard of living they provide**. Our measures on workers' rights will act in concert with our policies to reduce the cost of living – we will fight to ensure that workers have more disposable income after their necessities are secured.

Our commitments are:

## Living Wage

We will introduce a **statutory Living Wage** grounded in social consensus and the evidence base on the cost of living. This currently stands at €12.30 per hour.

## Tax Relief for Trade Unions

We will **reinstate the tax relief for trade union subscriptions** similar to that which applies to membership of professional bodies

## Public Pay

The Social Democrats commit to **negotiating a new public pay deal** to begin in 2021.

## Protect Pensions

Workers are entitled to know that they will have security in their old age, and that they will not have the pensions they have worked for stripped away unfairly or due to discrimination. We will legislate, as is the norm in other EU countries, to prevent employers who have the financial resources to meet the commitments in their pension schemes from simply walking away from those benefit promises.

## Precarious Work

Nobody should have to work without knowing their rights, so we would give everyone the right to know the terms and conditions of their employment, including their hours and their employment rights, from day one.

People should have the right to arrange their family and social lives around their work, so we would require employers to pay for any hours cancelled less than 72 hours in advance, and to pay an overtime premium for hours scheduled less than 72 hours in advance.

Traveling to work in Ireland can be time-consuming and costly, and as such we would require employers to pay any worker they ask to come in for at least three hours at their regular wage, whether that work is made available or not.

We believe anyone who hires a worker has an obligation to provide them with actual work. We would ban all zero-hours practices, including zero-hours “if and when” contracts, by guaranteeing all workers a minimum number of hours.

Access to benefits, mortgages and loans, and the protection of anti-discrimination law can be inhibited by insecure contracted hours. Such arrangements have been shown to have long-term negative impacts on earnings potential, physical health and mental health. We would introduce banded-hours contracts, based upon the employee’s average weekly hours over the past 13 months, using at least 5-hour bands as the norm.

**Temporary contracts should not be used to evade employment laws.** We would strictly limit the use of fixed-term and temporary contracts to fill permanent positions.

We would **close loopholes in the tax code which promote bogus self-employment.**

We will also introduce deterrents to the use of bogus self-employment practices, introducing punitive fines and a right to restorative back pay if a firm is found to be deceptively using self-employment to undermine working standards and/or the living wage.

## Modernise the Public Service

Our public servants make an immense contribution to Irish society – As part of a comprehensive modernisation of the way the sector operates we will improve accountability and transparency while also fully honouring the terms of existing pay agreements, delivering pay equality, and addressing staff shortages.

We will invest heavily in good quality public services to make them reliable and efficient for the public and desirable places to work.

## Fair Representation

The best protection against exploitation and abuse in the workplace is to have someone on your side:

- We would allow employees in workplaces which do not recognise trade unions to elect a workers’ rights representative, similar to the existing

system of health and safety representatives and with strong protections from penalisation.

- To bring Irish board rooms in line with other social democratic countries, we would introduce a right for workers in large firms to be represented on the board of directors and consulted on major decisions.
- Rights only truly exist where they can be asserted, so we will introduce strong sanctions for employers who penalise workers for asserting their workplace and union rights; or who promise favourable treatment to those who refrain from doing so.
- We will propose legislation to allow worker co-operatives first refusal in the purchase of profitable companies closing their business in Ireland.

## New Deal for Young Workers

As part of our new deal for young workers, we will **end the unjust discrimination against new entrants to the public service**, and also introduce measures to discourage two-tier pay scales in the private sector.

We will introduce a **proper oversight framework for internships** to ensure they are not being used to exploit young workers for no educational benefit, and continually review and update employment practices to account for loopholes and emerging forms of exploitation.

We **oppose the use of labour activation policies as a cheap labour source** for unscrupulous employers but support their use to help individuals with specific needs acquire valuable skills and transition into further education, and secure jobs. We will root out exploitation and unfairness – introducing regulated, evidence-based programmes to serve those with distinctive needs such as early school leavers, the long-term unemployed, or graduates.

Young workers can find it extremely difficult to obtain the protection of employment rights, so we will **reduce the maximum probationary period in the Unfair Dismissals Act to 6 months**.

## Gender Pay Gaps

We stand strong against all forms of inequality, whether through active discrimination or a failure to provide the supports necessary for everyone to succeed in society. Firms should be required to publish statistics on their

gender pay gaps; and we will introduce new, **stronger penalties on firms and individuals who have violated anti-discrimination laws.**

We recognise that it is not just enforcement that is required however, and we will also tackle the root causes of pay inequality by supporting affordable childcare and, as above, providing for an extensive expansion of a shared parental leave system.

We will investigate the introduction of a mandatory **gender quota of 30% on the executive boards of all large companies registered in Ireland.**

## Communications

### Public Broadcasting

A **free and independent press is essential to the foundation of our democracy**, and the Social Democrats have always been forthright and impactful in defending this institution.

The existence of media monopolies in Ireland, such as Independent News & Media, puts an integral part of our democracy in the hands of individuals who wish to control the dissemination of important information to the people of Ireland. It is vital that we end the over-concentration of media ownership by single individuals or companies, and diversify ownership of the ever-growing media sector. We will continue to fight for legislation in the Dáil to ensure this becomes a reality

We **fully support the future of Public Broadcasting in Ireland**, and we also recognise the urgent need for reform. Our public broadcasters are undergoing a funding crisis as well as facing new challenges in an ever-evolving industry governed by out-of-date legislation such as the Defamation Act (2009).

In order to address these challenges, the Social Democrats will:

- Form a **Commission on the Future of Media in Ireland**. The need for such a Commission is more pressing than ever, not least because of Reporters Without Borders (2019) report showing that Ireland has slipped six places into 15th place since 2016 in a worldwide press-freedom ranking index.
- We will **support public broadcasting across the country**, recognising the importance of local and rural media in giving communities across Ireland a voice.

### Digital Strategy

Modern life is increasingly digital orientated. It is important that our future government balances the need for supporting digital innovation and technological strategies for combating social issues, with protecting the dignity and rights of the individual. Too much of the digital market lies out of reach of regulation and presents a real and serious threat to democracy and people's individual safety.

The Social Democrats will ensure that **all members of our society have the opportunity to be educated on digital literacy and safe practices online**, while also protecting our citizens from exploitative and unregulated practices by large digital corporations.

Our approach is as follows:

- The overspend and privatisation of the National Broadband Plan is unacceptable and was strongly opposed by the Social Democrats in the Dáil. We will **explore legal action to retain public ownership of our network**, ensure that quality internet provision is available throughout rural Ireland, and prevent any further gross mismanagement of funds .
- Supporting **national digital literacy programmes targeting children, marginalised groups and older people**. It is vital that large segments of our populations are not left behind in a digital society.
- We will form an Election Commission which will include a review of online campaigning and political advertising practices, and legislate accordingly.
- Improve training and capacity for the Gardaí to more effectively tackle online crime.
- We will legislate to ensure workers have the right to log-off after hours. Our increased digital availability should not come at the cost of exploitative work practices.
- **Legislate to address online harassment** such as revenge porn and hate speech.
- Work alongside international partners and the EU to **tackle the issue of tech monopolies**.
- Protect the **individual's right to privacy** by supporting the Data Protection Commission in greater GDPR enforcement, and ensuring that all government bodies strictly adhere to rules on data management and retention. Government initiatives found to ignore these regulations, such as the Public Services Card, will be phased out.
- Ensure the enforcement of upcoming EU legislation to prevent Geo-Blocking, which will promote a more equal access to the internet across EU countries.
- Recognise that the reliance on advertising revenue for online businesses has led to the exploitation of individuals data on a large scale. We would promote research and development to find legitimate alternatives to this revenue stream.

## Business Policy

### Growing a Confident, Innovative, and Resilient Economy

Ireland's economy is based primarily on the value of our people. It is driven forward by our creative, ambitious entrepreneurs, made competitive by our smart, capable workers and depends on talented, energetic young graduates.

Successive governments have consistently failed to live up to the ambition, passion and confidence of our entrepreneurs and our workforce. For too long our industrial policy has been a defensive posture, focused on "holding what we have" rather than looking at how we can grow our economy with confidence over the next 10 or 20 years.

We know that it is difficult to predict exactly what the global economy will look like in 20 years' time.

However, it is reasonable to assume there will continue to be a fast pace of change, with resulting challenges and opportunities for our relatively small, relatively open economy. We believe that our medium term strategy should be to **invest heavily in the development of a highly skilled and flexible workforce**, and to increase supports for new and existing companies to allow them to grow from Ireland, rather than needing to leave Ireland to grow.

Before discussing specific business and enterprise centred policy proposals, it is worth considering how our broader policies for a Social Democratic Ireland would create a society that can foster indigenous growth and Foreign Direct Investment into the future.

- We are committed to **improving equality and access in education**. This will harness the full potential of the Irish Workforce by helping to bring the best out of our people.
- We are **committed to reducing the cost of living** through policies in key areas such as housing, health and energy. This will help to ensure that Ireland remains attractive as a place to come to work (a factor that has been key in Ireland's recent hi-tech industry boom) and as a place to employ people.
- We are **committed to tackling corruption in Ireland** through the establishment of an independent anti-corruption agency. This will help our best businesses thrive through honest competition based on merit.

- We are **committed to tackling Ireland's infrastructure deficit**. The building of new transport networks, upgrading educational institutes, providing high speed broadband to

the whole country and putting in place the local services required to build thriving communities are all essential to promoting a positive business climate in Ireland.

The above policies are part of an observed virtuous cycle in socially democratic economies – by investing to provide the environment where businesses can succeed, we in turn get economic growth. This growth funds social investment back into a highly educated workforce, transport and broadband infrastructure, affordable housing and supports for new and growing companies. For this reason, social democratic countries are the best places to start and grow businesses.

At present in Ireland, we have the opposite – a downward spiral of underinvestment in both education and entrepreneurship. Expensive childcare, rents and insurance is putting pressure on wages. Underinvestment in broadband and connectivity is hurting our international competitiveness. If this continues it is likely that our economy will diminish over time; we will be less able to fund investment in these areas; and we will find we are less able to maintain a high value economy.

So what does a confident, ambitious economic policy for a social democratic Ireland look like for inward investment, growing businesses and a high value workforce?

## Foreign Direct Investment

- In the near term, we are **committed to maintaining the 12.5% corporate tax rate** which is an important factor in our competitiveness as an FDI location – however, we would regularise our treatment of all companies to **ensure that 12.5% is collected**;
- For the medium term, we will seek to significantly improve capital investment, particularly in Broadband and Transport, to help bridge Ireland's infrastructure deficit – which is acting

as a brake on growth in all areas of the country. We would tactically restructure our public debt, to free up fiscal space and take advantage of historically low borrowing costs;

- For the long term, **we want to ensure that the Irish economy competes for FDI at the higher end of the value chain**, where investment will be predicated less on our tax system than on the agility and innovation of our workforce. Competing solely on price

instead of value is not sustainable for most businesses, and nor is it right for our economy

## Equipping the Irish workforce

- Introducing **skills-based courses to include innovation, entrepreneurship, communications and critical thinking**, together with required professional development for teachers;
- Investing in **access programmes**, building on existing successes, to ensure broad sociodemographic representation across the third level system;
- Recognising that an **apprenticeship ought to be acknowledged as a valuable third level education** and a better competency based approach

for some trainee professionals, we propose a new innovative National Apprenticeships programme in line with the European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeships to help meet workforce needs and skill shortages. We want to see a particular focus on new apprenticeships in areas such as coding, IT security and AI;

- **Investment in lifelong education** so that employees can up-skill and re-skill to enrich the workforce and drive their own careers.

## Enterprise

- Provide an additional €100m for Enterprise Ireland for **start-up support funding** to bring support levels in line with comparable European states, ensuring that our start-ups are supported to grow internationally from an Irish base;
- Recognising the key role that **cooperatives** have played in developing Irish industry particularly our major success stories like Kerry and Glanbia and ensuring that new and growing companies based on this model have equal access to state supports;

- Adjust the tax-treatment of share options for start-up employees so that they can be rewarded without penalty for taking the risk of joining a new venture.
- Promote **digital apprenticeship programmes** through initiatives like the UK's "Tech Partners" scheme.
- Investigate the introduction of an **'apprenticeship levy'** to encourage major companies to develop their own apprenticeship programmes.

## SMEs and the Self Employed

- To respond to an immediate issue, we would maintain a **special Brexit fund**

to Enterprise Ireland to help insulate indigenous industries traditionally

heavily dependent on trade with the UK (particularly agriculture, food and beverage, fisheries and energy) towards new European markets, and non-UK suppliers;

- We are committed to developing the **same social protections** as PAYE workers to those who chose to opt-in and pay an appropriate rate social insurance contributions;
- As a principle, we want interactions with the state to progress at the normal speed of doing business –we will introduce opt-in mechanisms to spread tax payments throughout the

year which will bring greater cash-flow stability.

- We will insist on **fair and transparent public procurement processes** and seek to give stronger weighting in procurement competitions to bids from those with strong labour and environmental protection offerings.
- We will seek to improve funding under the **Wage Subsidy Scheme** for people with disabilities and link it with changes in the National Minimum Wage.

## Social Protection

### Making Poverty a Priority Again

Our economy may be getting stronger, yet many are left behind:

- One parent families are five times more likely to be in consistent poverty than a two parent family.
- A fifth of adults with a disability are persistently deprived.
- One in nine children live in a poor household and go without the basics.

As an over-riding mission of our party, the Social Democrats are determined to make poverty a priority once again. We would seek to **eradicate child poverty by the end of the next Dáil term**, ensure all Budgets would be properly poverty-proofed and update the official measure of poverty to include significant costs such as housing and we would base much more of policy in this area on **the Minimum Essential Living Standards** measure.

### Focus on Public Services

We are cognisant that tackling poverty is not just about more social welfare income or simply about jobs. In fact, focusing on merely income is a far too simplistic approach and has failed every previous government. The simple fact is there is no gain for a person in getting an extra €5 in a welfare payment 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 absolute priority of the next Government:

- We have focussed on health-care, and in particular, preventative care.
- We have focussed on children's services and childcare.
- We have focussed on bringing down the cost of housing and energy bills.
- We have focussed on education, especially the goal of making primary education truly free.

## Focus on Decent Jobs

Elsewhere in this Manifesto, we have set out the **critical need to improve job security for workers**. As we approach full employment, there has never been a better opportunity to do this. Progressing to a Living Wage and improving job protection and conditions for part-time and casual workers will significantly impact on the numbers experiencing poverty.

## Eliminate Poverty Traps

- We would **raise the medical card income disregard** for people with disabilities who are at work to ensure that this is not a barrier to taking and staying in employment.
- We would provide **far better information to jobseekers** – particularly around part-time and casual work options and benefit retention, and by streamlining the application system so that casual workers can return to payment quickly when their casual work is exhausted;
- We would explore how better access to **Working Family Payment** for the self-employed could be provided;
- We would restore genuine rehabilitative work option while retaining a benefit for long-term recipients of a disability payment;
- We would give greater discretion to decision makers and encourage far greater feedback from frontline services when genuine anomalies in the social protection system are discovered.
- We would **fully restore tapering arrangement for Lone Parents**.

## Activation

- We would **improve jobseeker/case officer ratios** and end private sector involvement in job activation programmes.
- We would link case interventions with needs of the workforce and interests of the jobseeker.
- We would **improve further education, training and apprenticeship options**, and offer better basic literacy and job-hunting skills programmes.
- We would provide more one-to-one sessions.
- We would **guarantee subsidised childcare for lone parents**.

## Social Welfare Rates

- We would fund an increase in all weekly welfare payments to match the projected rate of inflation in 2020, with additional support for child

- dependents under 12 and those living in Direct Provision.
- We believe that as a starting principle **social welfare rates should be set against a measure of adequacy (such as the Minimum Essential Living Standard measure)**, informed by poverty rates applying to specific cohorts of the population, and index-linked.
  - We would take the following measures:
    - Improve Living Alone Allowance above the CPI rate;
    - Improve the rate for jobseekers who are under 26 above the CPI rate until the discrimination faced by young people in welfare code is eradicated and as part of a suite of measures to improve training, education and job opportunities for this cohort.
    - Introduce a **Cost of Disability Payment**;
    - Examine extending the Home Carers' Scheme to pensioners born before 1 September 1946.
    - Scrap the habitual residency condition for Carers payments.
    - Improve Back to School Allowance

## Pension Age

The Social Democrats will oppose the planned increase in state pension age to 67 in 2021. The Government's plan to increase the pension age would mean a scaling back of people's benefit entitlements and an overall reduction in pension value of up to 20%. Moreover, increasing the pension age would have a disproportionately negative impact on low-income pensioners who depend entirely on the state pension as their sole income.

We must ensure that the state pension is affordable and secure so that people can have certainty about what they will receive as they plan for their older age. The Social Democrats believe the best long-term solution can be reached by seeking an all-party agreement on the future of the Contributory State Pension, to once and for all create real certainty around pensions.

Our priorities are:

- i. Ending the auction politics on pensions by linking the State Pension to either 35% of the average wage, or to increases in public service pensions, in order to promote equality and solidarity.
- ii. The need to align the retirement age with the pension age and adjust employment contracts accordingly.
- iii. Consideration of funding proposals to bring the pension age back to 65.

- iv. The introduction of a system whereby individuals should be given the flexibility to receive the State Pension earlier or later than 65. The actual pension they receive would be reduced or increased on a cost neutral basis.

## **Better Administration**

We would hire more medical officers so that the time it takes to decide on applications and appeals can be reduced. Reducing appeal times saves the state money;

We would explore the possibility of a unitary means-test across all Government schemes to cut down on form-filling and administration costs.

## Better Banking

Banking is fundamental to our everyday lives and to our economy. If people or businesses don't have access to basic and affordable banking services, then they face serious disadvantages in the modern world. This is becoming all the more important in the gradual move to a cashless society.

The Social Democrats have a number of concerns about how banking in Ireland continues to operate. The Tracker Mortgage scandal highlighted once more how unscrupulous banking activity can be in Ireland and how weak the Central Bank can be in some of its regulatory oversight – especially when it comes to protecting consumers.

Irish households continue to face the **highest mortgage rates in Europe** while savers get the lowest returns. There is a clear lack of competition with less than 1% of Irish customers switching their current account each year.

**Reform of the Credit Unions** is happening at a snail's pace with only very limited progress towards establishing this sector as a strong competitive force vis-a-vis the main banks.

There is no official count of the number of people in Ireland who do not have a bank account but estimates put the figure at between 6% and 24%. This means they face severe disadvantages and generally pay higher for their utility and other bills. They are financially excluded. 350,000 Irish people used a licenced moneylender in Ireland in 2017.

The approach of the Social Democrats on banking is dominated by four principal concerns:

1. Everyone should have **access to basic and affordable banking services** in their locality. This includes debit cards, on-line banking and credit for personal loans and business ventures
2. We need much **greater competition in banking**, and it is critical we develop a strong not-for-profit banking sector to achieve this
3. We need much stronger, **consumer-focused regulation and oversight** of banking
4. We should keep **some State control of banking** in Ireland

## Sale of AIB

The Social Democrats believe there are strategic and competitive advantages in the state retaining a strong stake in Allied Irish Bank and we are not in favour of further share sales.

## Not-for-Profit Banking

The Social Democrats would promote the extensive roll-out of a strong not-for-profit banking sector in Ireland. This would support financial inclusion and would also drive much greater competition in the sector. We believe this can be based on a reformed Credit Union movement.

We strongly endorse the recommendations of the Oireachtas Finance Committee of November 2017 in relation to the development of the Credit Union movement. We recognise recent improvements in this area but believe Ireland can go much further

In particular, we favour:

- Much more extensive availability of full current accounts for personal and small business banking, including debit cards that can be used on the full national and international ATM network;
- Much more extensive mortgage lending, with expertise and financial aggregation of risk provided at a county and/or regional basis;
- Provision of online banking and associated services including electronic payments;
- Support for on-going development of lending expertise, in particular with regard to mortgages and business lending;
- Support for all corporate governance changes required to ensure compliant oversight of new financial activity;
- Increased savings limit beyond €100k for credit union customers;
- Wider investment options for credit union deposits than current options (limited mainly to government bonds, bank bonds and cash deposits);

## Reforming the Central Bank

We will overhaul the approach of the Central Bank in relation to the protection of consumers. For too long consumers have played second fiddle to other interests. We will instil a **zealous consumer-first approach in the Central Bank** by setting down new standards and accountability arrangements for the Central Bank through legislation.

The Bank will be directly accountable to a new Consumer Rights Committee in the Dáil which it will attend at least monthly. The Bank will also be subject to written Dáil Questions for the first time. The authority and independence of the Central Bank will be maintained and respected but that is no excuse for not being accountable for its actions and inactions.

## Financial Inclusion

The Social Democrats are concerned about the continuing **strong presence of moneylenders in Irish credit markets**. Over 300,000 Irish people use moneylenders each year, with repeat lending a prominent feature of the Irish experience with moneylenders.

Charges are very high by international standards with a typical APR of over 100% and in some cases interest rates approaching 300%. According to research by UCC for the Social Finance Foundation, Ireland is now in a minority of countries in Europe with “no formalised interest rate restriction on high-cost credit, with this coverage gap now addressed in almost all other European countries”. This is completely unacceptable and means that the poorest in Ireland are paying the most for goods and services. The Social Democrats want a fundamental policy shift to offer far greater protections to low-income households.

The Social Democrats will invest in a **new national Financial Inclusion strategy**. We will place it prominently in a new National Strategy on Poverty (which would update the recently published and very limited Roadmap for Social Inclusion).

This comprehensive strategy will include a new national target of ensuring everyone in the State has at least a basic bank account, that financial literacy forms a stronger part of the junior cycle curriculum and is available for older generations in free courses run through MABS, and that all banks must have a

free banking option without conditions as to minimum amounts held in an account or a limit on the duration of free banking. We will cap money-lending charges and ensure the roll-out of the Micro-Credit Scheme throughout the country.

In conjunction with a general shift to recognising the needs of vulnerable and disadvantaged customers across all aspects of consumer activity, we will insist on much greater protections for vulnerable customers in banking and financial services. Regulators in the UK have shown a very significant awareness of this problem in recent years and we will expect Irish authorities to follow suit.

## An Ghaeilge

Tá na Daonlathaigh Shóisialta thar a bheith sásta tacaíocht a thabhart do fhorbairt na Gaeilge, mar theanga beo agus mar acmhainn don gcultúir, lámh le láimh leis na Gaeltachtaí. Tá sé ar intinn againn fuinneamh nua a instealladh sa Ghaeilge, agus feabhsú a dhéanamh d’oideachas na Gaeilge, i scoileanna faoi mheán an Bhéarla.

Ba cheart go mbeidh iarracht Fad-Rialtais, idir na Ranna éagsúla, ar son na Gaeilge, agus an Ghaeltacht. Ní hea cheist faoi meabhras-“silo” le dul chun cinn ar na fadhbanna a ghabhann le hAire amháin agus Roinn amháin, ina gcoinne na coimhlínthe dá chéile.

Táimís go hiomlán réidh le cúnamh a thabhart chuig na hábhair luaite anseo:

- Ardú an méid airgeadais a fhaigheann an Ghaeilge agus Na Gaeltachtaí, le hardú airgeadais chun go mbeidh an Stráitéis Fiche Bliain i bhfeidhm, ina measc.
- Cinntiú go bhfuil spreagadh eacnamaíochta éifeachtúil sna Réigiúin Gaeltachta.
- Oibriú lena bpobail áitiúla, le bheith cinnte go mbeidh a ngutha chloiste, maidir le hacmhainní, airgeadas, srl.
- Tacú le Líonraí Gaeilge, cinn nua agus na chinn a bhfuil cheana féin bunaithe, le scapadh an Ghaeilge mar theanga beo, taobh amuigh de na Gaeltachtaí thradisiúnta.
- Ní mór dúinn an Bille Um Teangaí Oifigiúil 2019 a chur i bhfeidhm.
- Ardú in uimhreacha ‘s cion dóibh siúd ina bhfuil fostaithe san Earnáil Phoiblí le Ghaeilge, chun deimhniú go mbeidh meas taispeánta chuig na cheartaí de na Ghaeilgeoirí, agus iad ag deileáil le choirpeacha phoiblí, trí mheán na Gaeilge.
- Forbairt Polasaí Ghaeilge san chóras Oideachas ó Naíonraí go Tríú Leibhéal.
- Tacaíocht a thabhairt do Cleachtóirí na luathbhlianta, le bheith fostaithe in áiteanna inár úsáid an Ghaeilge, seachas Béarla.
- Dul chun cinn le tacaíocht a thabhairt chuig forbairt Gaeilscoileanna, Gaelcholáisti & Naíonraí nua a thógáil, agus le háiseanna éagsúla eile inár spreagtar úsáid na Gaeilge, bunaithe ar úsáid áitiúil.
- Feabhas a cur ar na tacaíochtaí a bhfuil ar fáil do mhúinteoirí agus bainisteoirí i scoileanna Lán-Bhéarla, le bheith cinnte go bhfuil seachadadh iomlán den CLIL, le cúnamh sna stíl inár múintear ábhair eile, trí Ghaeilge.
- Ardú an méid cúnamh a fhaigheann TG4 agus Raidió na Gaeltachta.
- Chumasú níos mó den óige filleadh ar Scoileanna Samhradh na Ghaeilge, trí leathnú cúrsa scoláireachta.
- Tacaíocht le scéimeanna, ina bhfuil féidireachtaí ar fáil do dhaoine fásta

an Ghaeilge a fhoghlaim, i ranganna Gaeilge.

- Tacaíocht ar feadh Ionaid i gCultúir Nua, agus Caiféanna Gaeilge.

## Irish Language

The Social Democrats are committed to the development of our national language as a living language and cultural asset, along with support for Gaeltachtaí. We wish to see supports for new and existing Gaelscoileanna and Gaelcholaistí, as well as enhancing Irish language education in English medium schools.

Our emphasis is on a whole-government, cross-departmental approach to Gaeilge and the Gaeltacht. It is not a question of a silo mentality with one Minister and Department against others.

We are committed to:

- **an overall increase in funding for Irish and the Gaeltacht**, including funding the full implementation of the 20 Year Strategy on Irish.
- ensuring effective **economic stimulus programmes** for Gaeltacht areas
- working with local communities in Gaeltacht areas to ensure their voices are heard in terms of resources, financial and otherwise
- supporting new and existing Líonraí Gaeilge to spread Irish as a living language outside the traditional Gaeltachtaí
- fully implementing the Official Languages Bill 2019
- seeking the delivery of an **increased number and proportion of public sector employees with Irish** to ensure the rights of Irish language speakers to deal with public bodies through Irish
- developing a policy for Irish in the education system from pre-school to 3<sup>rd</sup> Level
- supporting training for early years practitioners to work in Irish language settings
- ensuring support for the development of new Gaelscoileanna, Gaelcholáistí, naíonraí and other Irish language educational centres based on local demand
- improving supports to teachers and leaders in English medium schools to ensure the full delivery of the new Primary Language Curriculum, including training support for the delivery of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), to support the teaching of other subjects through Irish
- increasing supports to TG4 and Raidió na Gaeltachta
- enabling more young people to attend Irish language summer schools by expanding scholarship programmes
- supporting the rollout of Irish language classes for adults
- supporting new cultural centres and Irish language café.

## LGBTI+ Rights Policy

Ireland has undergone a historic and unique expansion of civil and social liberties. The marriage equality referendum and gender recognition acts of 2015 were the result of a long and worn road of progress. As a new party our history is not only rooted in these achievements but empowered by it. But there are still rights and struggles to be won.

### Legislative Reform

- We will introduce **effective hate crime legislation**, in consultation with the LGBTI+ community, community groups, the Gardaí, and relevant stakeholders. We will continue the process of updating hate speech legislation will ensure that new laws are fit for purpose and uses up-to-date terminology.
- We will **reform parental rights** to ensure LGBTI+ parents are equally treated under the system, in recognition of the efforts many campaigners such as the Equality for Children group have made.
- We will implement the recommendations of the Gender Recognition Act review report, to provide **legal gender recognition to non-binary people and trans people under 18**.
- We commit to using **gender neutral pronouns** whenever possible in future legislation and recognise Them/They pronouns.

### Health

There is a unique intersection between the LGBTI+ community and healthcare reform. The fundamental breakdown that exists at the moment is a lack of patient driven care. Often LGBTI+ members are more deeply aware of their own needs and not listened to. We want to change this. In particular the Social Democrats see a breakdown in decent trans healthcare as a major concern.

We would:

- Develop **national trans health services** to provide effective and timely care. and introduce an informed consent model of trans healthcare.
- Assess the professional development needs of local care teams to ensure access to hormone prescriptions from GPs.
- End the 1 year MSM blood ban and bring it up to international standards.

- Expand **access to free contraception and affordable PrEP.**
- Expand the availability of the HPV vaccine
- Review healthcare provision to intersex people and ensure best practice is rolled out nationwide.
- Create a LGBTI+ **mental health strategy** with community addiction services to match.
- Ensure LGBTI+ Awareness training is available to all Healthcare professionals to equip them to deliver LGBTI+ inclusive care.
- Develop the strategies and services to **end new HIV transmissions by 2030**, as outlined in the Fast-Track Cities model, including developing and implementing a new National Sexual Health Strategy, and including measures to **end HIV-related stigma and discrimination.**

## Other Measures

- Fully implement the existing National LGBTI+ Government Strategies and create a **longer-term LGBTI+ inclusion strategy** on top of the current 2 year cycle strategies
- Ensure the full implementation of the LGBTI+ Youth Strategy 2018-2020.
- Introduce LGBTI+ inclusive relationships and sexuality education and history in schools.
- Review and update of the National Action Plan on Bullying (2013), including providing specific prevention initiatives for LGBTI+ identity-based bullying.
- **Ban conversion therapy.**
- Commit to **protections and rights for intersex people.**
- **Invest in LGBTI+ resource centres**, with a particular focus on ensuring access to youth work services and provision of alcohol-free spaces, and providing facilities for older LGBTI+ people.
- Create a LGBTI+ quality standard for **older people's services** to ensure mainstream facilities are providing LGBTI+ inclusive care
- Reaffirm **asylum status of LGBTI+** people coming from nations where they face oppression and reform application in a way that recognises human dignity.
- Establish the scale **of LGBTI+ youth homelessness** as part of a wider youth homelessness strategy, and examine the need for gender neutral homeless services and appropriate responses to the issues faced.
- Ensure Ireland's International Protection process and direct provision system are supportive and sensitive to the experiences and needs of LGBTI+ people.
- Investigate the possibility of including an LGBTI+ questions on census to ensure evidence based allocation of services.

## Sports and Recreation

Approximately 1.6m Irish adults regularly participate in sport and exercise. Sport is fundamentally embedded in our culture. However, **participation levels have declined** in recent years with a more pronounced downward trend in team sports.

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

We have a **particular desire to improve participation levels among girls, women, older people and people with disabilities**.

In pursuit of these goals we commit to the following:

- To use **participation levels as the main driver of funding and strategy in sports policy**. This means funding will be geared towards participation more than any other criteria.
- To have a **sports capital fund allocation every year** rather than the current ad-hoc arrangement. This would provide some stability to grass-roots organisation who wish to plan ahead in the development of their facilities. Allocations under the fund would be made by an independent Commission and the fund would be distributed according to open, fair and objective criteria. Ministers would have no role whatsoever in the decision-making process.
- We should be seeking through the Sports Capital Grants Programme to provide an open access MUGA pitch in every community (multi use games area) where that is feasible. These have worked very well in several communities where an appropriate location was identified and where strong community support was forthcoming.
- **Extra funding for initiatives aimed at cohorts with high drop-out rates or low participation rates** including girls, women, older people and people with disabilities.
- Introduce a new requirement that all **planning authorities must publish a sport and recreation facilities strategy** as part of their development plan process. Such a strategy would include an appraisal of pitch and recreational shortfalls in each local authority area.
- Planning for pitches and facilities would be incorporated into each major planning application, Local Area

Plan and all other development projects.

- Address the **under-utilisation of some existing facilities such as schools or**

community centres or buildings and set in place new rules for their use by local communities.

## Community, Charity and Voluntary Sector

The charity, community and voluntary sector provide invaluable services in areas such as health, education, arts, sports, disability and housing all across Ireland, in addition to international development. The IEC recently estimated the total value of Ireland's charity as over €24.5bn per annum. The Social Democrats recognise the vital work of these groups and will;

- **Ensure ring-fenced funding** is provided for the policies put forward by the Department for Rural and Community Development (DRCD) incl. Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities: A five-year strategy to support the community and voluntary sector in Ireland 2019-2024 ( August 2019); the National Volunteering Strategy (in development), and the National Social Enterprise Policy for Ireland (July 2019).
- Expand dormant accounts funding.
- Include funding for the DRCDs social enterprise initiative in the Budget.
- Support the retention of a senior cabinet Minister for the Community and Voluntary Sector and for the DRCD itself.
- Support a reformation of the electoral acts to exclude civil society groups from its provisions outside of the context of general elections and referendums.
- **Develop and implement a comprehensive skills-development strategy** funded through the National Training Fund.
- Introduction of **sustainable funding models** which factor in the full cost of service delivery
- **3 year multi-annual funding** as the default approach for community and voluntary organisations.
- Implement a process to determine essential services under HSE Section 39 and Tusla Section 56, followed by a commitment to fund these organisations adequately and ensure sustainable pay and working conditions for staff.
- **Incrementally increase the VAT compensation scheme** for charities in line with Danish rebate levels.
- **Bring down the cost of insurance**
- Develop and implement a **robust, meaningful and equal partnership between public sector bodies and civil society organisations**, particularly those who represent the needs and interests of those who are marginalised and excluded from such decision-making.
- Support the findings of the Independent Review Group on the role of voluntary organisations in public-funded health and personal social services, and seek an extension of its findings to other areas of government policy such as community and rural affairs, education and children.

- Establish a **working group on positive commission and procurement** to ensure we are seeking the highest

quality of services - rather than simply the cheapest.

## Make 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.

**Ireland's insurance costs are very high by international standards.** While the cost of premiums has risen despite falls in average costs of claims over the last ten years, steps still need to be taken to reduce fraudulent or exaggerated claims. We need a dedicated Garda Insurance Fraud unit to bring prosecutions against those who exaggerate or make outright false claims. People who are dishonest should expect to face the consequences.

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 is sufficiently consumer-focussed in its approach. 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% in the last decade despite a 2.5% 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 payouts in other countries, and, with better regulation, reduce premiums.

## Public Liability Insurance

The government's failure to identify and address the threat caused by insurance companies exiting the (already uncompetitive) public liability insurance sector has had negative impacts on our communities, public health and expressions of national culture.

As a result, play centres are closing down, expenses for sports clubs are escalating, adventure tourism and activity-based enterprises are feeling the pinch, and costs for all businesses with a significant public footfall are being driven up. Everyone, except vested interests, loses under the current system.

- The Social Democrats would take immediate action by **expanding the remit of the state owned Irish Public Bodies insurance scheme to ensure that public festivals, community groups and volunteer led sports teams can get cover immediately,** while steps are taken to fully reform the post Brexit industry to ensure that all forms of insurance are fair and competitive.
- We believe that in the longer term the **State can do more to promote the concept of co-operative or group insurance.** Strong models already exist in areas such as the social housing sector, and far more businesses, sport, or community groups could enjoy

stable and affordable insurance cover if this was promoted.

- We would seriously **investigate the possibility of introducing a New Zealand style public liability insurance scheme** in an Irish context.

### 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.

### Health Insurance

According to the Health Insurance Authority consumer survey of 2017, 51% of customers pay over €1,500 for their health insurance. 71% pay over €1,000. 73% of people with health insurance have never switched provider, while nearly two thirds who have switched have only switched once.

- The Social Democrats are fully committed to the cross-party **Sláintecare** reforms of the health service to create a publicly funded single payer healthcare system, ultimately eradicating the need for private health insurance.

### Childcare Insurance

The Social Democrats are dedicate to reducing the cost burden on families through reductions in motor, home and health insurance.

- In addition to our other policies aimed at ensuring that children have the best opportunities in life, we will act to reduce the heavy burden of childcare costs on families by ensuring that **cost of premiums experienced by crèches and Montessori schools are reduced**, so that the benefits can be passed on to families in reduced costs of childcare.

## Agriculture & Rural Development

Agriculture is critical to our economy and is the lifeblood of rural communities across the country. Without sustainable and robust support from the state, the agricultural sector will suffer greatly, taking with it many rural communities and the heart of Irish society.

We must ensure that agriculture and agricultural policy considers three main priorities at all times:

- Farmers, big and small, and their local communities.
- Consumers of agricultural products, both at home and abroad.
- Our ecosystem, which is coming under increased threat from the climate crisis.

The following are our policy priorities to better support agriculture and rural development in our country:

- Acknowledge the **importance of agriculture to the economy and rural communities**, and so ensure that producers themselves receive a fair price for their produce.
- We support a **fair and simpler CAP** which ensures more farm payments targeted towards low-income farmers.
- **Protect biodiversity and support a move away from monoculture and intensive farming.** Practical examples of these policies include wildflower borders on crop fields.
- **Tackle the cartel-like practices in the beef processing sector.**
- Allow small and local producers to compete with larger national/international retailers by **removing below-cost sales.**
- Further **develop horticulture and organic farming**, which has less of a reliance of imports.
- Increase funding to farmers in **Areas of Natural Constraint and Special Areas of Conservation.**
- Launch initiatives to **reduce isolation, address mental health issues**, and foster selfcare and wellness in the farming community, especially amongst older and young farmers.
- Provide funds to **allow for hiring costs of labour** in order to cover parental leave, sickness, injury and bereavement.
- Promote **education and training initiatives to reduce farm accidents and deaths**, and to improve general health and safety.
- Invest in **agriculture education courses at all levels.** Support third level institutions in conducting innovative research which could improve farming methods and increase yields sustainably.

- **Support apiculture** and explore the possibility of allowing beekeepers to use land in bogs. Introduce a ban on the use of neonicotinoids
- Support the **growth and diversification of the forestry industry** especially in terms of energy production and biomass production. As per our biodiversity policy, we support the development of native woodlands.
- Reduce costs and emissions by using **shared machinery through co-ops and sustainable communal energy production** such as wind, solar and blue energy.
- Formalise **walking routes** through commonages in the uplands of Ireland with a **full and transparent consultation process**.
- Complete and **expand greenway programmes** with a comprehensive and open consultation process.

## Fisheries

- Work to ensure **more sustainable fishing practices**. Introduce marine protected areas (MPAs) to cover certain nurseries for species which are still below maximum sustainable yield. There will be a total ban on fishing within MPAs.
- Work towards an **EU-wide ban on super-trawlers** and ensure current controls are strictly observed and adequately resourced.

## The Urgent Biodiversity Challenge

Biodiversity loss is one of the biggest challenges that Ireland faces. This is not a crisis that has just come upon us, but has been years in the making. For far too long, we have relied on the false narrative that Ireland as a green country, is also an environmentally friendly one.

In 2019, The Intergovernmental Panel on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Service (IPBES) published its global assessment on the state of the world's biodiversity and ecosystem services. The report shows that **nature is declining globally at rates unprecedented in human history**. Ireland is not immune from that grave assessment. **One in every five of the species assessed in Ireland is threatened with extinction** and the conservation status of one third of our protected habitats dis-improved between 2007 and 2013.

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

The Dail declaration in 2019 of a Climate and Biodiversity Crisis was very welcome. It must now be followed by action. There must also be the acknowledgement that the **climate crisis and biodiversity loss are intrinsically linked** and that both must be addressed in tandem. And since the Dáil declaration, while there has been much Governmental talk about climate change, there has been little focus on the equally important issue of biodiversity. In fact, **biodiversity improvements and nature-based solutions need to be a key tool to tackle climate change**.

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

## Our Natural habitat

**Ireland is the most deforested country in Europe**, and one of the most deforested in the world. While reforestation is ongoing, most is with non-native sitka spruce plantations used for commercial forestry. These forests are poor habitats for wildlife (and less effective carbon sinks), and our **focus should be on preserving and expanding our natural biome of primarily deciduous forest**.

In 2018, according to the Department of Agriculture, only 28% of our forest was broad-leaved, and only 27% of new planting was broad-leaved in that year. With modern knowledge of ecology, this is simply unacceptable.

We propose that **a percentage of agricultural land be gradually 'rewilded' back to natural forest**. Partly owing to our high degree of deforestation, Ireland has a huge amount of pastoral land and produces twice as much food as we need for our population.

While it is important to remain food secure and a strong food exporter, there is a significant minority of farms which have low productivity and are not profitable, and there is a large amount of farmland lying idle.

We propose a scheme in which the **State would work closely with farmers and offer to buy the farmland of some of these unprofitable farms at attractive rates, with the aim of planting native forest**.

Ultimately, the goal would be to connect these areas together and **vastly increase the size of our National Parks**. This would be a long-term and ambitious project, but it would provide vital habitat for our native species, and for potential reintroductions of extirpated species.

## Our Fauna

We are undergoing unprecedented insect loss, nationally and globally, with habitat loss and pesticide use suspected as the main culprits. Recent research from elsewhere in Europe suggests a staggering **75% decline in insect numbers in the past 26 years, with an annual decline of 2.5%**. Recent research in Ireland has shown that our butterfly and bumblebee populations are declining

at rates greater than the global averages. This immense loss **threatens the total collapse of the food chain** if the trend continues, so we must do everything in our power to halt or reverse it.

If we wish **Ireland to be a country where nature thrives once again**, we must also continue to fund conservation for our vulnerable and endangered larger animal species, on land and in water, and, where suitable habitat exists, endeavour to reintroduce species which have become extinct on the island due to human activity.

## To address these problems, the Social Democrats propose:

- A **voluntary purchase scheme for unprofitable farmland**, to be converted into protected native woodland.
- Incentives for the practice of **agroforestry**, for example silvopasture (grazing livestock amongst woodland).
- Incentives for the **planting of native trees on private land**, and for sustainable felling and harvesting practices (reducing clear-cutting).
- A **doubling of the area of protected nature reserve** by 2040.
- The promotion, and expansion, of **wildlife corridors** across the country. This would recognise the potential of rivers, canals, and the road network as potential nature corridors.
- To require state bodies to first **examine upstream natural based solutions** when considering works required to deal with flood relief and protection.
- **Reintroduction of extirpated species** where research has established feasibility. This would include a compensation scheme for any agricultural losses, and harsh penalties for illegal killing of reintroduced animals.
- Significant state funding for the **conservation of endangered and vulnerable native species**.
- Fund Councils and Inland Fisheries to **map and remediate barriers to fish migration** within their riverine systems.
- National legislation to significantly **reduce or eliminate the non-agricultural use of pesticides and herbicides outdoors**, and continued review of agricultural practices relating to pesticides, herbicides and fertilisers.
- State funding for the **monitoring and eradication of invasive species**.
- Require Councils **map areas of local environmental importance**, in consultation and cooperation with the local community and include them in County Development Plans as areas to be protected.

- In urban areas, the government would work with local councils and An Bord Pleanála to **prioritise the planting of trees and flowers in existing and new developments, and on streets**. It is healthier for people (mentally and physically) and wildlife alike to have as much planting and green space as possible in urban and suburban areas.
- To fund Councils to undertake Trap, Neuter and Return programmes for feral cats.
- Encouraging local councils to create **native Woodland Walks and Wildflower Meadows** in existing and new parks.
- Making the creation of **wild picnic bench spots** in office developments and (where practical) the creation of **rooftop gardens** in offices and apartments a vital part of ABP urban planning regulation. This would reduce the prevalence of 'concrete deserts' and have amenity and quality of life benefits.
- Ensuring all local authorities and planning authorities have all **hedgerows assessed while making planning decisions** and that priority is given to maintaining and protecting existing hedgerows and trees. Where additional or replacement planting takes place native species should be used.
- To establish a **Wildlife Crime Unit** in an Garda Síochána to assist in the prevention and detection of wildlife crime.

## Expenditure and Revenue Priorities

The following is the Balance sheet, working with the currently assumed fiscal space of €11bn, along with a series of revenue raising and spending reduction measures.

The largest items of increased expenditure are in the areas of Housing, where our proposals would bring the total State spend on housing to €6.3bn over the lifetime of the next Dáil, and in Healthcare where we provide for €5bn to fully implement Sláintecare, along with other investments in public transport and public services.

We are proposing the following revenue raising and spending reduction measures:

➤ **Alcohol and Cigarettes, €300m and €250m**

We would raise €300m from a series of taxation increases on alcohol over a series of budgets.

An extra 10c excise duty on alcohol would yield about €150m each time you do it. €24m would be raised through a ban of below-cost selling of alcohol as there is a VAT loss to the state with current below-cost selling.

We would raise excise on the standard packet of 20 cigarettes by 50c, yielding approximately €57m in year 1 – repeat for five years

➤ **Pension tax relief, €120m**

Reducing the maximum allowable pension fund (the Standard Fund Threshold, SFT) to €1.7m would, in most cases, fund an annual pension in excess of €60,000. This was the target agreed under the last Programme for Government but was not reached. We would set €1.7m as the new threshold.

➤ **Betting Tax, €100m**

We would raise betting tax on both in-shop and on-line betting by two percentage points.

➤ **Scrap the Special Assignee Relief Programme (SARP), €25m**

The SARP tax relief is aimed at reducing the cost to employers of so-called special “high-end” staff by providing special tax benefits. The employee must be on a salary of €75,000 or more to qualify. It was introduced in 2012 and was due to expire at the end of 2017 but was later extended. The Social Democrats believe this scheme to be grossly unfair. The Government should not be subsidising very significant salaries when there are so many other priorities for taxpayers’ money. It is simply outrageous that ordinary taxpayers are funding a scheme where people need a minimum salary of €75,000 to qualify. We would scrap this relief.

➤ **Levy on Single Use Plastics & Unrecyclable Packaging, €25m**

The extent of over-packaging in our supermarkets is fuelling a throw-away culture and contributing to waste and emissions. The public have lost patience with producers of such material. The response of the European Union, while welcome, is far too cautious and slow. It is also frustrating that EU law restricts national Governments' actions in terms of bans. In Budget 2020, the Social Democrats are calling for a new levy on single use plastics and packaging that cannot be readily recycled in Ireland. This should start low but gradually increase in future years so that producers have every incentive to switch to sustainable packaging. It should also encourage the development of far more refill options for the public.

➤ **Environmental Tax on Aggregates, €75m**

We would set down a new environmental levy on each tonne of sand, gravel, crushed stone and other aggregates extracted from the ground or lifted from the surface and used in construction. The rate would be comparable to the rate applied in the UK. Such a levy would encourage the recycling of aggregates and the much more sustainable use of our natural resources. It would also help reduce carbon emissions. When introduced in the UK the measure had a positive impact on the rate of recycling. This

measure is primarily aimed at environmental protection.

➤ **Banking Levy, €250m**

The banking system was rescued by the taxpayer over the past decade. Now that they have returned to profitability, and continue to avail of significant tax write-downs on previous losses, the Social Democrats believe it is not unreasonable for taxpayers to expect some dividends. We would increase the Banking Levy to raise an additional €250m.

➤ **Other**

Increase the **minimum effective tax rate** of persons earning more than €400k per annum by a percentage points (€40m approx)

Reform **refundable element for unused R&D tax credits** as recommended by Social Justice Ireland. Cost at last count was over €400m (yield here is €150m)

**Increase Employers' PRSI on the balance of incomes over €100,000** to give a yield of €175m

**Eliminate funding to the Irish Greyhound** racing industry.

Reduce the use of **agency staff** in the health sector as a result of Sláintecare

**Scrapping Help to Buy** over time would yield an estimated €50m but there is a limit to this as funding is only scheduled for a few years.

As per our Housing, section we would introduce a proper land-hoarding tax, yielding €50m

<b>Expenditure and Revenue Priorities for next Dáil</b>	<b>€m</b>
<b>Headroom Available (A)</b>	<b>11,000</b>
	<b>Headroom used</b>
<b>Extra expenditure above demographics and pre-committed capital (B)</b>	
Huge increase in State delivered Social & Affordable Housing totalling <b>€6.3bn</b>	1,400
Delivering Sláintecare, and improvements in Mental Health and Disability	5,000
Pensions and Welfare	2,000
Environment, Climate Change and Transport	900
Children and Education	900
Public Pay	2,000
Other	1,250
	<b>13,450</b>
	<b>Revenue Raised</b>
<b>Revenue Increases and Expenditure Reductions (C)</b>	
Reduce Maximum Allowable pension that qualifies for Tax Relief	120
Increase in sugar-sweetened drinks and Introduce Snack Tax	20
Alcohol excise and ban below cost selling	300
Cigarettes and e-cigarettes	250
Betting Tax (extra 2 percentage points)	100
Target extra revenue from REITs, Section 110 and Intellectual Property	250
Corporation Tax Reform to bring effective rate closer to nominal rate	500
Abolish the Special Assignee Relief Programme	25
Environmental Taxes on packaging, single use plastics and aggregates	60
Increase Bank Levy	250
Increase Minimum Effective Tax Rate on high end individuals	40
Reduce Research & Development Tax Credits	150
Increase employers PRSI on Salaries over €100,000	175
Increase Training Levy to fund education investment	75
Stop public funding to Greyhound industry	16
Reduce use of Agency staff and invest in staff under Sláintecare	30
Scrap Help to Buy and invest in direct build housing	50
Land-Hoarding Tax	50
Increase Stamp duty on Shares	37
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,498</b>
<b>Balance (A+C-B)</b>	<b>48</b>



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