

Change Starts in the Community

Local Election Manifesto 2024



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Key Policies

Social Democrats Councillors are committed to:

- Getting local councils back building again, and once more playing a pivotal role in building homes that are affordable to rent and buy.
- Ensuring that building infrastructure, transport links, and public services into every plan for our communities is the overriding priority in planning policy.
- Building '15-minute' cities and towns, pursuing planning policies that prioritise proximity and accessibility to work and essential services.
- The appointment of architects at local authority level whose role it is to improve the aesthetic appearance of the public realm.
- Increasing the prevalence of basic public services and amenities like public toilets, drinking fountains, benches, playgrounds, and community gardens.
- Prioritising play, sport and recreation opportunities for all ages and abilities, with Multi-Use Games Area pitches in every community, and maximising the funding of community facilities such as swimming pools and skate parks.
- Putting disabled people at the heart of all decisions that affect them.
- Driving strong long-term planning for greener, more sustainable communities, including by supporting increased investment in cycling and public transport.
- Promoting biodiversity, recycling, and strong anti-dumping measures.
- Promoting affordable and sustainable energy options, including the Sustainable Energy Community model, so that communities can own, generate, and profit from, their own renewable energy.
- Putting a strong focus on libraries and expanding the range of library services.
- Prioritising the rejuvenation of our town and village centres and main streets.
- Using technology to make local councils more transparent, including via the live online streaming of council sessions, at all levels.
- Campaigning in favour of directly elected mayors for Cork, Dublin, Galway, Waterford, and for all local authorities who want them.

Introduction

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

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

This June 7th, the people of Ireland have a chance to set Councils' priorities for the next five years and elect people to our local Councils who will stand up for their interests and put their communities first.

As Social Democrats, our single biggest priority is to **improve the delivery of key public services** which drive equality, promote sustainability, reduce costs for businesses and families, and raise living standards for all the community. In all our endeavours, we will commit to the principle of inclusivity, ensuring no one is left behind, and to advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (see Page 24), fostering a sustainable future for all.

This Manifesto sets out how Social Democrats Councillors will approach Council services and projects over the next five years. Some of the areas that we will focus on include:

- **Housing:** Councils must play a stronger role in ending the crisis in affordability. They must also plan for all of the infrastructure that goes with the building of new houses. We don't just want to build new homes; we want to **build sustainable communities.**
- **Environment:** One report after another warns us of the impending perils of climate and biodiversity collapse. We are living way beyond the means of our planet and in the process causing irreversible damage to our natural environment. **Local authorities must play their part in addressing this global issue.**

- **Service Delivery:** The Social Democrats want to **set new standards in how public services are delivered by local authorities** and how local officials engage with local communities. **We want to spread best practice across the country** on public realm improvements, provision of community infrastructure and facilities, and investing in measures that bring about social cohesion.
- **Youth:** Our young people were left behind during the pandemic, and community facilities and services have yet to catch up. We want to strengthen social infrastructure for all age levels **but with a particular focus on young people.**
- **Disability:** Disabled people should be at the heart of all decisions that affect them. **Our Councillors will prioritise the needs of people with disabilities,** focusing on tangible improvements in accessibility, such as barrier-free public spaces, accessible public transport, and inclusive communication methods, ensuring that people with disabilities can fully participate in community life.
- **More Inclusive Communities:** Our Councillors will work to build inclusive local communities, that are respectful of all cultures and traditions. They will work on a collaborative basis with members of the Community & Voluntary sector, creating a platform where local charities and community groups can participate actively in policymaking at local government level and support thriving communities.
- **Greater Participation:** There are fine examples all around the country of successful Council projects such as on **Community Budgeting, recycling projects, regeneration, and community engagement.** Our Councillors will ensure that their Councils value honesty, integrity and transparency, and set high standards for themselves and their work. We will leverage digital tools and platforms to foster greater community engagement and participation in local governance, ensuring transparency and accessibility for all.

Building Homes, Increasing Affordability

Housing represents an unprecedented challenge, impacting countless lives across Ireland. For the second time in a generation, we are struggling through a savage crisis in housing affordability.

For far too long, housing policy in Ireland has been written by developers for developers. The results speak for themselves:

- Rents have almost doubled in a decade.
- House prices have more than doubled.
- Large numbers of first-time buyers are effectively locked out of owning a home.
- More than 13,500 people are currently living in homeless emergency accommodation, and many more are experiencing hidden homelessness.

The Social Democrats believe that **housing is a fundamental right**, needed to ensure people can live dignified lives without financial hardship, precarity or stress. This housing crisis won't be solved unless we change the direction in housing policy, both at a national and local level.

We want to see far more affordable homes available to rent and buy. An increase in homes available to buy can only happen if there is a **policy shift away from building rental-only developments**.

We need to see an end to developer-led policymaking and a move to a housing and planning policy dictated by the public interest, with a **clear aim to deliver housing at the lowest possible cost to families and individuals**, rather than the highest possible profit to developers and land speculators.

To do this, we need to stop approaching housing and land as if they are commodities and start building homes using the extensive resources of the State. **Local authorities have a crucial role to play** in this, especially in **building on public land** that is at their disposal and **working with other Government agencies to plan and deliver new homes**.

The over-reliance on Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) works for no one but landlords. It leads to greater demand for housing, inflating prices for those looking to rent privately. The Social Democrats believes that the best way to move away from HAP is **the direct provision of public housing**.

We are committed to taking action in the following areas:

Building Affordable Homes

We want to use the extensive residentially zoned public land that is available to local authorities to **build homes that are affordable to rent or buy**.

We would create a **specific zoning for affordable housing** so that only genuinely affordable homes could be built on specific areas of land.

Local Councils play a pivotal role in promoting equitable housing by partnering with non-profit developers, leveraging their commitment to community welfare over profit margins. This approach not only broadens access to affordable housing but also ensures that developments are community-oriented and sustainably managed. The success of the some models within the Approved Housing Body (AHB) sector present a compelling blueprint for scalability, offering a proven framework for affordable, community-driven housing projects that we plan to expand across additional local authorities.

Our Councillors will work closely with AHBs to deliver more units and to ensure the **Housing First** programme is fulfilled.

Building Public Housing

We need to move away from a reliance on the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) and **expand the role of Cost Rental housing**.

Local authorities used to play a far greater role in the direct construction of social housing. **We will get local authorities back building again**. At a national level, in Government we will build **12,000 social homes** every year.

No More Long-Term Leasing

The Social Democrats want to **ban long-term leasing** as a method of social housing provision.

This **expensive and wasteful policy** – where taxpayer money is used to fund lucrative deals with landlords and investment funds for up to 25 years, often handing over more than what it would have cost to buy the house, before handing it back to the owner – should be replaced with the **direct building of social homes** by local authorities that they themselves will own.

Tackling Homelessness

While strong national policy is what is required most to achieve the eradication of homelessness, local authorities have a statutory responsibility in the area and can be more ambitious than many have been to date.

Our Councillors will work to ensure that their local authority builds enough social housing to **reflect demand in local social housing needs assessments**.

They will also ensure that the type of housing built **reflects the real size of households on the social housing waiting list**. Often this will mean building more one-bed apartments and four-bed+ homes.

It is important that councils allocate a proportion of new build social homes to people who have been trapped in homelessness the longest, and that local authorities make decisions in the best interests of children when assisting families in homelessness.

Using Compulsory Purchase Orders

As a party, we want to use **Compulsory Purchase Orders** (CPOs) to acquire land banks that will ensure a pipeline of development land for affordable housing.

Fifty years on from the Kenny report, the Government is still refusing to act on its recommendations. We would follow the

blueprint laid out in the report for a **continuous supply of social and affordable homes** by the State.

We would also be more proactive in our use of CPOs to buy and renovate derelict houses. A **fund should be created** at central government level to facilitate this.

Addressing Vacant Housing

We commit to lobbying for the appointment of at least **one full-time Vacant Housing Officer within each local authority**, tasked with identifying and mobilising vacant properties.

This initiative will be leveraged to rehabilitate hundreds of vacant units, focusing initially on publicly-owned properties, to swiftly address housing shortages. A priority area for us will be the revitalisation of 'over-the-shop' units, capitalising on this underutilised space to increase housing availability and town-centre living.

We will seek to use **CPOs on vacant housing** where appropriate, and nationally we favour the introduction of a **tax on vacancy** with real teeth to compel change of use. We would **increase the vacant homes tax to 5 per cent**. The current tax on vacant homes is set at a derisory 0.3 per cent, a figure that is easily gobbled up by property price inflation each year.

By increasing the tax to an effective rate, with fair exemptions, we would send a clear message to property speculators – **use it, sell it, or rent it**.

Additionally, we will implement strategies to substantially reduce the duration that Council properties remain unoccupied, ensuring more homes become available again more quickly.

Using Brownfield Sites

We will ensure that each local authority on which we are represented works constructively with the **Land Development Agency** so vacant and brownfield sites that are suitable for residential development can be quickly brought into use.

We will invest in Suburban Renewal by **utilising unused or under-used brown-field sites across our urban areas**.

Enforcing the RZLT

We will ensure that our Councils properly engage with the legislation governing the **Residential Zoned Land Tax (RZLT)**.

The RZLT has replaced the Vacant Sites Levy, which failed in large part due to the fact that a huge number of local authorities failed to engage with the terms of the Levy.

Land Value Capture

The correct strategy is for Councils to **acquire land before rezoning** so that its value is captured by the State and rezoning is not used to drive up the cost of purchasing it. The current process whereby land is re-zoned *before* state entities purchase it, allowing landowners to benefit greatly without any investment or effort in the land, **wastes significant amounts of taxpayer money and encourages land speculation**.

Social Housing Income Limits

We favour a **regular review of income limits for social housing eligibility**. This does not happen automatically, with the same limits applying for several years at a time, even when incomes are rising.

This makes no sense. Our public representatives will lobby at a national level for this to happen on a regular basis.

Improving Maintenance

We will act on behalf of Council tenants so that there are **good response times to maintenance issues in local authority housing stock**.

We will support technological solutions for housing maintenance which will ensure more efficient responses.

Ending tax perks for REITS

We are very concerned about the **impact of bulk property purchases by Real Estate Investment Trusts (REITs)**.

Under current arrangements REITs enjoy sizeable tax benefits and are using this position to purchase units in bulk.

New estates that were granted planning permission on the understanding they were to be a mix of owner-occupied and rental are now only available to rent.

First-time buyers are being deprived of an opportunity to bid for homes in their area, there is no tenure mix in some estates (as it is all private rental) and as the availability of housing for purchase falls, prices increase further.

The Social Democrats are committed to **ending the preferential tax treatment of REITs** and using the savings from this initiative to provide increased funding to local authorities for direct building of homes that ordinary people can buy.

Our Councillors and TDs will also bring about a change in the planning system so that **bulk purchases by funds cannot happen**.

Voluntary Step-down Housing

We will promote the reintroduction of a **voluntary step-down housing scheme for older people**, as previously existed in northwest Dublin and which was hugely popular.

These schemes provide older people living in homes that are larger than they need the opportunity to move voluntarily within their neighbourhood to accessible, sustainable and more manageable homes. They also free up larger homes for young families who require extra space.

Housing People with Specific Needs

Our Councillors will make sure our local authorities have adequate data on the housing needs of different groups of people living in the area so that housing needs can be matched with appropriate supply.

This includes **people with disabilities (see our section on Disability)**, and the **Traveller Community**.

Our Councillors will fully implement the recommendations from the report of the Traveller Accommodation Expert Review Group. The State must end its violation of Travellers rights and provide adequate housing.

Building Sustainable Communities

Strategic and thoughtful planning is pivotal to enhancing community development and shaping vibrant, sustainable places.

Social Democrats don't want to build just homes – we want to build communities.

That means making amenities, infrastructure, transport services, schools, retail, accessibility, and environmental sustainability central to every development.

Good planning has a huge influence on the quality of the places and homes in which we live. Good and bad planning can be a difference-maker in how strong and cohesive our communities are; how we spend our time, and connect with one another; our ability to strike a good work/life balance; our health and safety; and so many other aspects of our lives.

Good community facilities help to create strong communities. These include playgrounds, parks, community centres and other places where people can gather and connect. **The provision of community facilities must be a central plank of policy at both a national and a local level.**

Increasing tree planting and biodiversity projects in new developments, providing for allotments and community gardens, and connections to sustainable transport options including cycling infrastructure are also very important. Every local authority should have its own Tree Strategy.

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

Ireland has been let down by its planning system. So many of our problems – the high cost of housing, the traffic choking our towns and cities, our lack of basic amenities – can be attributed to the lack of sound long-term planning.

We must learn from the mistakes of the past.

Quality Infrastructure and Services

Our over-riding priority in planning is that Councils build infrastructure, transport links, and public services into every plan for our communities.

No homes should be built without a credible plan for the array of supports and infrastructure that communities need to thrive.

We commit to prioritising the inclusion of accessible public transport options, comprehensive cycling infrastructure, community playgrounds, playing fields (including all-weather amenities), expansive green spaces, childcare facilities, and vibrant retail and recreational facilities in all Local Area Plans.

We would like to see the appointment of architects at local authority level whose role it is to **improve the aesthetic appearance of the public realm**, for example by reducing street clutter and unnecessary signage, and pursuing creative ways to increase green space and spaces for play.

Every local authority should have its own Tree Strategy. We need to end excessive tree felling by introducing a better tree preservation processes, and ensuring that more heritage trees are protected with a 'prune-first' approach

15-Minute Cities

The concept of the 15-minute city is a vision of urban planning that **prioritises proximity and accessibility to employment and essential services**. Among its goals are a reduction in car

dependence, and **improved quality of life for residents**.

The characteristics of the 15-minute city vary by location and specific local needs, but generally include:

- **Proximity to services** – with workplaces, shops, schools, healthcare settings and parks within a fifteen-minute walk or cycle from any point in the city or town.
- **Infrastructure for pedestrians and cyclists** – with pedestrianised streets and cycle lanes designed to promote safe and sustainable active travel.
- **High quality and regular public transport** – with greater investment in buses, trams and trains to quickly connect people to different parts of the city.
- **Quality public spaces** – with priority given to the creation and preservation of accessible green spaces, parks, and sport/recreation areas.

The result of these measures is typically an **improved quality of life, greater work/life balance (with less commuting time), and a greater sense of community** among residents.

15-minute cities are also more environmentally sustainable.

Guided by the principles of the 15-minute city, Social Democrat Councillors will actively incorporate these values into the formulation of County Development and Local Area Plans, ensuring a holistic, resident-focused approach to urban development.

Inclusive Communities

For truly socially sustainable communities, it's imperative to develop diverse housing options crafted to **universal design standards**. This ensures accessibility and comfort for individuals across all age groups and those with disabilities, promoting inclusivity at every level.

In line with promoting accessibility, the 'dropped curb' principle should be integrated into all housing and urban development projects. This approach not only aids those with mobility challenges but also benefits the wider community by ensuring seamless access to public spaces and facilities.

Implementing universal design principles, broadening downsizing options and sheltered housing programs for the elderly, and securing dedicated funding for individuals transitioning from congregated settings, are critical steps. These measures facilitate more suitable living environments, **catering to the nuanced needs of these communities**.

New apartment blocks should have Community Rooms as standard.

We must ensure that all **Local Authority Integration Teams** are fully staffed to welcome new arrivals into our communities, including extra resourcing in counties with large numbers of Ukrainians and International Protection applicants. Each local authority should have a **local migrant integration strategy**.

Development Levies

We will work to ensure that there is substantial community gain from development levies and that levies are clearly spent on **improving social, community and physical infrastructure in the areas in which they are collected**.

We will ensure that development levy schemes capture the existing needs and new needs of local areas.

Too many local authorities do not make enough provision for libraries, playgrounds, swimming pools, and other community facilities as part of their development levy scheme.

Public Land for Public Gain

We are dedicated to the strategic utilisation of public land for public gain, with a specific focus on enhancing housing, transport, and recreational provisions for the community. We want to **significantly expand the Council's landholding**, in conjunction with the Land Development Agency, for the purpose of housing delivery.

Assembling public land banks for **the delivery of affordable housing** is one of the key tools to addressing Ireland's chronic housing problems and will be a key focus of our Councillors.

Planning Enforcement

We will ensure that the **planning enforcement and derelict sites** functions of our local authorities are active and responsive to complaints from the public and that there is proper follow through.

We will put a very strong emphasis on **streamlining the 'taking in charge' process** (see next page for more information). Too many new communities have been forgotten about by their local authority in recent years, or have been let down by developers from whom they have purchased their homes.

We will also ensure that the planning requirements related to short-term lets are enforced by local authorities.

Rainwater Harvesting

Across Ireland, in every city and county, we spend millions of euros every year treating all water in our mains to drinking standard. We then use that same water supply for flushing toilets, washing cars, watering gardens, washing clothes, and all sorts of purposes that do not require drinking-standard water.

This is a **huge waste of a treated resource**, as well as a waste of nature's free resource of rainwater which, with our evermore built-up environment and more hard urban surfaces, is increasingly a cause of flooding.

Meanwhile the Government talks about pumping water from the Shannon to feed the demand for water on the East coast, while in other areas, such as West Cork, planning permission cannot be granted for any additional developments due to the lack of a viable source of water.

The Social Democrats want to make it the norm for rainwater harvesting, for use in toilets and washing machines etc, to be **part of planning conditions for new housing developments**.

Exemptions could be made for properties that do not have enough area from which to collect sufficient rainwater for the number of residents, or do not have sufficient garden space or access to bury a collection tank.

By providing a 'distributed reservoir', such tanks would also mitigate against flash flooding during extreme weather events,

especially on hard urban surfaces or following periods of drought.

Using this 'grey' water not only saves the treated water in Ireland's grossly mis-managed water system, (for example, almost half of treated water in the Dublin area is lost to leakage) it reduces the run-off into the overburdened drains and culverts that were not built for the run-off that modern concrete and asphalt surfaces generate.

The more buildings that retain this 'grey'" water (which is actually very clean) the more treated water is saved and **the better and protected our environs are from the impact of extreme weather events**.

Dealing with Coastal Erosion

Several of our coastal communities are dealing with the problem of coastal erosion with, in some cases, houses literally falling into the sea or onto the beach as increasingly regular and severe storms erode the land underneath them.

Social Democrats Councillors will push for the full implementation of the recent *Coastal Change Management Strategy Report*, with **dedicated teams for coastal regions featuring the necessary scientific, environmental and planning expertise around coastal erosion and flooding**, with a focus on nature-based solutions.

We will engage closely with affected coastal communities; no one whose family home is at risk from coastal erosion or flooding should be left to fend for themselves.

Taking in Charge

The fact that it can take years and even decades **for public areas in newer developments to be taken in charge** by Councils is completely unacceptable.

Many residents have been left with completely unsatisfactory services such as roads, pathways, public lighting, green spaces, and other amenities. This leaves **residents in limbo, and, in some cases, having to pay for basic public services** such as street lighting, road repairs and liability insurance. In some cases, estates have been waiting since the 1970s.

Our Councillors will make this a priority issue and **fervently represent the interests of residents** living in unfinished estates:

Monitoring and Incentivising

We will ensure local authorities have a proper tracking system in place so that these estates are not forgotten, and developers are constantly reminded of their outstanding responsibilities.

It is important that people living in affected estates know their rights. Councils should appoint liaison staff to deal with the estates affected.

We will not accept sub-standard finishing and will ensure that a robust bond system is in place so that there are appropriate incentives for developers to finish out estates. Any bonds accepted by planning authorities as security should be **index-linked, provided by operators regulated by the Central Bank, and sufficient to cover the cost of satisfactory completion** of the development in question.

National Level

Nationally, we will seek much stronger protection for residents, including strengthening the powers of local authorities to be proactive in taking new developments in charge, **stronger powers of enforcement for Councils to pursue**

developers, and a dedicated fund to help the worst affected estates.

Local Property Tax Reform

We want to see an arrangement in place for **lower Local Property Tax charges where estates are waiting to be taken in charge.**

This will be fairer to residents and incentivise local authorities to work with developers to get estates finished quickly.

International Best Practice

It is worth noting that most European countries have no 'taking in charge' process, as local authorities build and maintain the public spaces and amenities, often collecting compensation from the developer to pay for their construction.

Before the land is rezoned there is a fully binding legal agreement on how the developer will pay the local authority to put in public amenities.

Areas that are public and to be taken in charge should be specified in the planning permission, and completed and handed over to the local authority within the timeframe of the planning permission.

Council Services – Getting the Basics Right

The Social Democrats want to **set new standards in how public services are delivered by local authorities** and how local officials engage with local communities. As is evident throughout this Manifesto, **we want to spread best practice across the country.**

As a first step, we want the role of National Oversight and Audit Commission (NOAC) to be expanded. Far more measures of Council activity, or lack thereof, should form part of its auditing processes. **Communities should know how well their local Council is doing across all possible measure of service.**

Social Democrat Councillors will proactively engage with Council management to ensure that basic public services are not only performed well but are also delivered in a timely manner.

Our Councillors will strategically utilise the Council’s Service Delivery Plan and Council meetings as platforms to **spotlight and advocate for the enhancement of basic service delivery and overall Council performance** in key areas such as:

Road and Footpath Repairs	Public Toilets	Street Cleaning
Drinking Fountains	More Benches	Tree Planting and Maintenance
Hedge-cutting	Graffiti Removal	Road Safety
Vacant Homes	Planning Enforcement	Derelict Sites
Litter Control and Dumping Enforcement	Parks Maintenance	Public Lighting
Community Engagement	Recycling Facilities	Playground Maintenance
Drainage	Housing Allocations and Maintenance	Promoting Enterprise

Here, and in subsequent sections of this document, we outline some specific areas where we feel **Councils can generally do so much better.**

Public Realm Improvements

Local authorities should **prioritise place-shaping and improvements to the public realm** as a fundamental responsibility, with a particular emphasis on enhancing public spaces to foster community engagement and wellbeing.

Implementing straightforward, effective measures such as **adding additional bins, installing more public benches (especially, but not exclusively, in parks and green areas), and maintaining footpaths** can significantly enhance public space quality.

Ensuring the cleanliness and maintenance of cities and towns is crucial for the health and aesthetics of our communities, a basic yet vital function of local authorities. These are some of the most basic functions of local authorities, and our **Councillors will have a strong focus on getting them right.**

It's essential to allocate funding towards environmental improvements, including enhanced street lighting, better accessibility features for wheelchairs and buggies, and thoughtful landscaping to beautify and functionalise urban spaces, while also incorporating the principals of Crime Prevention through Environmental Design (CPTED, see Page 51).

We would also like to see the appointment of architects at local authority level whose **role it is to improve the aesthetic appearance of the public realm.**

Examples might include by reducing street clutter and unnecessary signage, and by pursuing creative ways to increase green space and spaces for play. We will put a priority on ensuring that street and road networks are designed in a way that allows for safe access to schools and childcare facilities for our children. We will also work to ensure the public realm is more accessible for our elderly, including more age-friendly parking spots.

Public Toilets

Addressing the shortage of public toilet facilities in our towns and cities is imperative for public health and convenience, a clear area for improvement compared to European norms.

There is just one public outdoor toilet facility in the whole of Dublin city (at St Stephen's Green). The closest other public toilets are at Sandymount Strand and Clontarf, which each have one single automated public toilet. Our Councillors want **to increase the prevalence of public toilet facilities in all our towns and cities.**

Ideas such as setting up coffee shops in parks, providing toilets, should be examined, as should the possibility of working with cafés, restaurants, and bars on developing an incentivised scheme where the public can use toilet facilities in return for reduced commercial rates.

Drinking Fountains

Another major difference between Irish towns and cities and those in other European countries is the **dearth of free drinking water and drinking fountains.**

Our Councillors will work to make the availability of **clean free drinking water standard** across the local authorities on which we are represented.

Childcare

It is not acceptable that the shortage of childcare facilities is such a severe issue in so many areas of the country. There is evidence that, while national standards exist for new developments to include childcare facilities, these are often being waived by local authorities. This is completely unacceptable and Social Democrats Councillors **will make sure that**

this is not done on any future developments within their area.

We will use the Council's role as part of the County Childcare Committee to **promote better information to parents on childcare options** and to better inform policy in respect of capacity shortages and fees.

Education

Our Councillors will support funding for **community-based education programmes** including those related to adult literacy, digital skills and vocational training.

Where possible, we will use the position of Councils on the boards of Education and Training Boards to promote educational access for all and high education standards, and to uphold the constitutional rights of children and their parents **to not attend religious instruction classes**.

Paying Bills

We would like Councils to make it as **easy as possible for residents to pay their bills**.

In particular we would like to see a pay-as-you-go scheme adopted by Councils to **facilitate payment of Motor Tax** so low-income households are not faced with large annual bills that can send them into the hands of moneylenders. We would also like to see a restructuring of motor tax charges so that people who can't afford annual tax discs face no additional charges.

Improved Training and Feedback

We will work to improve **Council training** and other supports for the establishment of **Residents Associations and other local groups**, including Tidy Towns and environmental groups. We are also keen to promote customer service initiatives so that there are **regular feedback opportunities** for the public on services.

The **online 'Citizen Hub'** of Dublin City Council is an excellent model that we would like to see rolled out nationally. It is a central hub where people can check their position on the housing list, report dumping, request footpath repairs, apply for disability home improvement grant, and many other things, all without the clientelism that comes with going through elected Councillors for what should be readily available basic information and easy communication with the City Council. We would **work to roll out similar Hubs** in all local authorities to empower citizens.

Across the different local authorities, there is variance in policies on providing information to people on the local housing waiting list. **Several local authorities do not inform people or families where they are on the list**. Making such information available to people can have a disproportionately positive psychological effect, allowing them to manage expectations and make long-term plans accordingly. Many people communicating with our Councillors find the deprivation of such information to be little short of cruel.

Other Services

We will lobby for increased funding from national government to deal with issues like **rat infestations**.

We will ensure that Councils meet their obligations under the **Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty**. We will work with Councils to adopt an **anti-racism strategy** for each Council area in respect of Council services and duties.

In general, we believe that **too many services that should be a basic function of local government are being outsourced**. Even, in some cases, the delivery of public lighting has been privatised, and has too often led to a sub-standard service with little accountability.

Investing in Play, Sport and Recreation

Social Democrats Councillors are committed to **prioritising play, sport and recreation opportunities for all ages and abilities.**

Ireland has poor social infrastructure and were it not for the tremendous success of voluntary organisations such as the GAA and others, we would have very little indeed.

We need a renewed focus on bringing our communities together and investing in shared spaces. The Social Democrats want to set a general target of **a community centre in every significant population base in Ireland.** This can be made available to young and old alike, and funded by an enhanced Sports Capital Programme and the National Development Plan.

Across the country, there is growing demand for youth work facilities, a growing population of young people (the 10-24-year-old population increased 14 per cent between 2016 and 2022, compared to an 8 per cent increase in the wider population), and there is limited funding available to youth work organisations for new builds or improvements.

The exception is through the Department of Rural and Community Development's *Community Centres Investment Fund*, of which less than 5 per cent went to youth work project and organisations in 2022. Any new builds under this fund require partnerships with local authorities.

Integration of new communities is a huge benefit of investing in things like sport and recreation. They break down barriers and build a sense of a broader community across different groups. Youth clubs and groups can have an important role to play **in welcoming and helping young people integrate into new communities.** We also believe that better funding of youth services and their facilities can **help prevent social challenges such as anti-social behaviour and crime in communities.**

We can do so much better with the community facilities we already have or those that are in planning. The model developed at Fingal County Council, known as the **"Fingal Schools model"**, is a good example where it was agreed to co-locate new schools with community facilities on sites made available by the Council (more on Page 18).

We would like to see this model replicated in other areas. Where feasible from a security and residential amenity point of view, school facilities should be made available for after-hours community use.

We are committed to making improvements in the following areas:

Investing in Youth Facilities

Having down-time is vital to our health. But where do teenagers go for this?

Our young people are spending more and more time in school or online. This sedentary lifestyle can lead to physical and mental health problems. Young people are often lonely and isolated – and may feel overwhelmed by both the real life and virtual worlds they occupy.

The **provision of additional community facilities for young people** will be one of the biggest priorities for our Councillors.

There has not been enough investment in facilities and services for young people. Nonetheless, some Councils have shown that even with limited resources and by engaging in a **genuine partnership with the community**, they can play a key part in helping their local communities provide for this age group.

(As an example, the aforementioned Fingal Schools model, see next page).

Social Democrats Councillors are committed to **maximising Council resources such as empty or under-used buildings, community/sports support workers**, and other Council resources and facilities to improve youth services and in particular to **offer alternatives to young people** who don't engage in mainstream sports and activities.

Our Councillors will also aim to build **support for investment in youth work facilities and infrastructure** into County Development Plans. Their work will be based on engagement with young people and local youth work organisations, with a goal of 'futureproofing' the local authority area based on demographic projections.

Better Sports Facilities

We should be seeking, through the Sports Capital Grants Programme, to **provide a Multi-Use Games Area, or MUGA, pitch in every community** where feasible. MUGA pitches should be open access, by which we mean open to a variety of different groups. These have worked very well in several communities where an appropriate location was identified and where strong community support was forthcoming.

Social Democrats Councillors will play an active part in **maximising the funding of community facilities, such as swimming pools and skate parks, through the Sports Capital Programme** and if in Government we will maintain a funding programme on an annual basis.

We want to **expand the number of parks with strip lighting** so that joggers can use parks safely after dark.

The Social Democrats also wish to **maximise playing time for local sports clubs on Council pitches**. The upkeep of some Council facilities leaves a lot to be desired. Poor drainage, irregular mowing, poor maintenance, or indeed closing down pitches/facilities at certain times of the year all impact on how active our children, young people and adults can be.

This is unacceptable. It breaks very positive routines and is a factor in children dropping out of sport. We will end the practice of Councils shutting playing pitches during the year, other than for maintenance and pitch recovery.

All-weather Facilities

As well as developing open-access MUGA pitches, we want to see an increased

prevalence of **all-weather pitches and sporting facilities in our communities**.

Their importance has been particularly evident over the course of this year, where an unusually wet Spring has left many playing pitches unusable and has led to the cancellation of training and/or matches for many sports clubs.

Replicating the Fingal Model

Councils and communities need to do better with the community facilities we already have or those that are in planning.

The model developed at Fingal County Council, known as the **“Fingal Schools model”**, is a good example where it was agreed to co-locate new schools with community facilities on sites made available by the Council.

Under this model, development levies were used to build **shared school and community facilities**; the pooling of resources means schools get the benefit of better facilities for use during the day, and the wider community can use the same facilities during the evening and at weekends.

We would like to see this model replicated in other areas.

Where feasible from a security and residential amenity point of view, school facilities should be made available for **after-hours community use**.

Providing Playgrounds

Our Councillors will **prioritise the provision of playgrounds**, including **side-by-side play opportunities for people with disabilities**. Our Councillors have already delivered a successful model in Greystones that could be replicated.

Playgrounds should be seen as not only an investment in children but as a **great way**

to bring communities together, foster social interaction, and provide a focal point for parents and grandparents.

We want to see greater provision of playgrounds across the country, particularly in counties with fast population growth over the past few years.

We are conscious that the positioning of playgrounds in local communities is an important factor for consideration to promote community buy-in, to reduce the risk of vandalism, and to minimise anti-social activity.

We also need facilities for older children including play spaces and skate parks. **Public consultation will be a vital part of every playground and park proposal.**

Promoting Active Lives

The emergence in recent years in certain Council areas of mid-night leagues, passports for leisure, and the Park Run phenomenon shows that **Councils can play a huge role in keeping people active** – and at relatively low marginal costs. We will work to expand these across the country.

We believe the Council can also play a strong role in **supporting local Arts groups** and we will look to support such groups in our communities.

Social Democrats Councillors will ensure that there is a **play and activities plan for every age category in every local authority** in which we are represented. We will focus on driving up participation in sports and activities for all age groups.

We will aim to provide more free gym and exercise equipment in public parks, and support the development of lidos and other outdoor swimming facilities.

Dog-walking and Dog Parks

We want to encourage the use of our public parks by dog-owners, and recognise that a balance must be struck between the interests of dog-owners and of other park users, particularly young children.

We are committed to developing **dog parks** within parks which have sufficient space. These would be designated areas where people can walk their dogs off a lead, without inconveniencing other park users.

From an animal rights perspective, we will ensure that dog pounds contracted by councils operate in a humane manner and promote animal welfare.

Community Gardens & Allotments

We will also work to improve access to, and expand, the number of public allotments and community gardens.

Our Councillors **will encourage councils to use vacant and derelict land for community gardening where appropriate**, and will promote events like National Allotments and Community Gardens Week.

We believe there is significant demand for both, and where possible, our Councillors will attempt to measure this demand in their area.

We will also examine the possibility of creating 'seed libraries' in council offices or public library premises, and of adding

contact details for allotments and community gardening to council websites.

We will seek to provide council funding for local artists to create art in community gardens.

Men's Sheds

As a party, we are **enthusiastic about supporting the network of Men's Sheds** across Ireland to continue expansion, through provision of premises and financial (particularly start-up funding) and other supports.

Often obtaining of a suitable premises is one of the most challenging aspects of establishing a Men's Shed. We will ask Councils to audit unused properties in their possession and identify the properties that could be suitable for use as a Men's Shed.

Festivals & Cultural Events

There are some fantastic examples around the country where Councils have partnered with local communities to deliver superb local festivals, and cultural and heritage events. These events **promote a strong sense of place and civic pride in our communities, as well as driving tourism and economic activity**.

Social Democrats Councillors will promote such activities in our Councils and we will use the resources of our Council as a key enabler for further events. We are also keen to address the escalating insurance costs faced by such events.

Putting a Focus on Libraries

One of the success stories of local government in Ireland has been our libraries.

Local public libraries do so much to support community life; providing internet access, digital skills classes, book clubs, and so much more.

The Social Democrats value the role libraries play and see them as **a key tool in promoting adult literacy, life-long learning, and community engagement**, amongst many other things.

We want to see libraries as a focal point in our communities, focusing on enabling public libraries to offer an **open, accessible, safe, and creative space to their local communities**. We will ensure that Councils retain a strong focus on libraries, and we will work to expand the range of library services wherever possible.

Our priorities on libraries include:

Community Space & Accessibility

We will ensure that meeting, study, and social space is freely accessible for individuals, local organisations and groups.

Accessibility and ease of use of libraries and their systems should be **continually improved to optimise the user experience** for all, including disabled people.

We will also support the appointment of full-time **Irish language officers** and an **increase in the availability of services and materials** in the Irish language.

Reading and Education Services

We will work to expand the Right to Read programme and Right to Read Local Networks, **to increase the participation of children and young people, families, and adults** in reading activities.

We will work to build on the current provision of library services to local primary and secondary schools, and explore the potential for an **expanded programme of library supports** which can

be delivered in alignment with the **national strategy on literacy and numeracy**.

Funding for Additional Services

We will seek to **increase funding for libraries** to support greater service provision.

This will include working with our parliamentary party and government departments and agencies to explore potential **additional funding sources** for projects focused on community regeneration, including the opportunity to develop library facilities.

Our public libraries have the potential to be not just libraries of books, but **'Libraries of Things'**; places where you can borrow a guitar, a sewing machine, or a chessboard and pieces. Such libraries are common in other countries, but unheard of in Ireland. It would be more sustainable and cost-effective if, as a society, we bought less and borrowed more, and such libraries would assist in this goal.

Disabled People at the Heart of all Decisions

Social Democrats Councillors are fully committed to **ensuring that people with disabilities are a priority** in the Councils on which we serve.

Each of our elected Councillors will campaign for much better access for people with disabilities, and ensure their voice is heard in Council decisions that affect them.

Our Councillors will be guided by the principles of:

- **Accessibility** – Making all local public services fully accessible, and catering to a wide range of disabilities, including physical, sensory, learning, and neurodivergent needs.
- **Participation** – Ensuring the participation of people with disabilities on local decision-making structures.
- **Planning** – Making sure local authorities publish an implementation plan for the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD).

However, accessibility and participation have not been the experience of disabled people to date.

Instead, people with disabilities often face **inaccessible walkways** (for example roadworks being undertaken with no consideration for wheelchair users or those with visual or other impairments), low (or non-existent) levels of **accessible public transport**, or information being provided by local authorities and service providers that is **not in an accessible format**.

Urban planning processes should take account of the Hierarchy of Road users, and ensure that people with mobility or sensory impairments have sufficient opportunity to contribute to new public space design.

Clear commitments to people with disabilities should be embedded in council strategies and plans, including County Development Plans, and where we have Councillors elected, we will lead the charge on this.

The UNCRPD

The Social Democrats are committed to the implementation of the **United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities** (UNCRPD).

We want to ensure disabled people are **consulted at planning stages and throughout the completion of building works**.

We recognise the importance of designing public consultations in an **accessible format** (with hybrid consultation events, held at accessible venues etc.), and with **multiple ways** for people to contribute their thoughts, opinions and needs.

Structured consultation between elected local representatives, council staff and people with a disability is **essential to avoid the continuance of the problems** noted on the previous page. Once a robust and regular consultation process is in place, issues can flow from it.

Improving Accessibility

Our Councillors will insist that the **Disability Access Officer** in each local authority is a full-time position. Many local authorities do have a full-time Disability Access Officer, but this is not standard across local authorities.

We are committed to creating **accessible buildings, paths and walkways**, and making sure accessibility concerns are included in all **restoration and refurbishment projects** over which the local authority has control, or a funding role. Local authority offices should meet **universal design requirements**.

We will work to ensure council staff are **trained on issues of disability equality** and the use of 'Plain English'. Where possible, this training should be given by disabled people.

A **"Plain English" approach in all Council material** is imperative, as is encouraging each of our Councils to work with the National Adult Literacy Agency in executing this approach.

We will work for increased **accessibility of information**, including ensuring council documents are available in different formats, including Easy Read versions. Local authority websites should meet **web-accessibility standards**, so that people can access information and navigate the site easily.

We are also committed to drawing attention to the national target of **6 per cent of Council employees having a disability** and encouraging local authorities to meet this target.

Housing

It is our policy to increase the number of **wheelchair-liveable homes and universally- designed homes** in each local authority area.

We want to make sure our local authorities have **adequate data on the housing needs** of people with disabilities living in the area so that housing needs can be matched with appropriate supply.

This might require undertaking **disability audits** in the local area.

We will work to improve efficiencies so that disabled people can secure **housing**

adaptation grants they are entitled to in a timely fashion. And we will make sure dedicated social housing provision, **appropriate to the needs of disabled people**, is delivered matching the scale and extent of the need identified within the local authority area.

Transport and Mobility

Our Councillors will fight for **more accessible public transport** in both urban and rural areas, with **increased frequency and increased connectivity across all modes of public transport** in our local communities.

We will ensure that the **infrastructure** for public bus, taxi and rail stops/stations is well maintained and **accessible for disabled people**.

Our local authority areas need a sufficient number of **disabled parking bays** in villages and towns. We will seek increased funding and resources for **footpath repairs**. Footpath surfaces in bad disrepair have the greatest negative effect on disabled people and the elderly.

Equality of Access to Amenities

Social Democrats Councillors will work to ensure that **all local sporting facilities**,

libraries, museums, theatres, festival venues and community spaces are accessible where disabled people can participate and enjoy these local amenities, with access to toilet facilities and changing places.

It is important that we make **public playgrounds and amenities accessible to all to promote inclusive play**, ensuring children with disabilities can participate and are not segregated from their peers.

Making local recreation sites and tourist attractions accessible, including ensuring there is a **beach mobility wheelchair** for local beaches must also be a priority.

We will work to **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 Council **recreational projects include accessible changing facilities** to ensure the health, safety and dignity of those with disabilities and mobility issues, as well as **accessible toilets** which include a hoist, adult-sized changing bench, and larger space for additional assistants.

Sustainable Development Goals

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015, is a shared blueprint for prosperity and sustainability.

At the heart of the agenda are 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which are an urgent call for action by all countries in a global partnership.

They recognize that ending poverty and other deprivations must go hand-in-hand with strategies that improve health and education, reduce inequality, and spur economic growth – all while tackling climate change and working to preserve our natural environment.

Our Councillors will **advocate for, and promote, the UN Sustainable Development Goals** in their work on each local authority on which we are represented.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



Creating Cleaner Greener Communities

Climate change is the single biggest threat to our environment, to our living standards, and to our existence.

The Social Democrats recognise this threat as a fundamental issue facing our country and our planet. Everybody has to play their part in tackling it and preparing for its consequences.

Though climate change is a global issue, it can only be tackled by every part of Government doing its bit.

At the national level, we will advocate for clean energy initiatives, such as offshore wind energy, widespread adoption of electric vehicles, enhanced flood defences, and universally accessible home insulation grants.

Councils must play their part also. Our Councillors will:

- Drive strong **long-term planning for sustainable communities**.
- Support increased investment in **cycling and public transport**.
- Promote **biodiversity, recycling**, and strong anti-dumping measures.
- Encourage **new energy solutions** and put Councils at the heart of delivering them.

The Climate Change Adaptation Strategies being implemented by Councils nationwide are crucial for formulating workable and actionable plans to locally address climate change. These strategies are especially vital for managing coastal erosion, flood defence, and planning for extreme weather events.

Urgent progress is required on the stalled Marine Protected Areas bill. The Social Democrats want to see a moratorium on licences to pump raw sewage into protected waters, and immediate revocation of existing licences.

Please also see the sections in this document on Transport, Cycling, Litter and Dumping, Recycling and Waste, Plastics, Biodiversity, and Energy Communities for further details of actions we propose.

There are many ways Councils and Councillors can make an impact on climate change.

- Promoting better **coordination and collaboration among different Strategic Policy Committees** to address the cross-cutting issue of Climate Change more effectively.
- Supporting the **development of green infrastructure** including hedgerows, wetland restoration, and woodland expansion.
- Leading by example in **housing design and energy saving in the Council's own buildings**.
- **Designated drop off points** around our urban centres within a 1 km radius of schools, so students walk on dry mornings.
- Supporting and facilitating **Cycling Buses** for **children travelling to school**.
- **Bicycle shelters and secure lock-ups** at all public buildings.
- Promoting the use of **surplus heat in district energy schemes**.
- **Reducing energy consumption** by accelerating the transition to low-energy LED public lighting.
- More **public recycling bins**.
- **Better collection opportunities at amenity centres** for mattresses, sofas, large plastic toys etc.
- **An end to single-use plastic at council events** and timelines to end or reduce them in council supported events.
- Promoting and **expanding the number of community gardens and allotments** where feasible. Our Councillors **will encourage councils to use vacant and derelict land for community gardening** where appropriate.
- Making sure there is at least one **water inspector** for each local authority, ensuring year-round testing of water quality at bathing spots and in rivers.
- Enhancing biodiversity through creating native **Woodland Walks** and **Wildflower Meadows** in existing and new parks.
- Advocating for local authorities to **cease the use of glyphosate** in public open spaces.
- Greater availability of **clean free drinking water and water fountains**.
- Increased prevalence of **rainwater harvesting** as a standard practice in our communities. (See Page 13).
- Require each local authority to develop a **local clean air** strategy.
- Provide funding for the environmental department in Councils to have at least **one staff member focused on clean air** and related environmental issues.
- Adequate numbers of **car-charging points** in every small town and village.
- Supporting representation from **environmental, community, and cycling groups** on Council Committees.

Tackling Litter and Illegal Dumping

We believe our Councils can play a much bigger role in tackling litter and illegal dumping. As judged by the number of fines issued, there is **significant variance in the level of enforcement activity** by local Councils.

Similarly, the level of funding per capita for local authorities under the Local Authority Enforcement Measures Scheme varies widely.

As with general financing of local authorities, the Social Democrats believe there needs to be an evidence-based approach to the funding local authorities receive to tackle dumping. There is no apparent reason why some counties get several times the fund funding per capita under this scheme that others get.

The Social Democrats will ensure that every local authority **adopts a clear strategy on dumping and takes a zero-tolerance approach to offenders**.

Our Councillors will take the following actions and approaches:

Naming and Shaming

The Social Democrats favour **a naming and shaming policy** for people found guilty of illegal dumping. Our Councillors will explore all legal avenues to bring this about.

We will also seek to deploy technology, including CCTV, wherever feasible to identify and catch culprits.

More Public Bins

We will **reverse the trend of Councils removing public bins**.

We are particularly keen that additional bins are provided in areas such as around bus-stops and taxi ranks, on approaches to schools, and outside neighbourhood shops. We also need more underground waste bins, which have much larger capacity.

We will also promote the **expansion of Council furniture/junk collection days** as resources allow.

Community Cleanup

We will promote and **support residents' clean-up days** and work side by side with Tidy Towns committees to deliver cleaner environments in our communities.

This will include promoting beach, canal, and neighbourhood clean-up days, with a special emphasis on removing plastic pollution.

Our Councillors will support the fantastic work of Tidy Towns groups and work with them to increase the positive impact they have on the cleanliness and biodiversity of their communities.

Facilitating Good Behaviour

Public facilities for disposal of non-recyclable material should have **longer weekend and evening opening hours**.

The easier it is to dispose of unwanted items the less likely there will be a problem with dumping.

Charges for bringing disposable items to public facilities should be as uniform as possible across the country and should be pitched at a level that discourages dumping.

Regarding the issue of dog waste, we will replicate a successful community experiment where **dispensers with free doggy bags** were erected at entrances to parks, resulting in a significant reduction in the problem.

We also wish to expand the number of bins so that dog-owners can easily dispose of dog litter. Too often, these bins are left overflowing and are not emptied.

Tackling Bad Behaviour

We want to hire more litter wardens and improve the enforcement process. We favour the **doubling of on-the-spot fines for littering** and further increasing fines for illegal dumping.

In turn, we want to double funding to the anti-dumping initiative so that detection, enforcement and clean-ups can be improved.

It is **vital that penalties for illegal dumping are actually applied**. Enforcement bodies are too often failing in their duties to apply appropriate penalties. Our Councillors will work to ensure that fines are applied at a level that reflects the risk posed to, or damage exacted on, the environment.

An estimated 50,000 households dispose of their waste in an unregulated manner according to the County and City Management Association. We will focus on reducing this figure.

We want to set **strict enforcement targets** for local authorities and the Environmental Protection Agency to deal with the chronic problem of illegal dumping, as well as infringements of conditions attached to waste licences and permits.

We would improve national funding to allow the recruitment of additional staff in this area.

We would double on-the-spot litter fines from €150 to €300 to improve the deterrent of dog-owners not picking up after their pet.

Investing in Recycling

Most People want to do their best for their environment and play their part by recycling as much as possible. However, we are not making it easy for them.

Our current recycling system is inadequate. There isn't enough **basic information** for consumers on how and where people can recycle materials and items, and the recycling system in Ireland can't handle many goods that are sold in our shops.

We need national legislation on banning certain single use plastics and micro-plastics, and a new national and EU strategy to tackle unrecyclable packaging. Local authorities have a key role to play in this.

The Social Democrats want our Councils to take the lead again on recycling. Some of them have very committed staff doing a great job in their area but many could do so much better.

We believe that:

- **Consumers must have much better information** so that they can make informed choices on minimising their waste and **maximising their recycling, reuse, and repair opportunities.**
- We need a **completely new process** that is more effective in minimising waste so the volume of unrecyclable products reaching our supermarket shelves is vastly reduced and so that recyclable waste that is currently not collected as part of household collection services can be recycled.
- Local authorities can play a much bigger role **by expanding the number of Civic Amenity Centres, making waste charges affordable, expanding opening hours of bring centres,** and providing better options for recyclable material that is currently not part of kerbside collection.

We are proposing a mixture of practical local and national measures to vastly improve the effectiveness of work local authorities are doing promoting recycling and the circular economy.

Better Recycling/Repair Options

We believe that **funding for the development of recycling centres should be reinstated**, and the number of centres expanded so that there is at least one civic amenity centre for every population centre.

We will work to spread best practice around the country. The recycling centre in Bray, County Wicklow, is a very good example of where the **public service has partnered with charity shops** to allow residents dispose of certain unwanted material.

We would like to **end the practice of waste collected in public bins going to landfill** and we will roll-out segregated public waste bins.

The Social Democrats will to **support the creation of more social enterprises such as the Rediscovery Centre, Food Cloud, and Recreate Ireland**.

We believe the tax code and commercial rates system should be examined and reformed to promote better second-hand markets and repair businesses.

We will explore, through the European Institutions, the possibility of **reduced VAT rates for the repair of goods** and how better regulation could ensure goods are longer lasting and repairable.

Improved Information & Education

We need far better customer information on recycling – what can be recycled, where it can be recycled, and which bin can it go into.

While the development of www.mywaste.ie has been welcome, it is far too basic. If waste can't go in a household recycling or compost bin, then consumers should know where in their area an item can be recycled. Such

information is still not readily available in some local authorities.

There is also much confusion among the public as to what the different recycling emblems on packaging mean. Our Councils can play a stronger role in making this information available.

We believe education on recycling, reducing and re-using can also be improved in our schools, building on the success of the Green Flag initiative.

New Recycling Targets

We want to see **new targets established 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.

At the last count, the percentage of households with three bins in some counties remains too low.

We also want to see **new specific targets set for recycling in places of employment** – an area that has been badly neglected.

Responsible Disposal

We strongly support the principle that waste is treated/disposed of **as close as possible to where it is generated**.

This is not only in the interests of fairness, but it also incentivises waste reduction within regions. It also minimises emissions, congestion and pollution risk associated with transporting waste across the country

We will insist on **transparent emissions monitoring for all waste facilities**. We believe current systems are inadequate, especially in respect of waste incinerators.

In some cases, waste licences are being granted on inappropriate sites close to residential homes. **We will insist that the**

EPA and local authorities meet their responsibilities around only allowing waste operations on suitable sites and under strict and enforceable conditions.

We will insist on proper compliance with the assessment process.

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.**

This levy should be set at a level to encourage the recycling of construction and demolition waste and to reduce the amount of waste being landfilled. Proceeds should be set aside for the environmental fund.

New Structures on Waste

We are calling for a **fundamental review of the effectiveness of the Repak Scheme in how we approach waste and the respective roles of producers, retailers, and consumers.**

In particular, we need to re-examine responsibilities of retailers and manufacturers in reducing the plastic used for the packaging of products, especially loose products. Local authorities often end up picking up the costs of this flawed system.

The waste sector in Ireland is not adequately regulated. There is **still no economic regulator for the sector.** This has meant that several areas of the country have no competition for their waste services.

It has also led to a situation where, almost uniquely in developed countries, Ireland has a “side-by-side” competition model for waste services – by far the most cost-intensive model a country can have. The lack of a regulator also makes it very difficult to apply basic standards to waste companies.

The Social Democrats believe the Commission for the Regulation of Utilities should be **established as the regulator of the waste industry**, and that in the short-term we should transition to a system whereby competition works on a “for the market” basis.

We believe this can **allow for the re-municipalisation of waste services** in certain circumstances and we note the savings that accrued in Lyon, France, and other cities when this happened.

Ultimately, we would like to see a transition to full re-municipalisation where resources, costs and consumer interests allow.

Tackling the Plastic Problem

Plastic has become endemic in our culture. It is now almost impossible to avoid purchasing daily necessities without also purchasing some plastic packaging.

There is a growing problem worldwide of plastic pollution, particularly with single use plastics and **our ‘throw-away’ culture** – everything from vinegar and shampoo sachets to birthday party goodie-bags and drinking straws; we use them once for perhaps thirty seconds and it can take half a millennium to break down. **It is the very definition of unsustainable.**

The damage to our oceans is potentially catastrophic with some estimates warning that we could have more plastic than fish in our oceans by the middle of this century. And scientists have yet to confirm what exactly plastic pollution is doing to our food chain and the potential long-term risks to human health.

The recent introduction of the Deposit & Return Scheme can have a positive effect, if the many problems currently undermining the project are solved, but more action is needed.

There is an urgent need to reduce the demand for and supply of plastics, and we commit to the following measures:

- The Social Democrats welcome and support **EU initiatives** on this issue. However, a 2030 target for the achievement of some of the objectives around plastics is not ambitious enough and we believe Ireland should **go much further much sooner**.

As an interim measure, we are seeking **a levy on plastics that cannot be easily recycled** in Ireland at the moment.
- In tandem with this, local authorities should take a pro-active approach to ensure the development of **further recycling facilities so that a wider range of material (for instance black plastics and some soft plastics) is recyclable** right across the country.
- We support a ban on all **unnecessary single-use plastics** such as takeaway coffee cups, knives and forks, and other items, and will seek to put **an end to single-use plastic at council events**.
- We will promote the **development of re-fill options** in retail to minimise the production of plastic containers and we will encourage more local authorities to provide **refill water dispensers and drinking fountains** so that the demand for plastic bottles is reduced.

Protecting Biodiversity

There is growing concern worldwide about the **impact of human development on the biodiversity of our planet**. Depletion of wildlife and insect loss have become very significant environmental issues.

The Social Democrats will ensure that each of our Councils take biodiversity seriously. We will promote a concept we call **Green Communities**, whereby Councils would promote biodiversity as much as possible within a given zone.

Under our proposals, the Council would prioritise measures such as:

- Recruiting **biodiversity officers and ecology officers** in the Councils on which we are represented.
- Increasing the presence of **bins, and reducing litter** to keep parks, waterways and beaches clean.
- The **planting of trees and flowers** in existing and new developments, and on streets.
- Pursuing **blue flag status** for beaches in our coastal communities.
- Significantly **reducing the use of pesticides and herbicides** in public green spaces and, where possible, in gardens.
- Creating wild picnic bench spots in developments and near offices and encouraging the creation of **rooftop gardens in offices and apartments**.
- Advocating for local authorities to **cease the use of glyphosate** in public open spaces.
- Developing a **national hedgerow conservation strategy** so that a correct balance can be struck between the interests of landowners, road users, and the habitats of our native wildlife.
- Creating native **Woodland Walks** and **Wildflower Meadows** in existing and new parks.

More Affordable and Sustainable Energy

Ensuring energy affordability for homes and businesses is **important to mitigate deprivation and fuel poverty, and to improve economic competitiveness.**

Fuel poverty is often defined as where a household spends more than 10 per cent of income heating their home, but more broadly might be viewed as a situation where households cannot afford to keep the home adequately heated.

The Social Democrats believe that Ireland can do much more to **promote affordable and sustainable energy and that local authorities can be significant players in this.**

Too often, the debate on energy pits environmental sustainability against affordability. **Sustainability and affordability should be dealt with side by side.** Climate change is happening, and the role of carbon is undeniable. Equally, energy poverty is a real thing and unless the most vulnerable in our society can access affordable energy, we are undermining public support for the fight against climate change and creating another problem for ourselves.

The Social Democrats believe that **energy policy should be based on the UN's Sustainable Development Goals.** These goals set us the objective of **tackling climate change and preventing poverty at the same time.** In that vein, we believe local authorities can play a very significant role in promoting a new community-focus on energy policy.

Solar Energy

Individual households and homes can be made more resilient to energy price and supply shocks through **the rollout of solar panels.**

Though solar installation on private dwellings, public and community owned buildings, and commercial premises has risen significantly, the lack of coordination is inhibiting the scale of nationwide installation. **Greater efficiency through economies of scale must be created.** Installing panels and completing retrofits almost at random slows down installation and drives up costs. This is where local authorities can have a role.

The Social Democrats want to **install solar panels on 100,000 homes each year** as part of a sustained state-led effort to harness the power-generating capability of the technology.

Around one million homes in Ireland are suitable for solar panels but do not have them installed. We will provide **grants to households to install solar panels**, reducing household emissions and cutting electricity bills by an average of up to 40 per cent over the course of a year.

The initial tranche should be targeted at low-income households, using the same eligibility conditions as for the Warmer Homes Scheme.

We will take the following actions:

Solar Panel Installation Strategy

We want to install solar panels on 100,000 homes per year as part of a sustained state-led effort to harness the power-generating capability of the technology.

In Government, we would create **an initial €200m fund to provide grants** to households to install solar panels, reducing household emissions and cutting electricity bills.

The Role of Local Authorities

We would examine the possibility for local authorities to **bulk-buy these solar panels** to allow households to avail of further economies of scale. A standardised approach has the potential to cut costs by up to half.

Installing panels and completing retrofits almost at random slows down installation and drives up costs. Having installers in one area, doing multiple installations and retrofits is far more beneficial. **Coordination between local authorities, energy agencies, the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI), and**

Sustainable Energy Communities is necessary. We would have local authorities and local energy agencies create **a register of approved PV installers**, allied with government grant funding, so they can efficiently manage PV installation at scale in council-owned private dwellings.

Solar Meitheals

Though the Government have invested heavily in the creation of voluntary-run Sustainable Energy Communities (SECs) across the country, once operational the effectiveness of these SECs has been limited. We will lobby for **enhanced funding of local authorities and their associated energy agencies** so they can support interested Sustainable Energy Communities (SECs) to become Solar Meitheals.

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

Retrofitting

Over recent years, the number of homes that have received a ‘deep retrofit’ has increased significantly but the Government is still well behind on its targets. The retrofitting and better insulation of homes, specifically through a ‘deep retrofit’, **offer homeowners the opportunity to make significant energy and financial savings, while improving the quality of their living environment.**

We will take the following actions:

Support for Local Authorities

We want to see **local authorities, the SEAI, and energy agencies develop a list of building contractors under the coordination of One-Stop Shops** to tender for block retrofits. This action should be supported by all Councillors, with funding provided at a national level.

Retrofitting Council Housing

Local authorities and energy agencies should **identify council-owned housing estates**, with building fabric that lends

itself to a ‘deep retrofit’, and work with interested local SECs to create block applications for **‘deep retrofits’ in areas of geographic concentration.**

Retrofits in the Wider Community

Once these council-home retrofits are completed, local authorities and energy agencies should also **identify housing estates that are ripe for ‘deep retrofit’**, and to work with local SECs to create block applications amongst homeowners for deep retrofits.

Community Ownership of Energy

The benefits for individuals from the roll-out of renewable energy need not be limited to solar panels on roof tops. There can also be **significant benefits at a community level from the shared ownership of other energy projects.** Local populations can retain wealth in their local area through the community ownership of projects like windfarms. Such ownership has been shown to also increase local support for such projects.

There is now a clear pathway to allow communities, primarily through the **Sustainable Energy Community (SEC) model**, to own and generate their own renewable energy, the revenues of which will return to the community, reinforcing community support for decarbonisation. Despite this, the Government is far off its 500MW target to be produced by community-owned renewable schemes.

Currently SECs undertaking this process can receive funding from the SEAI. However, the process for the release of this funding is far too cumbersome. To remedy this, the Social Democrats would introduce two new measures:

- **Increased funding to local authorities and their relevant energy agencies**, to provide greater technical, financial and business planning expertise to SECs undertaking this process, as well as funding to provide long-term no-cost loans to help SECs through this process.
- Provide **government-backed low-interest green-loans** to SECs in the construction of these renewable energy projects. Given the high cost of construction of Community Owned Renewable Farms, it is imperative that the Government extends financial supports to these schemes. It is not enough to solely rely on European Investment Funds. Ireland has a Strategic Investment Fund that already identifies 'climate' as one of its main impact themes, and the Social Democrats would extend the ability for Community Groups to access government low-interest green loans.

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

Our Councillors will also work to ensure that all new housing developments include facilities for microgeneration and storage that enables maximum retention of energy produced, allowing households to reduce energy costs and generate income. Bodies such as the Tipperary Energy Agency have shown the enormously positive impact communities can have. We will work to emulate this right across the country.

Supporting Wind Energy

Ireland's renewable energy resources represent an enormous opportunity for the country.

If we adequately invest in our renewable energy capabilities, Ireland can **become a net exporter of clean energy by the end of the decade**, while reducing our reliance on imported fossil fuels, enhancing our energy security, and reducing vulnerability to international price fluctuations.

Investing in green energy will also be crucial in mitigating climate change and reducing greenhouse gas emissions in line with our international commitments. **At a local level, renewable energy will also create jobs and stimulate economic growth.**

It is important that **the State and state bodies like local authorities can benefit** from involvement in this strategically important and potentially lucrative sector of the economy. In many counties, wind farms are already the biggest commercial rates payers to the local council.

Our Councillors will be **strong advocates for wind, solar and other renewable energy creation** on the local authorities on which they serve, and will promote the benefits and opportunities to constituents. This will allow us to build a more resilient, sustainable and prosperous future for communities and for the country.

There needs to be **better alignment of county development plans with national policies on climate action and renewable energy**. An audit should be carried out as a priority to assess where gaps exist. We also need to resource our planning system properly (hiring more planners and ecologists) to help assess renewable energy projects.

The easiest wind farm to 'operationalise' is the one that is already built and operating. **Permission for existing wind farms in county development plans should be extended** where the farm has reached 'end of life' and the operator is seeking 're-powering', unless there are very good reasons not to.

Delivering Improved Public Transport

Traffic is choking our cities, towns and villages. Meanwhile, too many Irish communities have no transport option but the car. Ireland has one of the highest rates of car usage in Europe.

This didn't happen by accident. It is the result of a **longstanding neglect of public transport investment**.

Under successive governments, one abandoned or delayed public transport plan has followed another. Our inability as a country to adopt long-term plans and implement them comes back to haunt us repeatedly.

The Social Democrats are committed to **significant investment in both urban and rural public transport**. Prioritisation of **public transport and cycling over roads expenditure** simply has to happen to reduce carbon emissions from the transport sector. The planning of these things is also important for building homes and sustainable communities.

In this Manifesto we are setting out a clear commitment that Social Democrats Councillors will **campaign strongly on behalf of their communities for significant improvements in local public transport**. We will use every power available to local Councillors to facilitate the expansion of public transport services in our communities.

We are committed to:

Directly Elected Mayor

We are committed to campaigning in favour of **directly elected mayors for Cork, Dublin, Galway, Waterford**, and for all local authorities who want them (see Page 62).

We strongly believe that these mayors should assume responsibility for transport planning in each of these cities and counties, creating strong linkages with satellite counties, towns, and communities.

High Planning Standards

We will put **transport planning at the heart of all significant housing plans**.

We must end the practice of building homes before we build the infrastructure that new communities will depend on.

We will ensure that the **needs and opinions of people with disabilities are heard** and responded to, and that **universal accessibility** is central to all transport decisions affecting our Council areas.

It will be our aim to ensure that public and active travel transport services are

affordable, disability-inclusive, and child- and elderly-friendly. This will involve access and appropriate space for wheelchairs, and other mobility supports.

It also means that streets, footpaths and cycle lanes should be designed to ensure that children, older people and disabled people can move about safely.

Better Bus Services

Our Councillors will work for an increased prevalence of **town buses** across all local authority areas.

We must also increase the prevalence of **bus shelters**, which make a significant difference to people's enthusiasm about using public transport.

We are committed to working with local public transport service providers to **promote the use of predictive analytics** to determine if extra service provision is needed during adverse weather conditions and major public events such as festivals, concerts and sporting events).

We will aim to introduce **more night bus services**, a move that will help to support the food, beverage and hospitality industry, and night life, around the country.

At a national level, we will continue to campaign for **lower fares** so that the use of public transport is encouraged and congestion is reduced.

Engaging All Stakeholders

We will ensure that Council officials are responsive to local traffic concerns and that requests for roads repairs, traffic lights, pedestrian lights, filter lights, yellow boxes, bollards, ramps and all aspects of **traffic management and roads maintenance** are dealt with promptly and efficiently.

We will promote **active travel to schools** and ensuring that all local authorities prioritise the provision of **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.

Our Councillors will ensure that public transport service providers play a full role in Council Transport policy meetings.

We will **establish good accountability arrangements** at these meetings so that Councillors can raise service issues for constituents.

We will further ensure that the National Transport Authority is more responsive to meeting requests from local authorities.

Finally, we will ensure that the **public know about every significant transport and traffic proposal** related to their community and that their voice is heard in the decision-making process.

Promoting Cycling

Ireland is far behind much of Europe in the development of cycling infrastructure. While recent years have seen improvements, many are yet to recognise that cycling is a major transport area that can contribute hugely to society.

The benefits of cycling are enormous. And everyone, even those who don't cycle, stands to gain. With more cycling we get:

- **Less pollution, less congestion, and less carbon emissions.**
- **Healthier lifestyles** and a more active population.
- **Better mobility** and quicker commuting times.
- **Safer streets and more liveable neighbourhoods.**

Cycling saves time, saves money, and saves lives.

Our local Councillors will help put cycling at the heart of the thinking and strategy of each local authority on which we are represented. Cycling should be recognised as a core element of transport policy and Social Democrats Councillors will make this happen.

We will support the development of comprehensive segregated cycle-lane networks across each local authority area and work to improve connectivity and permeability between and within communities.

Our commitments to cycling include:

- Significantly **improved funding** for cycling infrastructure.
- **Proper segregation** for safer cycling.
- More cycling **greenways** and urban bike schemes.
- **Safer Cycling to School.**
- At national level, improved access to the **Bike to Work** scheme.

The Social Democrats are committed to the following measures:

Increased Funding for Cycling

At a national level, we are committed to **maintaining the recent increase of cycling funding to 10 per cent** of the Land Transport Budget and **in the medium term, increasing funding so that 20 per cent of the Transport Capital Budget is spent on cycling and walking.**

Both current and capital funding are critical to the expansion of cycling.

Proper Segregation for Safe Cycling

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

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

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

In the interim and where cycle lanes can't be segregated, we favour the **programming of traffic lights so that cyclists can get a head start.**

We would examine the possible **reduction of local road speeds to 30kph**, a speed which greatly reduces the chance of fatality in an incident compared to, for example, 60kph.

We favour greater use of segregated contra flow cycle lanes.

Improved Cycling Infrastructure

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

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

We will increase funding for the **maintenance of cycle lanes** at a local level.

We will improve road designs so that roundabouts are less hazardous, so that hostile junctions are redesigned and manhole covers, drains and other potential hazards are appropriately positioned.

We will ensure that all road upgrades and new roads comply with best practice road safety standards and the Hierarchy of Road Users is respected.

At the local Council level, we will ensure that **Cycle Connects** and the **GDA Cycle Network plan are prioritised as part of each local authority's development plan process.**

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

Cycling Greenways

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

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

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

We must challenge the culture of objections to such developments, particularly where these objections appear to emanate from a desire for personal convenience, the continuation of car-centric culture, or financial gain.

Safer School Trips

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

We 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 highly successful

Galway Cycle Bus, and seek to emulate it right across the country. Funding should be prioritised for community initiatives such as these that promote active travel to schools.

Local Cycling Officers

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

Our Councillors will also lobby so that the filling of any vacancies of pedestrian and cycling officers are prioritised within the Council's recruitment process.

Cycling Incentive Schemes

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

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

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

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

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

Strong Local Economies

Councils can contribute hugely to the economic success of their areas by promoting and facilitating strong partnerships with the local business community, and by setting the right conditions for business.

Each Council must be cognisant of the **key drivers of economic development** in their area, the key industries at the heart of this, and adopt strategies to protect and enhance these sectors. Our Councillors are committed to the following measures:

Working with Local Business

We will work with the business community to **facilitate and sustain jobs-rich enterprise opportunities** and to promote economic development.

We will champion local businesses that not only drive economic growth but also **pledge to uphold exemplary labour standards**, ensuring each job created is a step toward fair employment.

We will also ensure that **sustainable economic development, job creation, and job sustainment are key goals** of the development plan in every Council we are represented on.

Procurement

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

We will also seek to create a **more inclusive and accessible tender process** so that a wider range of organisations can successfully bid for contracts, for example smaller local firms or local social enterprises.

Training

We will put a **greater focus on enterprise training**, through the Local Employment Offices (LEOs) and other state agencies, and on new strategies that aim to **maximise the participation of those currently excluded from the workforce**.

Where appropriate, we will conduct local skills censuses and develop complementary training programmes which address local skill gaps.

Rejuvenating Main Street

We will **prioritise the rejuvenation of our Main Streets to encourage greater footfall**, discourage vacancy, improve vibrancy, and make them places where people want to regularly shop, visit, socialise, and live.

(See section on Rejuvenating our Town Centres).

Tourism

We will prioritise tourism and heritage and believe our Councils can contribute significantly to better offerings on these across a number of their competencies.

These offerings include: **planning and development, planning enforcement, signage, promotion, litter control, beach**

and **parks maintenance**, and in the expansion of **festivals, cultural events, and greenways**.

We will introduce **more night bus services**, a move that will help to support the food, beverage and hospitality industry, and night life, around the country.

Commercial Rates

We will ensure that the **rates regime is fair and transparent and promotes competitiveness**.

We will seek to raise collection rates so that local authorities have more revenue and so that compliant businesses are not competing against non-payers. We will use some of this extra funding to lower rates where possible and appropriate.

We will ensure that **adequate rates rebate schemes are in place for businesses facing genuine trading difficulties and for start-ups**, as long as such a scheme does not distort competition between competing outlets.

Markets

We want to support town and village markets so that small food producers and co-ops have a space to trade in our communities and people can buy local produce and support local producers.

Insurance Costs

Nationally, we are very concerned about the **failure of Government to tackle the high cost of public liability insurance** faced by many businesses, but particularly those with high footfall.

Our representatives will strongly push this issue on behalf of local businesses until the excessive court awards for minor injuries

(which is at the heart of our very high insurance costs for public liability) are more in line with international norms.

We also need to see **far more action by the Government and regulators to promote sustainable competition in the insurance market** – the current competition model has failed.

Community Hubs

We will **promote the development of Community Hubs** which would provide hot-desks, co-working facilities, hi-speed broadband, and conference and meeting spaces to local businesses and remote workers.

Promoting Community Banking

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

This would improve the **availability of credit in local communities using Credit Unions and Post Offices**. The retention of our existing post office network is extremely important.

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

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

Community Wealth Building

The work of our Councillors will be informed by **the principles of Community Wealth Building** (see next section on same), so that the amount of wealth extracted from the local community is limited, and more income and spending is recirculated within the local area.

Community Wealth Building

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

These ideas are being applied by a growing number of businesses and municipalities across the UK and USA, driving a shift in thinking around economic development.

Community Wealth Building (CWB):

- Recognises the **benefits of a diverse blend of ownership models**, which can return more economic power to local people and institutions.

For example, small enterprises, community organisations, cooperatives and many forms of municipal ownership are often more economically beneficial for the local economy than large or public limited companies.

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

- Seeks to **increase flows of investment within local economies**.

The aim is to harness wealth that exists locally, for example by maximising local community benefits through procurement and commissioning policies.

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

CWB can be particularly useful (even crucial) in areas where the economy has been hollowed out through years of under-investment.

It has the potential to re-direct millions of euros back into the local economy, leading to a reduction in unemployment and increased wealth in the area.

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

The Social Democrats are committed to the following actions and principles around Community Wealth Building:

Procurement

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

We will also seek to create a more inclusive and **accessible tender process** so that a wider range of organisations can successfully bid for contracts, for example smaller local firms or local social enterprises.

Using a wider range of criteria beyond cost alone can be used as part of the procurement processes and can help contribute to virtuous local supply chains.

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

Community Energy Schemes

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

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

There is now a clear pathway to allow communities, primarily through the Sustainable Energy Community (SEC) model, **to own and generate their own renewable energy**, the revenues of which

will return to the community, reinforcing community support for decarbonisation.

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

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

(See section on Developing Sustainable Energy, Page 36).

Social Enterprise

Social enterprises blend entrepreneurial spirit and activity with a social mission, with the goal of addressing issues including local, unemployment, social exclusion, or environmental sustainability at a local level.

Properly funded and supported, they have the **potential to play a significant role in building resilient communities**.

Our Councillors will advocate for access to Local Enterprise Office business supports that enhance the skills and capabilities of social enterprise leaders and workers.

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

Where possible, our Councillors will work for increased local financial support to encourage the growth and sustainability of social enterprises, and foster an environment where Social Enterprises and Cooperatives can thrive.

Promoting Community Banking

As noted in the previous section, it is a long-standing aim of the Social Democrats to support the provision of community banking across Ireland.

This would improve the **availability of credit in local communities using Credit Unions and Post Offices.**

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

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

CWB within the wider Community

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

The term ‘anchor institution’ is used to refer to organisations which have an important presence in a place, usually by

virtue of being large scale employers, large purchasers of goods and services in the locality, or overseeing large areas of land, whilst also having relatively fixed assets.

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

Tapping into their **sense of civic responsibility and their contribution to the local economy** – from how they purchase goods and services to their employment policies to their investment and finance strategies – can also further Community Wealth Building.

Guided by Community Wealth Building principles, Anchor Institutions can play a defining role generating local economic benefits.

We will work to mainstream Community Wealth Building in the strategies and policies of local authorities and national government.

Rejuvenating our Town Centres

Our town centres, main streets and neighbourhood shops are often the centre-points of our neighbourhoods. They are some of the most prominent spaces we share and in which we come together as a community.

Yet, too often in Ireland, they can be the worst kept, worst planned, least loved areas. **We have to re-think how we support businesses and enterprises at local level to ensure the vitality of our towns, villages and urban villages.**

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

The Social Democrats want to **put these shopping areas back at the top of the Councils' agenda.**

We will **prioritise rejuvenation of these parts of our towns and villages** to:

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

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

Alongside our other plans for strengthened local government and stronger communities, we are making the following proposals to boost support to our main streets and neighbourhood shops, and to rejuvenate our town centres.

We commit to the following:

Promoting Regional Economic Development

We should be using the National Development Plan to invest in projects that boost industrial and commercial capacity across the country such as **improved rural broadband, public transport, electricity capacity, and third level technological centres.**

This will improve local economies and employment opportunities, boosting purchasing power and retail possibilities across the country, and help provide economic counterweights to Dublin and the eastern seaboard.

Rates Rebates as a Policy Lever

Owners of vacant commercial premises can often claim a refund on commercial rates from their local authority.

This can encourage the proliferation of shuttered, empty and under-used premises on many of our Main Streets.

No rebates should be available for premises that remain vacant after a reasonable period is allowed for re-letting or re-use, to be set by each local authority.

Social Democrats Councillors **will work with interested tenants and landlords to ensure that, where possible, vacant commercial premises can be used for 'Meanwhile Use'** for things like pop-up galleries and other types of creative spaces, as well as office spaces for local start-ups. (See next page for more info).

Our Councillors will ensure that **adequate rebate schemes are in place for community facilities, businesses facing genuine trading difficulties and for those that need assistance in the start-up phase** – subject to a provision that such a scheme

would not distort competition between neighbouring outlets.

Improving Local Authority Funding

Central funding of local authorities must be improved to allow adjustment of commercial rates and street-parking rates to promote the commercial viability of Main Street businesses.

Funding should also be provided for **environmental improvement works** such as street lighting, footpaths, parking, cycling infrastructure, accessibility for wheelchairs and buggies, landscaping, and street furniture.

Planning and investing in things like better lighting in urban areas, and places for nature within our urban settings, are key to making people choose to spend more time in our towns and villages.

As noted earlier, we would also like to see seed funding provided to local authorities to help **improve the collection of commercial rates** and apply at least some of these savings to help lower rates overall.

Town and Village Regeneration

The Town and Village Scheme currently provides funding to help rejuvenate local communities. However, many urban pockets in need of such funding cannot currently qualify. **This scheme needs to be better funded and expanded to allow urban villages to benefit.**

In addition, we would ensure that the **shop-front improvement grant scheme is enhanced** and available to all towns and villages.

Each of our Councillors will push for a **specific budget for 'neighbourhood shops'** in their area to improve the appearance of these key focal points in communities and

to make such shops more accessible for people with disabilities, cyclists, and pedestrians.

We will support our communities in making bids under the Urban Regeneration and Development Fund and the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund.

Strict Enforcement of Out-of-Town Shopping Centre Guidelines

A strong set of planning guidelines exists to protect Main Streets and town centres when planning applications for out-of-town shopping centres are being considered.

However, these have not always been well observed or applied by planning authorities.

We are in favour of setting the planning regulator with the task of ensuring that planning authorities strictly enforce planning guidelines **so that town centres are not adversely affected by new developments.**

Tackling Vacant and Derelict Sites

The law needs to change to **give stronger powers to local authorities to tackle vacant and derelict sites and shops.**

The Vacant Site Levy failed in large part due to the fact that a huge number of local authorities failed to engage with the terms of the Levy. At one point, three years after the implementation of the Levy, nearly half of all local authorities had no sites listed, and most had no market value available.

We will ensure that our Councils **properly engage with the legislation governing the Residential Zoned Land Tax (RZLT)**, which replaced the Vacant Site Levy.

Such measures would minimise dereliction, counter land-hoarding, and

help end the under-use of town centre sites.

We also favour the strengthening of the role of local authority staff, such as Public Domain Officers, to intervene with businesses who fail to maintain their premises to an acceptable standard at the expense of neighbouring businesses.

Meanwhile Use

Commercial vacancy is a growing problem in many of our cities, towns and villages.

‘Meanwhile Use’ allows for a tenant to temporarily occupy vacant or underused premises, sites or spaces in urban areas.

‘Meanwhile Use’ is typically pursued while a landlord secures a new long-term lease, before the major redevelopment of a site, or in a long-term vacant space. It benefits the community, the landlord and the temporary tenant, including by:

- Reinvigorating main streets.
- Providing short-term security and income for landlords.
- Supporting local SMEs and start-ups by creating new flexible, affordable workspace and creative spaces, and
- Providing potential spaces to creative, artistic or cultural groups in a town.

Meanwhile Use Leases are agreements between the local authority, the landlord, and the tenant.

Social Democrats Councillors **will work with interested tenants and landlords to ensure that, where possible, vacant commercial premises can be used** for things like pop-up galleries and other types of creative spaces, as well as office spaces for local start-ups.

Repopulation of Main Streets

We will promote the repopulation of urban centres by **encouraging over-the-shop conversion to residential**.

The Buy and Renew Scheme allows local authorities to purchase and renovate housing units in need of repair, before making them available for social housing. Too many local authorities have, in our opinion, been too slow to utilise this funding, despite the **additional benefit of tackling dereliction and improving streetscape appearance**.

The Urban Regeneration and Development Fund assists with compact and sustainable development, and facilitates **a greater proportion of residential development within the existing built-up areas**.

Again, this has the added benefit of ensuring more parts of our urban areas become attractive and vibrant places in which to live, work, visit and invest.

The Rural Regeneration and Development Fund aims to address building vacancy through refurbishment and redevelopment, or demolition where necessary, while the Town and Village scheme includes funding for tackling vacancy and dereliction, and an option for local authorities to acquire land for town regeneration.

Town Website & Local Branding

We will promote the development of town websites and social media presence with listings of all shops, services, contacts, events, promotions, opening times etc.

We will also push for **funding for the development of local branding, such as a county flag or other regional branding**, to support indigenous producers and local independent shops.

Parking Management

Several local authority areas, particularly in cities, are experiencing problems with parking management, having outsourced the area. Simply put, parking enforcement often does not happen at all away from the very centres of the cities or towns in question.

In areas where this is the case, our Councillors will seek **specific resources for each administrative area to be outlined in the outsourcing contract** so that there is a fairer spread of parking wardens across the local authority and the division of resources is not solely dictated by which areas are considered 'lucrative'.

Community Hubs

We will promote the development of **Community Hubs** which would provide hot-desks, co-working facilities, hi-speed broadband and conference and meeting spaces to local businesses and remote workers.

These could be provided in **under-used or disused buildings** or as a section of a local library or Council office. The more we can promote a community-centred approach, the greater vibrancy and economic sustainability in our local communities.

End Upward Only Rent Reviews

Rents are a key part of the cost-base for main street businesses and are a major factor in the viability of many independently-owned shops.

Upward-only rents can undermine businesses because their sheer inflexibility does not take account of the ups and downs of the business cycle. We will **seek to amend the Constitution to ensure that legislation can be enacted banning upward only rent reviews**.

Safer Communities

The Social Democrats are committed to fostering **safer, more vibrant communities across Ireland**.

Crime Prevention Through Design

Recognising the profound impact that the built environment has on **crime rates and community well-being**, our Councillors will advocate for the integration of **Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED)** principles into all aspects of urban planning and development. CPTED strategies not only **deter criminal activity** but also **enhance the quality of life** for all residents, embodying our vision for inclusive, secure, and cohesive communities.

CPTED is based on the premise that the proper design and effective use of the built environment can lead to a reduction in the incidence and fear of crime.

Core CPTED principles include increased visibility in public spaces to encourage positive social interaction among residents and create environments where potential offenders feel exposed; ensuring urban environments are well-maintained and free of the signs of neglect, which can signal to potential offenders that crime is tolerated; using design to express ownership over spaces, encouraging residents to take stewardship of their community areas and deter unauthorised access; and promoting the use of public spaces for safe, intended purposes.

Our Councillors commit to:

- **Championing CPTED principles**, integrating them into all urban planning and community development initiatives within their local councils.
- **Increasing Public Awareness** by leading public awareness campaigns to educate residents on the role of environmental design in crime prevention.
- **Advocating for legislation and policies** that mandate the consideration of CPTED principles in all new developments and major refurbishments.
- **Initiating and supporting platforms** for ongoing dialogue and collaboration between residents, community groups, urban planners, and the gardaí.

Better Policing

We believe **policing in our community could work so much better** if there was greater co-operation and consultation with communities and local Councillors.

The **Joint Policing Committees** (JPCs) and especially **Community Safety/Policing Forums** around the country are good models. They bring together Gardaí, senior Council officials and communities to discuss crime and anti-social activity in the local area. They have been a welcome improvement on making local Gardaí accountable and a good way of exchanging information on local issues. However, we are not maximising output from them.

Their effectiveness depends far too much on how active individual residents, Gardaí and Council staff are in the given area. Far too few people know about them, how they can interact with them, or how to have an issue raised and responded to. There are often unnecessary restrictions Councillors questions to them. And the remit of the JPCs is currently too restricted.

The Social Democrats wish to **reform the JPCs** so they have a more formal role in setting local policing plans. All elected Councillors should be able to pose a limited number of questions at their local JPC and/or Community Safety/Policing Forum. Gardaí should be required to provide information well in advance of meetings to allow for the smooth operation of JPCs. Contact details for the public and minutes of meetings should be easily available on each local authority's website and in public libraries.

All Social Democrats Councillors will actively engage with their JPCs and Community Safety/Policing Forums to **represent crime and safety issues arising in their areas** and ensure that their **communities are well informed as to how the Council and local Gardaí are responding**. We will also work to further **improve co-operation between JPCs and drugs task forces**.

Separate from JPCs, we will promote “passive policing”, and ensure that public parks and public places are well lit and safe. On a national level, the Social Democrats will continue to seek the restoration of community Gardaí staffing levels. A greater prevalence of gardaí on bicycles patrolling an area has the double benefit of allowing them to move quickly and be seen by the community.

We support the establishment of at least one dedicated Women's Refuge for victims of domestic violence in every county, and the full meeting of Ireland's obligations under the Istanbul Convention.

Fair Funding for Local Authorities

There are four main income sources for local authorities.

These comprise of:

- Local Property Tax Receipts (collected from local homeowners but distributed from a central fund).
- Commercial Rates (collected from local businesses).
- Grants from central government (mainly from the departments of Housing & Local Government, Transport, and Communications).
- Charges on Goods and Services provided by local authorities.

Under this system, local authorities depend very heavily on central government to fund basic service provision. However, the Social Democrats are **not satisfied that the current system is sufficiently evidence-based**, as there is a wide variation in how counties and cities benefit.

In particular, population size, population changes, staff ratios, and infrastructure deficits are not adequately factored into how grants and the proceeds of the Local Property Tax are distributed to local authorities.

Local Property Tax

There are a number of key problems with how the funding raised through the Local Property Tax (LPT) is distributed.

The first issue is that the **LPT has not boosted Council funding**.

The introduction of the LPT was supposed to ensure that funding to local authorities could be stabilised and improved and, in turn, used to improve local services. This simply hasn't happened.

The **financial position of local authorities has not significantly improved since before the LPT was introduced**. What gains the LPT did initially provide to local authorities was taken away by the withdrawal of Motor Tax funding and, in many cases, a reduction in central government grants in roads and housing. Individuals and communities rightly ask "what am I getting for my Local Property Tax?" and the answer is often "not a whole lot more".

Another problem is that the **allocation of the LPT to our local Councils is not evidence-based.**

There is a **severe disadvantage to Councils that have experienced significant population growth** since the “baselines” were set. Each Council’s baseline has not been properly updated since the early 2000s, so in many cases no longer reflects the true financial needs of Councils.

This results in a transfer that particularly advantages counties where population growth has not been as rapid, but means that Councils such as Meath, Kildare, Wicklow, Fingal, South Dublin, Galway City, Clare and others lose significant funds. Some of the Councils with the lowest staff-to-population ratios lose the most out of this process because their position is assumed to remain unchanged, when the reality is populations have grown rapidly. **It is simply unfair.**

The Social Democrats believe that the **way the proceeds of the LPT are distributed needs to be overhauled.** It firstly needs to factor in population growth and the service and infrastructure needs such growth generates.

The **Department of Housing should go back to the drawing board and re-establish each local authorities’ true needs.** These needs should be updated regularly to allow for demographic shifts, infrastructure deficits, current staff-to-population ratios, and other issues that have shifted significantly in the last couple of decades. The **LPT should then be distributed on a much fairer basis than is currently the case.**

This would mean increased funding for staff, services and infrastructure for those Councils with the biggest population increases in recent years. It would also mean that the Local Property Tax would be a more truly “local” tax, as was the original intention. **Our Councillors’ votes on Local Property Tax will be informed by the need to fund local public services and the direct benefit accruing to their specific local authority area from the LPT.**

Collection of Commercial Rates

While there have been some welcome improvements in the collection of Local Authority Rates (or Commercial Rates) in recent years, there is still much **room for improvement** in many areas.

There is a collection rate of 94 per cent for the Local Property Tax. Disappointingly, the average collection rate per local authority in Commercial Rates is only 88 per cent. The most up to date comparative data across local

authorities shows that while Fingal County Council leads the way on 98 per cent, **four local authorities have collection rates of less than 80 per cent.**

Such a **low collection rate means that compliant businesses are doubly disadvantaged.** They are paying rates while their competitors are not, and the level of the rate struck is higher than it would be if everyone was paying their fair share. If we want our local Councils to provide all of the basic public services that we rely on, then everyone who can afford to contribute must do so.

The Social Democrats would **invest in supports and expertise to assist those poor performing local authorities** to boost their collection rates so that these Councils can become more self-sustaining and less reliant on central funding. This would entail reviewing where each authority is falling down and providing them with advice and extra staff to improve rates collection. We also believe there is much scope for peer-learning on this issue.

Several local authorities offer discounts on rates for vacant commercial premises. The Social Democrats believe **significant rates discounts for vacant premises encourages the dis-use of shops and is one of the main factors explaining why so many of our Main Streets and Town Centres are empty,** run-down or littered with shuttered premises. Indeed, vacant units impact on footfall and impede the commercial interests of neighbouring outlets.

We believe there should be no rebate **for premises that remain vacant after a reasonable period, to be set by the Council, is allowed for re-letting or re-use.**

We accept this measure will impact differently on different areas depending on the level of economic activity in the area so we would allow local Councillors apply discretion as to how long a unit would have to be vacant in a given area before the discount would no longer apply.

Local Authority Grants

The **distribution of Local Authority Grants from central government is also not done on a fair basis.** Many of the same local authorities that suffer from the unfairness of how the Local Property Tax operates, for instance Meath and Kildare, are hit with the same unfairness under this grant system.

The Social Democrats are calling for a **complete overhaul of how this system operates so that allocations operate on the basis of an objective resource allocation model.** Population growth and service deficits should be much more central to the value of grants given out.

Honest and Open Councils

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

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

A long-standing aim of the Social Democrats is the **establishment of an Anti-Corruption Agency**. Such an agency would be a vital law enforcement tool to help eradicate corrupt practices in politics and business in Ireland. We remain absolutely committed to its establishment.

If we are to build public trust in local democracy, then **transparency, accountability, and integrity must be the defining features of local decision-making**.

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

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

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

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

Transparent Local Government

We want to see the **live online streaming of council sessions**, at all levels.

This is already being done in many local authority areas since the pandemic. Much in the way that Oireachtas TV has improved visibility and accessibility of the national parliament, this would make council meetings more accessible to the

people affected by the debates, discussions, and decisions.

Technology should also be used to make meetings more accessible to Councillors who can't make every meeting. This additional openness and accessibility should be mandated at all levels, from Municipal Council meetings to Regional Assemblies.

Voting records at Council meetings should be made easily available to the public.

The Social Democrats accept all of the **recommendations for local authorities made by both the Mahon Tribunal and Transparency Ireland** in its report *Integrity Index 2018*.

Ethics in Public Life

The Social Democrats aim to develop and maintain up-to-date, **comprehensive Corruption and Fraud Prevention and Contingency Plans** in every local authority on which we serve.

We will ensure there are **proper procedures in place for Ethics Registrars**. We will also ensure that all consultations are adequately documented and published on the Council's website.

We also want to see Councillors' annual **declarations of interests** published on every local authority website.

Assisting Councillors in Their Work

It has been the experience of many of our party's Councillors that the documents and reports to be attached to the agenda for

council meetings are often made available too close to the meeting.

When this happens, Councillors often don't have time to prepare properly. This means that elected representatives cannot properly scrutinise Council affairs.

These documents should be sent out in a timely fashion. Our Councillors will seek to amend the Standing Orders to create rules around this function so that documents are received in a timely fashion.

National Level

At national level, the Social Democrats will continue to highlight the government's inexcusable foot-dragging when it comes to implementing **the ethics reforms recommended by the Mahon Tribunal in 2012**.

The Public Sector Standards Bill was introduced to the Oireachtas in 2015 but there was simply no political drive behind it, and it never passed into law.

While aspects of this Bill have been superseded by subsequent Acts, we are determined to have its provisions passed in full.

Direct Democracy at Local Level

Since their inception in 2014, **Public Participation Networks (PPNs)** have operated in every local authority and are a vital link in bringing the community voice to the local authority policymaking process.

In being made up of local and community groups, PPNs recognise the contribution of volunteer-led organisations to local economic, social, and environmental capital, and the participation of PPNs in the deliberative democracy process facilitates input from these organisations to council policy.

Elected Councillors have a vital role to play in facilitating participation through open consultative processes and active engagement. **Social Democrat Councillors will engage constructively with PPNs** and local authorities to support communities and allow for member organisations to engage meaningfully on issues of policy that concern them.

Community Budgeting is a type of participatory budgeting scheme that builds on international practice and the award-winning scheme run in South Dublin County Council (SDCC) since 2016. These schemes bring control of some Council funds back to local communities with an opportunity for broad public participation in deciding spending priorities.

Community Budgeting **allows local residents and groups to propose ideas** for Council spending in their communities using a specially allocated fund. Proposed projects which meet scheme guidelines are shortlisted for public vote.

Councillors and Council management play an important role in establishing and steering the scheme, but should not back particular projects and instead ensure the public have their say.

Elected Social Democrats Councillors will seek the establishment of **Community Budgeting schemes in each local authority** on which they are represented, along with cross-party Steering Committees with the involvement of both management and Councillors.

The amount to be allocated and the geographic area covered (local electoral area/municipal district/full Council) will depend on the specifics of the local authority in question. The successful €300,000 annual scheme in South Dublin has seen projects as diverse as playgrounds, ball skill walls, orchards and public pianos proposed, voted on by the public, and delivered by SDCC.

Strategic Policy Committees

For elected Councillors, Strategic Policy Committees (SPCs) are a vital mechanism to shape and guide local policymaking **in line with community needs and priorities**.

These committees, focusing on key sectors like housing, transport, economic development, and the environment, provide a structured process for Councillors to influence policy direction at a local level.

Through their work on SPCs, Councillors can have a direct channel to represent the interests and concerns of their constituents in specific policy areas. This role is **fundamental in ensuring that the voice of the community is heard** at the policymaking table.

Serving on an SPC also offers Councillors the opportunity to specialise in areas of personal or professional interest. This specialisation can enable them to build a depth of knowledge and expertise, which can elevate the quality of debate and decision-making within the overall council.

SPCs are an opportunity to drive change, influence local governance, and make a lasting impact on the community they serve.

Better Community Engagement

Our Councillors commit to **leveraging SPCs as platforms for deeper community engagement, ensuring a broader range of voices are heard in the policymaking process**.

This could involve initiatives to increase public awareness of SPC functions, facilitating public submissions on policy proposals, and hosting community forums or workshops to gather input on local issues and priorities.

Improving Transparency

Our Councillors will work to **improve transparency around the workings of SPCs**, including the publication of meeting minutes, decision-making processes, and

policy development updates in accessible formats.

The goal should be to demystify local governance for constituents.

Evidence-based Policy

Our Councillors will advocate for an **increased focus on data and evidence in SPC deliberations and recommendations**.

This might involve research, stakeholder consultation, and policy outcome-evaluation to ensure decisions are informed by the best available evidence.

Living Our Values

Our Councillors will ensure that SPCs prioritise policies that support **sustainable development and social inclusion**, aligning

with the core values of the Social Democrats.

This will include pushing policies that promote affordable housing, public transport, environmental conservation, and economic opportunities that are accessible to all community members.

Strengthening SPCs

Our Councillors will propose measures to strengthen the role of SPCs by ensuring they are **adequately resourced and have**

the authority to make meaningful contributions to policy development.

Better Coordination

Our Councillors will promote **better coordination and collaboration among different SPCs** to address cross-cutting issues more effectively.

This can lead to more cohesive policy development, avoiding siloed approaches and ensuring that council initiatives are well-integrated and mutually reinforcing.

Directly Elected Mayors

The creation of a directly elected mayoral position in a local authority would help balance the power of the unelected Chief Executive with **added democracy**.

The Social Democrats welcomed the advent of the directly elected mayor (DEM) for Limerick and believe the **further roll-out of this position for other city and county councils is the way forward**. However, we acknowledge that plebiscites should decide where they will be created.

We need accountability for people who are making the important decisions, as well as for directors of services, with more oversight coming from the mayor and Councillors. Local authority chief executives have a lot of power, and yet there is no way for voters to remove them if they do not like the job they are doing.

We propose:

- **Retaining the Chief Executive role**, alongside a DEM for the counties who wish to have it.
- Creating the DEM as a **strategic role**, leaving the Chief Executive to manage the operations of the council.
- Giving **budgetary oversight powers to the DEM** who would assist the Chief Executive in drawing up the annual budget with assistance from the Councillors.
- Giving the DEM **responsibility for initial drafts of county development plans** and climate action plans, with input from Councillors who must also approve the final version.
- Ultimately awarding DEMs **executive responsibilities** in each local authority where they exist in areas like housing, planning, waste management, community and traffic policing, and fire services. We are particularly keen to see DEMs take a role in transport policy, with a key role in setting local transport strategies. They would also take the lead on areas such as economic and tourism development, engaging with Gardaí, and creating safer public spaces.
- **Personnel and financial resources** being transferred as appropriate for the mayoral office to function.

As the DEM is not intended to be solely a figurehead, they **should have responsibility for strategy setting and an appropriate level of power to support the functions of the role.**

The mayoral position needs significant power for it to be worthwhile. The entire point of having a DEM is that they have a personal mandate, and their decisions should carry weight. If this is not the case, DEMs will represent merely the addition of highly paid lobbyists to a system that already exists.

The envisaged strategic policy role for the mayor will be difficult to realise without greater access to finance and devolved powers. **The size of the budget is vital.** If the DEM doesn't have a budget to enact their mandate, no mandate might as well exist.

This does not necessarily have to mean "new money" is given to the areas with a DEM. Instead, money that is already spent in the area, but where the decision-making on how to spend it takes place in Dublin, could be devolved to a more local level.

Mayors should set strategy, reliant on engagement with Councillors. Indeed, as many of the executive powers include the right to prepare and propose policies, and Council approval is required to confirm them, the mayor will need to work with the council.

Strengthening Local Government

The advent of Directly Elected Mayors in local authorities would be an important step in improving and enhancing local democracy. However, it will take more than this to have the transformative effect necessary for the potential of local government in Ireland to be fulfilled.

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

At each general election, all political parties make the same statements about local government in Ireland: it's weak, it's underfunded, it's under-resourced. And they all promise to reform it. But outside of promises to conduct a review, few concrete proposals are ever put forward and, after the election, things carry on as before.

The Social Democrats are serious about reforming local government. Indeed, we believe **we cannot reform politics in Ireland until we reform local government.**

By comparison to our European peers, Ireland has low levels of political representation, as well as a very low level of revenue-raising, expenditure and service delivery at a local level.

Our local authorities have the least autonomy in all of Europe, with a system of 'local administration' – rather than local government – that is heavily dependent on central government funding. We also have a relatively low number of local government units. This all must change.

The Social Democrats believe in the principle of **subsidiarity**, meaning that **social and political issues should be dealt with at the most immediate or local level** that is consistent with their resolution. There are a number of policy areas that could, and indeed should, be dealt with at a more local level than is currently the case in Ireland. This is the way things are done across Europe, particularly in those countries with a history of social democracy.

The extent to which local authorities must, in some circumstances, seek national-level permission to spend money is little short of ridiculous. County and City Councils often cannot hire staff without getting sanction from the Department for Housing, Local Government and Heritage; an overly onerous process.

In most areas of the country, public bus routes are managed at national level by Transport For Ireland (TFI). But it stands to reason that **TFI has less local knowledge of most counties and towns than councillors elected to represent them**. This is the kind of planning that should be devolved to local level.

Local authorities employ planners, architects, quantity surveyors; but too many pieces of work done at local level are micro-managed or even re-done at national level.

The current system leaves the local knowledge in one place, and control of the budget of the other. The Social Democrats believe there are several areas in which local authorities should have more autonomy and control.

- **Public transport planning** is currently not within the statutory remit of local authorities (though there is an advisory role). This role should be greatly enhanced.
- There should be **greater scope for local authorities to raise their own revenue**, beyond the current restrictive setup which essentially amounts to local rates, plus a share from the local property tax fund.
- Other areas of policy where there is scope for greater devolvement to a local level include childcare and elder care, arts and culture, tourism, some aspects of economic development, and certain recreational facilities.
- We need to enhance local democracy and widen participation **by increasing representation** at each local government level; municipal, county, and regional, to better serve our communities.
- We will continue to advocate for the provision of **adequate resources to allow local government to fulfil the roles** already assigned to it, and to broaden their scope.

**Social
Democrats**

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