



**Initial Response to the draft
Programme for Government,
*Our Shared Future***



Social Justice Ireland believes the draft Programme for Government (PfG), *Our Shared Future*, contains several policies and proposals that, if resourced and implemented, would represent a significant step to creating a fairer and more just Ireland.

Certainly, the environmental reforms contained within the PfG have the potential to transform Irish society for the better. Many other proposed social reforms also look very positive.

The PfG also contains a number of causes for concern, including lack of real ambition around poverty. A full analysis of the 130-page document will be published in due course. In the meantime, our initial response contained below highlights 10 positives contained within the PfG and 10 causes for concern.

We go on to list other areas contained in the document on which *Social Justice Ireland* had advocated and campaigned.

Ten Positives

1. Reiteration of the need for a new Social Contract, and a focus on issues of equality, including the need to equality-proof policies, and to improve gender equality.
2. Acknowledgement of the need for additional investment in Ireland's childcare infrastructure and the plan to establish an agency, Childcare Ireland, to assist in the expansion of high-quality childcare and professional development.
3. Recognition of the importance of regular social dialogue and open engagement with all sectors of society.
4. Reiteration of the need to implement *SlainteCare* and to increase Primary and Community healthcare provision. We also welcome the pledged increase in homecare hours and the aim of introducing a Statutory Homecare Scheme.
5. The considerable commitment to climate action and environmental preservation contained in the PfG will, if fully resourced and implemented, truly transform Irish society from an environmental perspective.
6. Inclusion of ambitious targets around lifelong learning, with a focus on increasing the current rate of 9% to 18% by 2025.
7. Commitment to ending the Direct Provision system and replacing it with a new International Protection accommodation policy, centred on a not-for-profit approach.
8. The renewed commitment to the UN-agreed target of 0.7 per cent of national income to be allocated to Official Development Assistance. In particular we welcome the commitment to a set a monetary expenditure floor based on recent allocations.
9. The plan to establish a Commission on Welfare and Taxation to independently consider how the tax system can support economic activity, promote employment and prosperity, and ensure sufficient resources are available to fund public services.
10. The expansion of the Housing First programme and wraparound supports for people experiencing homelessness, as well as initiatives to include universal design, a social housing passport, the development of a cost rental model, and a reduction in reliance on HAP for social housing solutions.

Ten Causes for Concern

1. It is worrying that poverty, a pervasive and persistent issue in Ireland, gets so little coverage in the PfG. It is also worrying that the main mention of plans to tackle poverty involve the “rigorous implementation of the new social inclusion strategy, *A Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025*”, which *Social Justice Ireland* has previously criticised as being too limited in its scope, and greatly lacking ambition.
2. The target of 50,000 social housing units over the next 5 years is too low to adequately address the existing level of need of c.133,000 households. It is also unclear how many of these will be built by Local Authorities and Approved Housing Bodies, and how many will be acquired or leased.
3. While welcoming the goal to protect core social welfare rates, we are disappointed that the PfG contains nothing about the benchmarking or indexing of core welfare rates.
4. The PfG contains just one mention of Public Participation Networks (PPNs) and manages to mis-name them in the process (as Public Participatory Networks). The plan to conduct “a comprehensive review of Public Participatory Networks and Local Economic and Community Plans, to ensure that they are fit for purpose for climate action and community development” indicates a lack of understanding of what the PPNs do, as well as a lack of consideration given to the issue of real participation.
5. The PfG contains a plan to have the Low Pay Commission (LPC) to examine Universal Basic Income. Issues relating to the role of government in providing a minimum floor below which the living standards of its citizens should not slip go far beyond the remit of the LPC. The Commission on Welfare and Taxation would be a far more appropriate home.
6. The stated intention to continue with the introduction of a pension auto-enrolment system and the idea that this is somehow part of a New Social Contract. Introduction of a universal state pension would be a far fairer and more progressive initiative.
7. While the PfG affirms a commitment to Ireland’s 12.5% Corporation Tax rate, no mention is made of the need for a Minimum Effective Rate of Corporation Tax that could raise hundreds of millions of euros.
8. The absence of mention of youth unemployment and a strategy to tackle it is worrying, given the manner in which young people will likely be disproportionately affected by unemployment as the economy recovers from Covid-19.
9. While the goal of moving towards a living wage over the lifetime of the Government is very welcome, we are concerned at the statement that Government will be guided by the recommendations of the Low Pay Commission on future changes in the minimum wage (possibly removing it from the hands of Government), and also that the PfG contains no mention of precarious working practices or zero-hours contracts.
10. The PfG contains no mention of Universal Basic Services.

In addition, the Programme for Government also includes reference to a number of other issues that *Social Justice Ireland* raises through its publications, research, events, and advocacy. We are pleased to see these issues dealt with in the PfG, even if in many cases we do not feel the Programme goes far enough, or addresses the issues adequately.

Here is a list of some of those issues, divided according to the chapters of the PfG.

A Better Quality of Life for All

- The recognition of the need to develop a set of wellbeing indicators for policymaking. This should include the integration of sustainable development into economic policy, based on the Sustainable Development Goals.
- The expansion of the Town and Village Renewal Scheme to bring vacant and derelict buildings into use.
- The increase in focus on investment in cycling and walking infrastructure.
- The review of the public transport system, investment and fare structures, and the de-carbonisation of Road Transport.

Reigniting and Renewing the Economy

- The review of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment on the basis of fairness and equity. This review also provides an opportunity for a new Government to review the adequacy of core welfare rates.
- The expansion of the credit union sector as a provider of community banking. This provides an opportunity to renew the community ethos of credit unions.
- Support for the European Green Deal. This support must be matched with capital and current investment to support green projects.
- The focus on investment-led recovery and the commitment to use currently-available low-cost borrowing to support this, particularly in areas such as housing, healthcare, transport, education and climate action.
- The increase to the Home Carer Tax Credit.
- The ring-fencing of a proportion of the carbon tax revenue for a Just Transition. This must go beyond the social welfare system and support initiatives such as a new model for retrofitting grants and green transport.
- The increase in REPS-2 funding to support more sustainable farming.
- The inclusion of budgetary overspends in department budgetary plans.
- The use of wellbeing indicators and balanced scorecards in the development of government budgeting.

Green New Deal

- Delivering a National Aggregated Model of Retrofitting reaching over 500,000 homes by 2030, as part of the EU Renovation Wave.

- Accelerating the electrification of the transport system including electric bikes, electric vehicles, and electric public transport, alongside a ban on new registrations of petrol and diesel cars from 2030.
- Developing a strategy for remote working and remote service delivery, taking advantage of the opportunity for a rapid roll-out of the National Broadband Plan.
- Completing and implementing a major Waste and Circular Economy Action Plan.
- Increasing the target for the number of Sustainable Energy Communities.
- Introducing a deposit-and-return scheme for plastic bottles and aluminium cans, in line with the findings of the recently commissioned report.
- Publishing a Just Transition Plan, to frame the work of a permanent Commission for Just Transition.
- Ensuring that financing is available and continue to grow the size of the Just Transition Fund.
- The commitment to developing a new model of engagement with citizens, sectors, and regions as an early priority for Government, building on the learning of recent years as we transition to a low-carbon digital economy.
- The commitment to work in a supportive and constructive way with those agencies and organisations tasked with protecting our biodiversity and natural heritage.

Universal Healthcare

- Enhanced governance and accountability in the health service.
- Free GP care to more children and to carers in receipt of the Carer's Support Grant.
- Abolishing in-patient hospital charges for children.
- Extended free dental care for children.
- Reduced prescription charges and the Drug Payment Scheme threshold.
- Increasing the income threshold on medical cards for people over 70.
- Developing Community Healthcare Networks to support the expansion of services, based on the need and size of local populations.
- Recruiting additional frontline community staff, including public health nurses and allied health professionals, such as occupational therapists, physiotherapists, dementia advisers and speech and language therapists.
- Increasing the excise duty on tobacco to further discourage smoking.
- Plans to tackle obesity.
- Planned improvements in mental health services.
- Supporting older people to live at home and with dignity and independence for as long as possible.
- Expanding community-based care, bringing it closer to home, in line with the Sláintecare Implementation Plan.
- Embedding ageing-in-place options for older people into the planning system, as the county and city development plans are redrawn this year.
- Increased provision of smaller homes in developments, ensuring that older people can remain living in their communities, close to essential services and facilities.

- Tasking local authorities to work with Approved Housing Bodies, co-operatives, private developers, and Age Friendly Ireland on the development/redevelopment of older-person housing.
- Maintaining support for the Housing Adaptation Grant Scheme, although we are of the view that this should be increased.
- Exploration of a new digital skills for citizens grant scheme, focusing on one-to-one training.

Housing for All

- Increased funding and cooperation with stakeholders, case workers and homeless people on a suite of measures to help rough sleepers into sustainable accommodation.
- Expansion of the Housing First approach, with a focus on the construction and acquisition of one-bed homes and the provision of relevant supporting services.
- Movement away from dormitory-style accommodation on a long-term basis and aim to provide suitable tenancies.
- Progressing a state-backed affordable home purchase scheme to promote home ownership.
- Strengthening the Mortgage to Rent scheme and ensuring that it is helping those who need it.
- Ensuring that an appropriate mix of housing design types is provided, including accommodation for older people and people with disabilities.
- Expanding the role of Vacant Homes Officers in local authorities and support local authorities to bring vacant stock into productive use.
- Working on a package of reforms with Approved Housing Bodies, to ensure that they can access finance and move off the balance sheet.
- Ensuring that procurement policy for social housing has strong social clauses, is in line with the new Green Public Procurement policy, and that it delivers strong value-for-money protections for public funds.
- Developing a Cost-Rental model for the delivery of housing that create affordability for tenants and a sustainable model for the construction and management of homes.
- Strengthening the regulatory and enforcement mechanisms, with regard to short-term lettings.
- Improving the security of tenure for tenants, through legislating for tenancies of indefinite duration, increasing RTB inspections and enforcement, and examining incentives for long-term leasing.

Balanced Regional Development

- Accelerating the roll-out of the National Broadband Plan.
- Ensuring that policy and planning across Government, in relation to the future provision of services and infrastructure, will be fully aligned with the National Planning Framework to create balanced and sustainable development in Ireland.
- Recognising the importance of agriculture, fisheries, tourism, and other sectors that support balanced regional development and employment.

- Publishing and implementing a new Rural Policy to build on the progress of the Action Plan for Rural Development to promote rural recovery and development.
- Investing in infrastructure, including broadband and waste and wastewater infrastructure, to support the development of rural towns and villages.
- Prioritising the upkeep and expansion of parks, green spaces, and other recreational infrastructure, for community enjoyment and biodiversity enhancement.
- Supporting, through a consultative process, community groups, arts and cultural bodies, sports clubs, voluntary organisations, and charities to recover and enhance their impact in the aftermath of COVID-19.
- The commitment to supporting a LEADER Programme and delivering a Rural Development Programme that is led by independent Local Action Groups and supported by Local Community Development Committees.
- Working with local authorities to establish designated groups to help facilitate the local roll-out of the infrastructure.
- Support the development of Broadband Connection Points across the country, as well as digital hubs that can support remote working in as many of the Broadband Connection Points as possible.
- Developing a national remote working policy to facilitate employees in working from home, or from co-working spaces in rural areas, and supporting the retention of skilled young people in rural communities.
- Pursuing a coherent policy approach to the enterprise needs of every part of Ireland through the Regional Action Plan for Jobs.
- Assisting rural economies to diversify into new sectors and markets.
- Developing new apprenticeships in sectors with a strong regional footprint.
- Further integrating Local Link services with other existing public transport services (e.g. the National Transport Authority) and building integrated rural transport, improving connectivity and access for rural dwellers to work, study, social activities, and public services, while reducing car dependence.
- The acknowledgment that An Post has untapped potential to do more and to make a further significant contribution across many areas of public, business and community life in Ireland.
- Seeking reforms to the CAP to reward farmers for sequestering carbon, restoring biodiversity, improving water and air quality, producing clean energy, and developing schemes that support results-based outcomes.
- Continue to support farmers to embrace farming practices that are beneficial environmentally, that have a lower carbon footprint, and that better utilise and protect natural resources.

A new Social Contract

- The ambition to provide each citizen with accessible and affordable health care, housing, education, childcare and disability services, as well as a living wage, upskilling, and a dignified retirement.
- Protecting core weekly welfare payments.

- Consideration being given to increasing PRSI over time to replenish the Social Insurance Fund, and make improvements to short-term sick pay benefits, parental leave benefits, pay-related jobseekers benefit and treatment benefits.
- Improving jobseeker supports for people aged under 24.
- Increasing the availability of activation schemes, including those run by local employment services.
- Developing a pension solution for family carers that recognises their important work, and the inclusion of extra support for carers more generally.
- Maintaining the entitlement for the Free Travel Scheme for all individuals aged 66+.
- The goal of working across government to address food poverty in children and ensure no child goes hungry.
- Undertaking an independent assessment of the pilot projects aimed at retaining Traveller and Roma children in education.
- Ensuring that the housing needs of the Traveller Community are met by local authorities and ensuring that existing funding is fully drawn down and utilised
- The significant ambitions around improving the lot of people with disabilities, particularly around personal budget concerns, employment supports, and implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of people with a Disability
- Recognition of the value of Early Education and Childcare for children, and the plan to introduce a long-term sustainable funding model that promotes quality, better outcomes for children and makes a career in childcare more attractive.
- Enabling increased remote and flexible working arrangements to support families in their parenting and childcare choices, while also supporting enterprise.
- Supporting higher participation of women in the workplace, as well as less commuting and greater regional balance.
- The plan to work with the childcare sector to introduce more flexibility in childcare.

Building Stronger and Safer Communities

- The establishment of a gambling regulator focused on public safety and wellbeing, covering gambling online and in person, with the powers to regulate advertising.
- Implementation of a plan for future refuge space on the publication of a review of domestic violence accommodation provision.
- Targeting resources at programmes that seek to address inequalities in sports participation, in particular socio-economic disadvantage.
- Publishing a strategy to support volunteering, including the development of a comprehensive supporting infrastructure and measures to disseminate best practice.
- Full implementation Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities, the five-year strategy to support the community and voluntary sector in Ireland up to 2024.
- Supporting the library network to meet the needs of our ever-changing society and implementation of the public libraries strategy, Our Public Libraries 2022.
- The plan to build on Ireland's first ever National Social Enterprise Policy.

Better Opportunities through Education and Research

- The commitment to continue to develop our educational system to meet the needs of all students and to tackle disadvantage from an early age.
- The commitment to develop innovative and collaborative approaches to ensure that our educational system fosters a love of lifelong learning, enables stronger communities, cherishes the environment, contributes to the economy, and adds to the health and wellbeing of all learners and wider society.
- Publishing a new literacy, numeracy, and digital skills strategy to support learners.
- Development of a long-term sustainable funding model for higher-level education, in collaboration with the sector and informed by recent and ongoing research and analysis.
- Recognising the role of community education and its vital role in our communities.
- Utilising the Human Capital initiative to deliver a wide range of education and training programmes for jobseekers, to support economic recovery and green skills development.
- Developing and implementing a standardised system of accreditation of prior learning, taking account of previous education, skills, work experience and engagement in society.
- Publishing an updated Apprenticeship Action Plan to look at new ways of structuring, funding, and promoting apprenticeships.
- Developing a strong pipeline of apprenticeships and traineeships to support our recovery and to provide new career paths for people with different interests and abilities.
- Expanding apprenticeships to new and non-traditional areas and work with employers to create new pathways for young people into sustainable and skilled employment.
- Seeking to expand funding for programmes to engage with students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds from primary school onwards.

A Shared Island

- The prioritisation of the protection of the peace process.
- A commitment to working with all traditions on the island, to build consensus around a shared future.
- Ensuring the full implementation of *New Decade, New Approach*.
- Continuing to utilise the All Island Civic Dialogue as a forum for addressing Brexit-related issues and other challenges arising for the island.

At the Heart of Europe and Global Citizenship

- A commitment to high environmental and labour standards and fair-trading practices, and a belief that European efforts will lead to political, social, economic, and environmental reform around the world.
- Support for the European Green Deal, seeking to ensure that it is central to the EU's economic recovery.
- Support for the EU Circular Economy Action Plan.

- Working with our EU partners to ensure greater coherence and consistency in actions to tackle climate change and promote biodiversity.
- Working to ensure the sustainable management of debt for developing countries.
- Continuing to work towards the UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals, aimed at ending poverty, reducing inequality, and tackling climate change.
- Ensuring that Ireland's international aid remains untied to trade.

Reforming and Reimagining our Public Life

- Building the capacity of local authorities to lead locally and engage citizens on climate change and biodiversity.
- Examining the prospect of devolving more powers to the local authorities through the legislative process to strengthen and enhance local democracy.
- Providing tailored and appropriate training to local authority members.
- Enabling councillors to access research and training to support them in their duties.
- Incentivising local authorities to bring forward pilot participatory budgeting projects.
- Enhancing local government environmental enforcement capacity.
- Expanding the role of the Parliamentary Budget Office to independently audit the cost of individual tax and spending measures contained in political parties' budget submissions and general election manifestos, their overall dynamic impact, and to assess their broader economic impact.
- Introducing a more open budgetary process, less dominated by 'existing level of service', with small incremental additions each year, but focused on major public goals and proven policy performance.
- Establishment a unit in the Department of Taoiseach to coordinate social dialogue.

Social Justice Ireland is an independent think-tank and justice advocacy organisation of that advances the lives of people and communities through providing independent social analysis and effective policy development to create a sustainable future for every member of society and for societies as a whole.



Acknowledgement

The work is partly supported by the Department of Rural and Community Development via the Scheme to Support National Organisations and Pobal.



An Roinn Forbartha
Tuaithe agus Pobail
Department of Rural and
Community Development



Support Social Justice Ireland

If you wish to become a member of *Social Justice Ireland* or make a donation to support our work you may do so through our website

www.socialjustice.ie/mem

