

4. Delivering a Just Transition for Ireland – some policy options¹

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In ‘Our Shared Future’, Government has committed to a Green New Deal and a new social contract (Government of Ireland, 2020). This paper will outline policy options that have the potential to progress both a Green New Deal and a new social contract in both a fair and inclusive manner.

Introduction

Climate change is one of the most pressing challenges we face, how we adapt and mitigate now will in large part determine the type of world in which future generations will live. When adapting to meet this challenge, we must also grasp the opportunity to address social and economic challenges that already exist, making sure that the actions that we take begin to address these problems rather than exacerbate them. This requires a Just Transition approach, both to meeting climate goals, and addressing the multifaceted social and economic challenges that we have failed to address for many years.

Climate commitments

Ireland is committed to legally binding climate-based goals in 2030 and a national commitment to achieving net zero emissions by 2050. Meeting our climate goals and delivering the social and economic transformation required for a new social contract will be challenging. In terms of climate targets, Ireland is on track to miss its carbon budgets without urgent action (Climate Change Advisory Council, 2023) and is on track to overshoot the 2030 emission reduction targets (EPA, 2023). To meet our 2030 targets every measure in the Climate Action Plan will have to be fully implemented. Given challenges in implementing previous climate policies it is reasonable to question whether every measure in the plan will be implemented by 2030. If current trends continue, the commitment to a Green New Deal would seem out of reach.

¹ This paper is an extract from forthcoming policy briefing ‘Delivering a Just Transition for Ireland: policy options’.

Some progress has been made with the publication of the Climate Action Plan and the country's first ever series of carbon budgets to 2030. However, a significant gap remains between climate action policy and climate action delivery. Current projections also suggest the 2030 targets will be missed (EPA, 2023) and that Ireland will fail to meet the targets in the first and second carbon budget periods without immediate and urgent action to rapidly reduce and prevent emissions (Climate Change Advisory Council, 2023). Ireland is significantly off-track from paths that deliver long-term transition to climate neutrality and our 2050 national policy goals. Ireland's provisional greenhouse gas emission estimates for 2021 (EPA, 2022) are a considerable cause for concern in relation to achieving Ireland's binding Carbon Budget targets. The current provisional numbers indicate that 23.5 per cent of the Carbon Budget for the 5-year period 2021-2025 has already been used. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, staying within the current carbon budget now requires deep emission cuts of over 8.4 per cent per annum over the period 2022 to 2025. The Climate Change Advisory Council (2023) finding (based on EPA projections) that Ireland is very likely to exceed the limit set in the first carbon budget (2025), and indeed is likely to exceed the second carbon budget (2030) is very concerning. The Council notes that failure to take action early has negatively impacted the prospects for meeting the cumulative target to 2030, and that this will have serious consequences for future carbon budgets.

Social contract

Delivering on the commitment to a new social contract is similarly challenging. Despite robust headline economic figures for GDP and GNI* growth, windfall corporate tax revenues of at least €6 billion in 2023 (Government of Ireland, 2023) and record employment levels, Government has not managed to deliver the transformative change required for a new social contract. In contrast to our strong economic performance, our social indicators make for more sobering reading. According to the most recent figures from the Central Statistics Office, 13.1 per cent of the population (over 670,000 people) are living in poverty, of whom more than 188,000 are children, over 133,000 have a job and more than 143,500 are over the age of 65 (CSO, 2023).

The prospect of either owning or buying a home remains elusive for many. Between 2012 and 2022, residential property prices rose by 75 per cent, private rents by 90 per cent, while wages rose by just 27 per cent (Parliamentary Budget Office, 2023). A persistent homelessness crisis continues, with a record number of people accessing emergency homeless accommodation exceeding 12,6911

in August 2023, including 3,895 children.² Our health system is also under increasing strain, with just over 84,000 in-patients waiting for treatment, of whom 9,805 are children³ to June 2023 and more than 598,000 outpatients were waiting for treatment, of whom more than 85,600 are children in the same period.⁴ *Social Justice Ireland* sees a Just Transition as a key pillar of a new social contract.

What is understood by ‘Just Transition’

The Government, in the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021, situates a just transition to a climate neutral economy as a process, within the wider statutory framework of climate action, which endeavours, in so far as is practicable, to maximise employment opportunities, and support persons and communities that may be negatively affected by the transition (Government of Ireland, 2021). In the Climate Action Plan, Government details a Just Transition Framework outlined in figure 1. This framework is made up of four principles (Government of Ireland 2021:40):

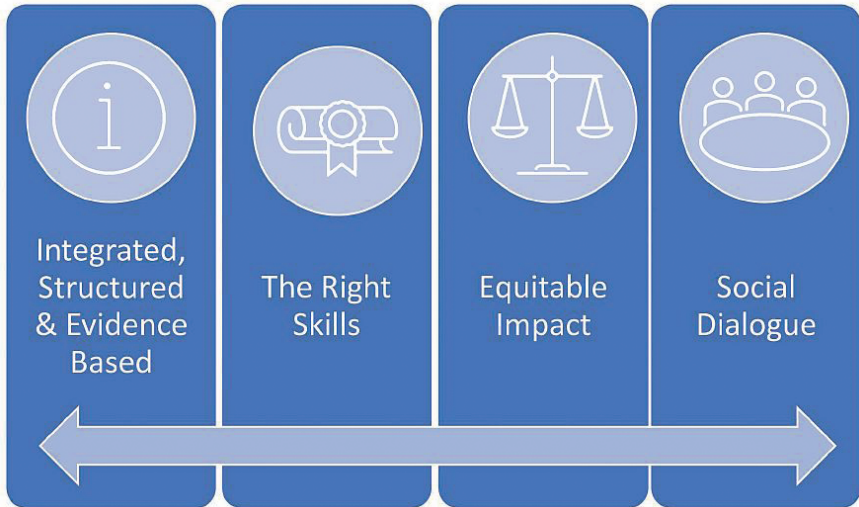
1. An integrated, structured, and evidence-based approach to identify and plan our response to just transition requirements.
2. People are equipped with the right skills to be able to participate in and benefit from the future net zero economy.
3. The costs are shared so that the impact is equitable and existing inequalities are not exacerbated.
4. Social dialogue to ensure impacted citizens and communities are empowered and are core to the transition process.

² <https://assets.gov.ie/271953/f141495e-fac0-483b-a61a-416797f8c02f.pdf>

³ <https://www.ntpf.ie/home/pdf//2023/06/nationalnumbers/in-patient/National01.pdf>

⁴ Ibid

Figure 1: Government Principles for a Just Transition



Source: Climate Action Plan 2021:40

Social Justice Ireland understands a Just Transition as leaving no people, communities, economic sectors or regions behind as we transition to a low carbon future. Transition is not just about reducing emissions. It is also about transforming our society and our economy and investing in effective and integrated social protection systems. It is about delivering quality services and a robust social infrastructure through investment in education, training and lifelong learning, childcare, out of school care, health care, long term care and public transport. Social investment must be a top priority of transition because it is this social investment that will support those people, communities, sectors and regions as we make the difficult transition to a carbon-neutral economy, transforming how our economy and society operates. Solidarity between generations is vital as we begin to implement the policies to meet our target of carbon neutrality by 2050 in a fair way, through a Just Transition process that leaves no-one behind.

What could a ‘Just Transition’ look like from a policy perspective?

From a policy-making perspective, a ‘Just Transition’ process requires moving to sustainable economy, one that is no longer underpinned by linear economic principles. Transition to a sustainable economy can only be successful if it is inclusive and if the social rights and wellbeing of all are promoted. Policy must support a social, environmental and economic transition, and one must not come at the expense of another. This requires embedding sustainable development, ‘development which meets the needs of the present, without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs’ (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987) across all of Government policy - through design, implementation and delivery.

A Just Transition requires a social protection system – along with appropriate services and infrastructure – that prevents poverty and social exclusion for those that lose employment or income due to the effects or mitigation of climate change (NESC, 2020). It also requires a comprehensive mitigation and transition strategy to ensure there is public support for our domestic and international environmental and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This strategy must pre-empt some of the challenges we face as we move to a more sustainable form of development. The development of a national mitigation and transition strategy to accompany the Climate Action Plan is a matter of priority if there is to be public support for the significant and fundamental changes required in the years ahead.

Transforming national policy also means ensuring that a just transition effects change at all levels. This must include social protection systems being updated to uphold an operational and fair Social Contract, planning for an ageing population through implementation of updated care policies and the recognition of unpaid labour in our economy and society. If Government is to deliver our 2030 targets, strong policy coherence; the mainstreaming of climate adaptation into fiscal policy; and governance focused on addressing inequalities is required.

Policy options for a ‘Just Transition’

Investment

Public investment in a productive and balanced portfolio is an important aspect of a Just Transition for Ireland. Investment in renewable and clean energy, climate related research and development, commercial and residential retrofitting and

other key sectors should be prioritised by Government. Government should pursue a policy of climate, human capital and social investment to ensure that existing inequalities are not exacerbated. Government must also increase public investment in climate related research and development. At present our investment in climate research and development is among the lowest in the OECD (OECD, 2021). Government should increase this investment annually, with a specific focus on small and medium-sized enterprises rather than larger corporations. This public investment should improve public access to innovations and green technologies for all and support innovation.

The output and learnings from climate research and development must remain a public good which is accessible to all.

- Apply the principle of the ‘common good’⁵ to public investment into climate research and development to ensure the resulting innovations remain a public good and accessible to all.
- As a general principle, investment rather than tax subsidies should be the preferred policy tool to support and develop climate infrastructure.
- Invest 0.01 per cent of GDP in climate research and development annually to 2030.

Energy Transformation

Energy is the third largest driver of emissions in Ireland. Energy-efficient homes help reduce our carbon footprint as they require less fuel to heat. One of the most cost-effective measures to promote sustainable development is to increase building energy efficiency through retrofitting. The Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI) estimate that €35 billion would be needed over the coming 35 years to make Ireland’s existing housing stock ‘low-carbon’ by 2050. More than 50,000 homes will have to be retrofitted every year to meet the targets set out in the Programme for Government. Investment in renewable energy and retrofitting on the scale required to meet our national climate ambition requires large scale investment in infrastructure.

In order to significantly reduce Ireland’s emissions, investment in retrofitting and the national grid should be a priority.

⁵ <https://www.socialjustice.ie/system/files/file-uploads/2021-09/2014-10-08-thecommongood.pdf>

- Government should develop a national retrofitting strategy of sufficient scale, using the learning from the SEAI deep retrofit pilot programme, with an ambitious target to deep retrofit the entire existing housing stock in a 20 year timeframe and concurrent plans to increase capacity within the construction sector.
- An upgrade of the national grid must be a key element of infrastructure investment so that communities, cooperatives, farms and individuals can produce renewable energy and sell what they do not use back into the national grid, thus becoming self-sustaining and contributing to our national targets.
- Integrate a Building Renovation Passport Scheme⁶ into the National Retrofit Plan. This plan should be fully aligned with the existing Building Energy Rating (BER) system and existing retrofitting finance and regulatory measures. This would facilitate a step-by-step approach to retrofitting which could be more financially appealing and manageable for many households.

Taxation and renewables

Subsidies are an element of the environmental tax code that should be reviewed. Eliminating harmful subsidies mean that government has a wider fiscal space available to it in terms of climate policy and taxation. The value of environmental subsidies in Ireland is substantial (€2.9bn in 2021).⁷ The OECD Environmental Review of Ireland (OECD, 2021) recommends gradually removing remaining tax exemptions and rebates that encourage wasteful fuel use in agriculture, fishery, heating and transport. A review of fossil fuel subsidies is a vital first step. Eliminating harmful subsidies mean that government has a wider fiscal space available to it in terms of climate policy and taxation and can allow for the redirection of these funds towards creating a green economy and facilitating a Just Transition. In light of the current energy crisis, its impact on the cost of living and the challenges presented by the ongoing war in Ukraine, a move to renewable energy must be an immediate policy and investment priority. Government should review all fossil fuel subsidies in 2024 and set out a roadmap to remove them by 2030. The savings from their removal should be invested in renewable energy to support a Just Transition.

⁶ <https://www.igbc.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Introducing-BRP-In-Ireland-Feasibility-Study.pdf>

⁷ <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-ffes/fossilfuelsubsidies2021/>

- Review all fossil fuel subsidies and environmentally harmful tax expenditures in 2024 with a view to removing those that do not align with our national climate goals. This previously foregone revenue should be invested in renewable energy, improving our national grid infrastructure and schemes to address energy poverty.
- Set out a roadmap to remove all fossil fuel subsidies by 2030.

Industry

Industry is a key driver of emissions and therefore can be a key driver of change. Emission reductions in industry will require using materials more efficiently, reusing and recycling products and minimising waste. The introduction of a circular economy would reduce emissions and contribute to restoration of natural capital. Embedding the circular economy principles into our economic framework is a key step towards decoupling economic growth from resource consumption and meeting the targets set out in the Climate Action Plan and the carbon budgets. Recent progress in this regard is welcome, with ‘Living More, Using Less’ - Ireland’s first circular economy strategy - focussing on policy coherence in order to deliver on our national ambitions. Among the objectives of the strategy are a national policy framework for Ireland’s transition to a circular economy; a commitment to reduce Ireland’s circularity gap, so that Ireland’s rate is above the EU average by 2030; and promoting increased investment in the circular economy in Ireland, with a view to delivering sustainable, regionally balanced economic growth and employment. Ireland can learn from international best practice and examine how for example key elements of the Finnish circular economy programme (which is seen as a core pillar of Finland’s target of carbon neutrality by 2035) which could be applied to Ireland such as the mainstreaming of the sharing economy and sustainable products and services; choices that strengthen a fair welfare society and the sustainable use of natural resources ensuring materials remain in circulation longer.

- Government should implement a polluter pays principle across industry and other transformative policies investing in the circular economy and to convert industry to a sustainable sector within the Just Transition.
- Further progress the Circular Economy Strategy and examine the potential for piloting best practice internationally in order to mainstream the sharing economy and sustainable use of natural resources.

- Invest in the development and expansion of Living Labs in each region focusing on areas such as plastics, renewables, zero carbon buildings.

Agriculture and Land Management

Sustainable land management is crucial to Ireland moving to more sustainable agricultural practices and achieving a Just Transition. The Climate Action Plan sets out the indicative range of a 22-30 per cent reduction in Agricultural emissions by 2030. The European Commission's proposals for the Common Agricultural Programme (CAP) for 2021 to 2027 (informed by the Green New Deal and the Farm to Fork Strategy) stipulate that at least 40 per cent of the CAP's overall budget and at least 30 per cent of the Maritime Fisheries Fund would contribute to climate action. Ireland's CAP Strategic Plan 2023-2027 notes the strong emphasis on higher environmental ambition at an EU level, and the incorporation of this ambition and 'Green Architecture' into Ireland's CAP 2023-2027. The new CAP system will incentivise more sustainable practices. However, the new CAP will also have a reduced budget meaning there are less funds to be allocated within Ireland. Resourcing and funding for agriculture in Ireland should prioritise sustainable agricultural methods that reverse biodiversity loss and mitigate climate change among others.⁸ Sustainable land management is crucial to Ireland moving to more sustainable agricultural practices. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) defines sustainable land management as the use of land resources to meet changing human needs while ensuring the long-term productive potential of these resources and the maintenance of their environmental functions. The adoption of sustainable land management would reward sustainable forms of agriculture and acknowledge the role of farmers as custodians of this vital national asset. Ireland will have to adapt to this new reality with sustainable agricultural policies, sustainable land management, protecting biodiversity and rural social and economic development guiding policy.

- Government should publish Land Management and Farm to Fork strategies for 2024 in order to progress towards sustainable agricultural practices.

⁸ https://ec.europa.eu/food/farm2fork_en

- Farm sustainability passports: Government should pilot Farm Sustainability Passport scheme to support farmers to move to environmentally friendly and sustainable agricultural methods.

Transport

Transport contributes significantly to Ireland's emissions. A Just Transition must ensure that transport policy serves all communities, including rural communities and lower socio-economic groups. Reducing the number of private cars on the road through improving public transport and cycling infrastructure and the introduction of congestion charges in urban centres must be part of the transition to sustainable energy. Emissions from aviation are not taxed directly. Jet kerosene use increased by 1.2 per cent in 2019, and is now greater than petrol use, and air travel is now second only to private cars as a share of transport energy. As we begin to look at what measures are required to deliver on the policies in the Climate Action Plan, we must look at the aviation sector and the policy levers that are available to ensure that it makes a contribution to our climate targets. *Social Justice Ireland* has consistently argued that the aviation sector should make a contribution to Ireland's emissions targets⁹ and outlined proposals as to how this could be achieved. Government must implement the key recommendations of 'The Impacts of Aviation Taxation in Ireland' (ESRI, 2021), in particular the recommendation to target the taxation of CO₂ directly by abolishing the Jet Kerosene exemption. This would ensure that air travel makes an appropriate contribution to the sectoral carbon budget for the transport sector and to our national climate targets.

- Government should proactively pursue the removal of the exemption of Jet Kerosene from excise and carbon taxes at EU level. In the interim, Government should introduce a commercial air transport tax which would ensure air travel makes a contribution to carbon budgets for the transport sector in line with the 'Polluter Pays' Principle and the Environment Liability Directive. Revenue accrued should be invested in improving public transport to reduce urban congestion, improving

⁹ <https://www.socialjustice.ie/content/policy-issues/its-time-price-flying-reflected-true-cost>

regional and rural public transport connectivity and in expanding active transport options beyond urban centres.

Policy Coherence

Policy coherence, and well-designed policy packages that support innovation and capacity building are key to reducing emissions. These include economy-wide packages that support mitigation and avoid negative environmental outcomes, meet short-term economic goals while reducing emissions and moving towards sustainable development. In order for effective, well-designed policy to be implemented it must have clear adaptation goals, defined responsibilities and commitments and must be coordinated across both Government and sectors. Climate adaptation therefore must be included in our annual budgetary cycle, with regular assessment and mainstreamed into fiscal policy and governance.

- Government should integrate climate adaptation into the annual budgetary process, while also publishing a green budget within the annual national budget and create targets and a reporting system for each SDG in order to ensure accountability on targets at a national level.

Social protection

Social protection is a key component of wealth redistribution and the delivery of quality services under a functioning social contract. The redistribution of wealth contributes to a more equal society. The provision of quality public services ensures the well-being of all.

Ensure social protection systems adequately provide a safety net and minimum social floor for those most vulnerable to the shocks of a Just Transition and provide services and supports for those facing lifestyle changes due to a changing society and economy.

- This requires benchmarking core social welfare rates to 27.5 per cent of average weekly earnings, with a commitment to indexation over time and an audit of services and infrastructure on a place-based approach, informed by the rural proofing model currently under consideration by the Department of Rural and Community Development.

Care

Care, in its various forms is required throughout all stages of the life cycle; healthcare, childcare and long-term care should be local, affordable and

accessible. Receiving care is an essential part of the life cycle, in early years, later years and for some, throughout all stages of their lives. Whether paid or unpaid, carers contribute significantly to society each year. Care work is people-centred, green work and should be viewed as such in the Just Transition.

Care is also an essential service that allows people to live well and age well in their communities. Initiatives taken towards a statutory entitlement to home care in recent years are welcome, but publication of details and implementation are regrettably delayed. Supporting people to live at home requires an integrated approach that ensures access to a range of supports in the home as well as transitional facilities (including step-up, step-down, convalescence, assessment and review, respite and rehabilitation services). To achieve this, deficits in infrastructure need to be addressed urgently with an emphasis on replacement and/or refurbishment of facilities.

- Government must recognise the essential contribution of carers to society and provide adequate income and protection for those providing care. Government should pilot a Universal Basic Services and a Universal Basic Income Scheme for Carers in line with the Programme for Government Commitment to a Carers Guarantee.
- Create a statutory entitlement to Home Care Services which has the required resourcing to support people to live and age well in their own homes, and can keep pace with increased demand.

Work, education and training

The green transition will drive a transformation of local labour markets, with new skills needed, and others becoming redundant. This shift to a sustainable and net-zero economy will result in a significant transformation of local labour markets, as workers move into different occupations and sectors. New skills will be needed throughout the economy, whether it is retraining construction workers on environmentally friendly materials and techniques, or reskilling automotive workers for electric vehicle production.

Skills development and retraining are vital to ensuring that workers have the right skills to prosper in a changing world of work and are a prerequisite for making the green transition a just transition. Lifelong learning, training and education allow for people to gain, improve and learn new skills. Appropriate education and training systems facilitate labour market participation, reduce impediments to accessing the workplace and allow for sustained labour market participation in the face of changing skillsets and workplaces. Apprenticeships

and Traineeships are an essential part of meeting the employment and training needs during the transition. With both the challenges and opportunities of the green transition being place-specific, local actions or national initiatives tailored to local realities are needed.

Government should resource the upskilling of those who are unemployed and at risk of becoming unemployed through integrating training and labour market programmes and must recognise the challenges of long-term unemployment and precarious employment and adopt targeted policies to address these.

- Resource the development of place-based strategies which are key to supporting communities during the transition, as risks and impact will vary across different regions and sectors. Learnings from past transitions both in Ireland (Bord na Móna closure in the Midlands) and further afield regarding what policies work best must be applied to the green transition. The Just Transition Commission, as proposed in the Climate Action Plan, could and should play a key role in preparing and implementing policies to support a fair and socially inclusive green jobs transition.
- Develop new apprenticeship and traineeships to support climate mitigation measures with a focus on place based, on the job training, focussed on those in the labour market in positions that have been identified as at risk, and address age profile issues by making apprenticeships and traineeships more attractive to those aged 30 and over.
- Ensure those in employment have access to quality employment, where possible having the option to work remotely. Government should facilitate working from home, hybrid models and the expansion of remote working hubs around the country, not only to facilitate improved work-life balance, but also as remote working reduces transport emissions associated with daily commutes.

Conclusion

In order to develop a sustainable society, services and infrastructure must be well-planned and capable of adapting to the changing needs of the population over time. This means that policy planning and design should, from the very beginning, include potential future changes, and as far as possible should be designed with these in mind. An on-going social dialogue structure is required to ensure the appropriate services and infrastructure are delivered, and that there is ongoing public support for the pathway by which these services and

infrastructure will come on-stream. There is an increased responsibility on local and national government to engage with communities on this issue and build local capacity (Climate Change Advisory Council,2020). This dialogue should also focus on what is required to transition Ireland to a low-carbon future, and how such services and infrastructure can be delivered and managed in a sustainable way. This requires input from all stakeholders. Such a mechanism would ensure that there is support and understanding as to how services and infrastructure are to be resourced and rolled out at local, regional and national level.

At present, there appears to be a strong degree of policy incoherence at national level, with government pursuing policies that result in increased emissions and inhibit the achievement of our climate-related goals. The increased emissions from both agriculture and transport mean that Ireland will have to purchase emissions allowances from other member states and face the prospect of being subject to fines for not meeting our European targets. The resources required to purchase emissions allowances could be better used in measures to actively pursue our climate targets. Energy policy is similarly affected through a mismatch between pursuing a policy of data centre expansion, and the pressure that this will put on energy resources whilst simultaneously trying to reduce our energy emissions and incentivising households to reduce energy usage at peak times.

To deliver a truly ‘Just Transition’ policy must support the most vulnerable people and communities who will be impacted by climate action. This will require coherence and collaboration across all Government Departments, state agencies and local authorities. It requires moving beyond actions to implement carbon budgets and the Climate Action Plan, which are vitally important and must be implemented, and also focussing on addressing current social and economic inequalities and infrastructure deficits. Aligning and transforming our economic policies to support our social and environmental goals, measuring progress and wellbeing, investing in social protection systems and a robust social infrastructure, resourcing quality services in areas such as education, care across the lifecycle and public transport must all form part of a whole of Government approach to a Just Transition. The Just Transition, as proposed in the Climate Action Plan, has the potential to play a key role in shaping and delivering a Just Transition for Ireland.

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