Wellbeing: Measuring What Matters

An Alternative Framework for a Fairer Future

2024 edition

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The evaluation of wellbeing as a measure of societal progress is gaining ground internationally, reflecting a positive shift away from the narrower focus of traditional economic measures like GDP to a more comprehensive understanding that includes social and environmental aspects. In line with this shift, the Government of Ireland introduced its Wellbeing Framework to guide policies aimed at improving quality of life. While this initiative is welcome, *Social Justice Ireland's* assessment reveals significant gaps in the Government's current approach, particularly concerning equality and sustainability. Here, *Social Justice Ireland* presents an alternative wellbeing report that offers a more comprehensive and nuanced assessment by prioritising a set of indicators that better reflect the lived experiences of individuals and different groups. *Social Justice Ireland's* approach also restores equality and sustainability as core pillars of wellbeing measurement, and highlights areas where progress has been insufficient, inequitable or unsustainable.

Key Findings from the Alternative Wellbeing Framework

Performance: Out of the eleven dimensions, four show modest improvements, while two dimensions – Mental and Physical Health and Civic Engagement, Trust and Cultural Expression – show negligible progress. However, five dimensions – Subjective Wellbeing; Housing and Built Environment; Environment, Climate and Biodiversity; Safety and Security; and Time Use – show negative performance, indicating deterioration over time.

Equality: Disparities persist across all nine dimensions measured for equality. While three dimensions show relatively lower levels of inequality compared to others, four dimensions reflect almost 100 per cent disparity. Two dimensions – Housing and Built Environment and Work and Job Quality – show worsening divides, highlighting a deepening gap between different groups.

Sustainability: Progress in sustainability is marginal across the six dimensions tagged for sustainability. Alarmingly, Environment, Climate and Biodiversity demonstrates a concerning decline, highlighting ongoing challenges in meeting emissions reduction targets and energy affordability concerns.

What do these findings tell us?

The results of *Social Justice Ireland's* alternative wellbeing framework paint a troubling picture of societal wellbeing.

While some areas show modest improvements, substantial disparities persist, and progress in key dimensions remains fragile and uneven. In particular, the lack of focus on equality and sustainability in the Government's Wellbeing Framework risks presenting an overly optimistic picture that does not accurately reflect the lived realities of many.

Why We Need a New Approach to Wellbeing

While both frameworks aim to measure wellbeing across multiple dimensions, they differ significantly in the choice of indicators, scoring trends, and focus areas, which ultimately present two distinct realities of life in Ireland. Across dimensions, *Social Justice Ireland's* alternative framework consistently reveals persistent inequalities that are not visible in the Government's Framework. The Government's Wellbeing Framework tends to focus on aggregate progress and international comparisons, which can mask the lived experiences of vulnerable populations. In contrast, this alternative wellbeing report focuses on equity, inclusivity, and sustainability, ensuring that no one is left behind. Equality scores across dimensions reflect widening disparities in housing, income, healthcare, and access to public services. Vulnerable groups – including renters, single-parent households, those unable to work due to long-term health problems, and individuals with lower education levels – continue to experience disproportionate challenges, hindering inclusive wellbeing. Addressing these issues through sustainable investments, equitable policies, and improved data collection will be essential to ensure inclusive and resilient progress for all.

Towards a Fairer Future

The key question is how to effectively improve wellbeing. This is where a comprehensive, coherent policy agenda guided by principles of fairness, sustainability, and the common good would be transformative. *Social Justice Ireland* proposes an integrated policy framework for a new Social Contract, identifying five key policy outcomes: Vibrant Economy, Decent Services and Infrastructure, Just Taxation, Good Governance and Sustainability. As Ireland continues to embed the Wellbeing Framework in its policymaking processes, it is essential to prioritise equity, inclusion, and long-term sustainability. By adopting a more comprehensive and nuanced approach to wellbeing measurement, policymakers can ensure that Ireland's progress is both resilient and inclusive, paving the way for a fairer and more just society.

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1 INTRODUCTION

This report by *Social Justice Ireland* provides an independent assessment of wellbeing in Ireland, offering a more inclusive and equitable framework for measuring progress. It prioritises indicators that better reflect the lived experiences of individuals and communities, ensuring that policymaking addresses inequality, sustainability, and long-term resilience.

Each year, the Government of Ireland publishes a wellbeing report, *Understanding Life in Ireland,* to assess the quality of life across economic, social, and environmental domains. This framework plays an increasingly important role in policymaking, including its use in the Budgetary process and in shaping discussions during the *National Economic Dialogue*, the *Summer Economic Statement*, and *Budget Day* documentation. It is essential to critically assess both the evolving priorities within the framework as well as how comprehensively it represents the wellbeing of all segments of the population. However, the Government's 2024 wellbeing report presents a limited perspective, focusing on aggregate trends while removing equality and sustainability from its core measurement approach (elements that had been included in the 2023 edition). While these issues are acknowledged in the narrative, their absence from core metrics makes it difficult to assess who is benefitting from progress and whether the gains are sustainable in the long term.

In this paper, we critically examine the Government's report *Understanding Life in Ireland: The Wellbeing Framework 2024,* recalculating the indicators using the Government's own 2023 methodology – one that explicitly integrated equality and sustainability. We then assess the effectiveness of the Government's chosen indicators and their ability to capture the complexity of wellbeing across different social groups. Finally, we present an alternative wellbeing framework, informed by public consultation, that reinstates equality and sustainability more explicitly into the wellbeing measurement. This alternative approach offers a more holistic and inclusive framework that better reflects the realities of diverse population groups and ensures that policymaking genuinely enhances the quality of life for all.

By focusing on equitable wellbeing outcomes, the alternative wellbeing framework aligns closely with *Social Justice Ireland's* vision for a new social contract, which emphasises inclusive growth, sustainable development, and social cohesion. Our analysis finds that, while Ireland has made progress in several dimensions of wellbeing – including improvements in education, community participation, and employment – deep inequalities persist. Housing affordability remains a significant challenge, with renters and low-income households facing increasing financial strain. Income inequality is widening, and environmental sustainability indicators show little to no progress. These disparities highlight the need for a more holistic and balanced approach to measuring wellbeing, one that ensures no group is left behind.

2 BACKGROUND

The assessment of wellbeing has emerged as a comprehensive and meaningful measure of societal progress that goes beyond traditional economic indicators. In line with the global trend towards greater use of this more expansive metric, the Government of Ireland developed a Wellbeing Framework designed to improve the understanding of quality of life in Ireland. Its stated intention is to guide policy decisions through a multidimensional lens encompassing economic, social, and environmental factors. *Social Justice Ireland* warmly welcomed this development.

Since its inception, the Government's Wellbeing Framework has undergone an iterative process of consultation and refinement. The first milestone in this journey was the publication of the *First Report on a Well-being Framework for Ireland* (2021)*.* This initial report outlined the guiding vision and ambitions of the framework, presenting an initial structure (reflective of the OECD *How's Life* model) and supporting Dashboard of Indicators. The Inter-Departmental Working Group developed a dashboard comprising 35 indicators, selected for their relevance to policy, international comparability, and ability to provide both aggregate and disaggregated data. This was followed by the introduction of the Wellbeing Portal[1] and the CSO's Wellbeing Information Hub[2], marking the second phase of the framework's development. In June 2022, the government published the *Second Report - A Well-being Framework for Ireland*, (2022) building on this foundation. The Overarching Wellbeing Framework now consists of the following eleven Dimensions:

1. Subjective Wellbeing
2. Mental and Physical Health
3. Income and Wealth
4. Knowledge, Skills and Innovation
5. Housing and Built Environment
6. Environment, Climate and Biodiversity
7. Safety and Security
8. Work and Job Quality
9. Time Use
10. Connections, Community and Participation
11. Civic Engagement, Trust and Cultural Expression

Crucially, this report recognised equality and sustainability as essential pillars for ensuring wellbeing improvements were equitably distributed and maintained over time. It also mapped clear linkages between Ireland's Wellbeing Conceptual Framework and indicators and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), to highlight the commonalities across both initiatives, which was a welcome development (Department of the Taoiseach, 2022, p. 32).

In 2023, the government made significant strides by developing a progress measurement methodology. This methodology evaluated indicators based on four key factors:

- Performance over time
- International comparisons

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[1] https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/1fb9b-a-well-being-framework-for-ireland-join-the-conversation/?referrer=http://www.gov.ie/wellbeing-framework/
[2] https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-wbhub/well-beinginformationhub/

- Equality
- Sustainability

Presented in the third report - *Understanding Life in Ireland: The Well-being Framework* (2023), this approach offered a more comprehensive understanding of national wellbeing. While not without its limitations, this nuanced approach was a welcome development, and the government deserves commendation for these efforts. We will delve deeper into this methodology in the following section.

Unfortunately, the Government's 2024 Wellbeing Framework marks a concerning shift. The framework moves away from explicitly measuring equality and sustainability. While these aspects are acknowledged in the report's narrative, their exclusion from core metrics risks oversimplifying challenges and presenting an overly optimistic picture of progress. If the Wellbeing Framework is to fulfil its promise of guiding inclusive, forward-looking policymaking, it must reaffirm its commitment to equality and sustainability. These dimensions are not optional or peripheral; they are essential for ensuring that wellbeing gains are both shared across society and preserved for future generations. Addressing these gaps is critical for Ireland to develop a more holistic and equitable approach to measuring societal progress.

In the next section, we critically assess the Government's 2024 framework and re-examine wellbeing in Ireland by applying the Government's nuanced 2023 methodology to its 2024 set of indicators. This analysis reveals a more complete picture – highlighting progress in some areas but also exposing persistent inequalities and sustainability challenges that are overlooked in the 2024 framework. Then in section 4 we calculate wellbeing scores for each of the eleven dimensions using *Social Justice Ireland's* alternative set of indicators.

3 A LIMITED PERSPECTIVE: GAPS IN THE GOVERNMENT'S 2024 WELLBEING FRAMEWORK

The Government's report, *Understanding Life in Ireland: The Well-being Framework 2024* (Figure 1)*,* presents a broadly positive picture of progress, largely due to a shift in the measurement as well as choice of indicators. Unlike previous iterations, explicit assessments of equality and sustainability have been removed from core performance metrics and confined to narrative sections. This change risks oversimplifying challenges and presenting an overly optimistic view of wellbeing.

The Government's 2024 Wellbeing Framework evaluates wellbeing across eleven dimensions and presents progress through two key metrics:

- *Trend score (white bar):* This score reflects Ireland's progress over time, typically calculated as a percentage change over a 5-year period (or adjusted based on data availability).
- *International score (blue bar):* This score compares Ireland's performance relative to the EU or OECD average and the best-performing country.

Additionally, the Government's report highlights groups with the lowest outcomes and marks sustainability-linked indicators using a leaf symbol. At first glance, the data suggests strong national and international performance—with positive trends in nine of eleven dimensions and sustainability progress in five dimensions nationally and six internationally.

However, this streamlined approach comes at a cost. While the Government's report acknowledges disparities in equality and sustainability in the narrative, their exclusion from core performance measurement means that disparities between different groups and long-term impacts are not fully accounted for and become less central to policy evaluation. This raises concerns about the framework's ability to fully capture issues such as housing affordability, income disparities, and working conditions – areas where equitable and sustainable solutions are essential.

The 2024 report does retain several strengths, particularly in its streamlined approach. By simplifying the data presentation, the report becomes more accessible to stakeholders and policymakers. This helps in focusing on specific areas of success or needed improvement. It also highlights inequalities in specific population groups, as reflected in Figure 1 (Groups with Lowest relative outcome on CSO Wellbeing Hub) and narrative of the report, such as single-parent households, older individuals, renting households, lower-income households, and individuals with long-term illnesses. Yet, without explicit integration into performance metrics, these disparities risk being overlooked in decision-making.

Ensuring that wellbeing is resilient and future-proofed requires more than just short-term improvements; it demands a framework that actively measures and mitigates risks to sustained wellbeing. In the following sub-sections, we examine the Government's 2023 methodology and then apply this to the 2024 indicators to provide a more comprehensive and holistic assessment of national wellbeing.
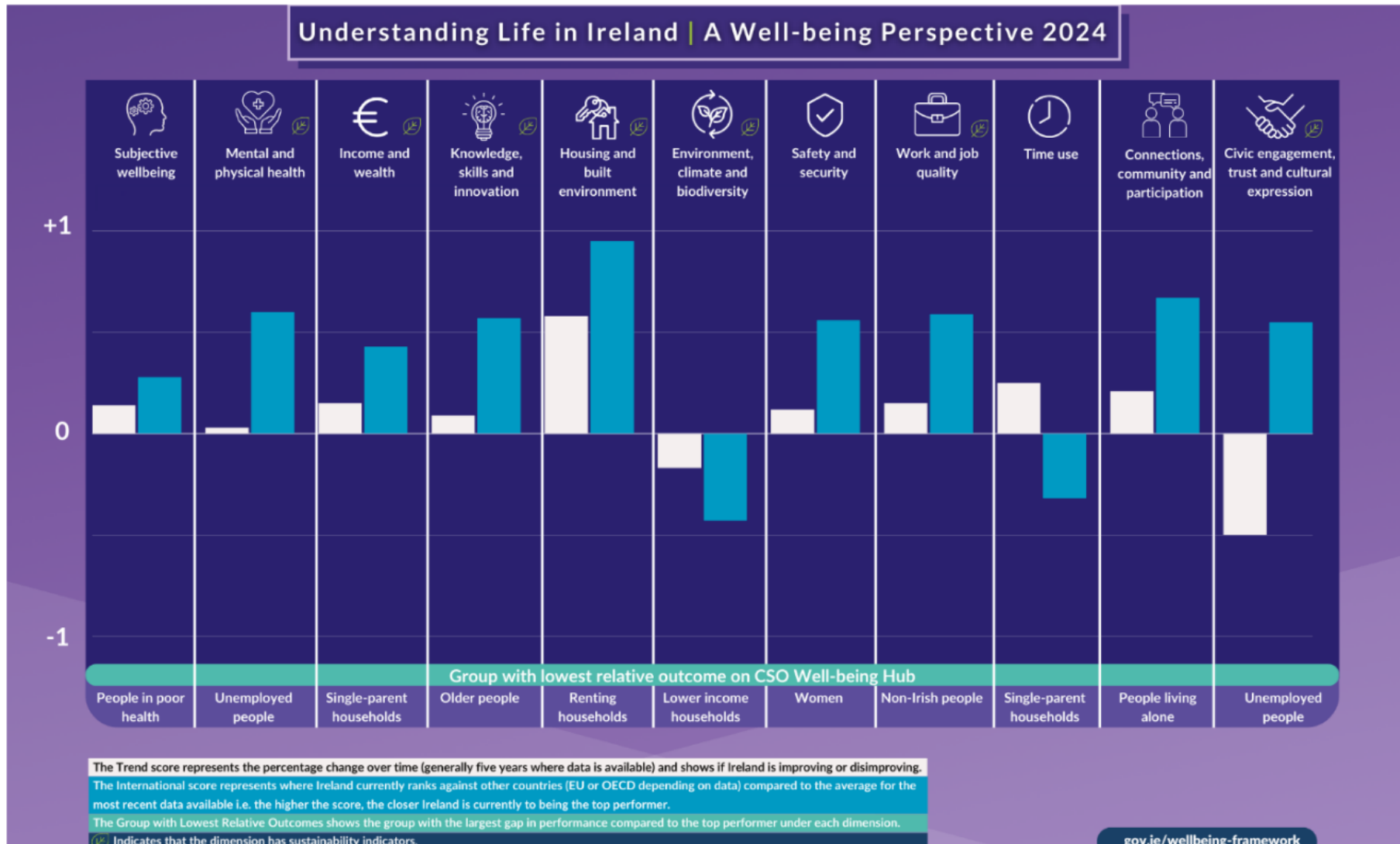
Figure 1: Snapshot of the Dashboard from Government's Report Understanding Life in Ireland: A Well-being Perspective 2024

3.1 ASSESSING CHANGES IN THE GOVERNMENT'S MEASUREMENT APPROACH

As mentioned earlier, the 2023 Government's Wellbeing Framework methodology (detailed in Appendix 1) provided a balanced view of national wellbeing across eleven dimensions. It not only tracked overall progress but also measured how equitably those improvements were distributed and whether they were sustainable over time. The key features of this methodology include:

1. Progress Measurement
   - Progress was calculated based on a combination of percentage change over time (typically a five-year period, depending on data availability) and an international comparison of Ireland's performance against the EU/OECD average and the best-performing country.
   - This dual approach provided a clearer view of whether Ireland was improving over time and how it ranked relative to international peers.

2. Equality
   - Equality was explicitly measured as the relative percentage difference between the best- and worst-performing groups for each indicator. For example, in the "Subjective Wellbeing" dimension, the framework examined disparities across different demographic groups, such as gender or socio-economic status, to ensure progress was shared equitably.
   - This ensured that improvements were not just measured at the aggregate level but were also evaluated in terms of their distribution across society.

3. Sustainability
   - Sustainability was integrated into the framework by tagging specific indicators as sustainable. This helped track whether progress in key areas was being achieved in a way that could be maintained over time.

The Government's 2023 Wellbeing Framework offered a more nuanced and transparent measurement of wellbeing. While its multidimensional nature may have increased complexity, it provided a comprehensive assessment that policymakers, researchers, and stakeholders could use to inform decision-making. However, the 2024 Wellbeing Framework, in contrast, moved towards a simplified methodology and unfortunately missed an opportunity of building on this strong foundation. Equality is now only referenced in the narrative sections rather than being integrated into core progress metrics. Without explicit measurement, disparities between different groups are less visible, potentially creating an overly optimistic portrayal of national wellbeing that overlooks whether progress is shared equitably. Similarly, while a number of indicators are still tagged for sustainability, the methodology in 2024 has no mechanism to assess whether the overall performance of a dimension is progressive or regressive with regards to sustainability. The next section will examine these concerns in greater depth.

3.2 RECALCULATING WELLBEING: MEASURING 2024 INDICATORS WITH THE 2023 APPROACH

To provide a fuller and more accurate assessment of Ireland's wellbeing, we have recalculated the Government's 2024 Wellbeing Framework using the Government's own 2023 methodology. This

approach restores equality and sustainability as core metrics, ensuring that progress is not only measured in aggregate terms but also evaluated in terms of how equitably it is distributed and whether it can be sustained over time. Our recalculations reveal that while nine out of eleven dimensions show some positive progress – largely due to the choice of indicators – persistent inequalities remain across all dimensions (Figure 2).

Equality scores[3] highlight disparities that are not immediately visible in the Government's 2024 framework. Four dimensions show lower inequality relative to others (scoring above +0.5), this still reflects substantial gap between the best- and worst-performing groups. Whereas, three dimensions reveal high inequality, and two – Income and Wealth and Housing and the Built Environment – show a deepening divide, with negative scores.

Sustainability, too, remains an area of concern. With the exception of Housing and the Built Environment (where indicator selections skew results), all sustainability-tagged indicators show only marginal or negative progress (Figure 2). This raises serious questions about the long-term viability of current trends and whether Ireland's wellbeing gains can be maintained in the future.

These recalculations present a notably different picture of Ireland's wellbeing than the Government's 2024 report. While the Government's report shows strong performance in Housing and Built Environment dimension, it is largely due to increases in energy-efficient homes and new dwelling completions in the last decade, the recalculated equality score exposes a troubling reality. Low-income families and renters continue to face significant barriers to housing access, a disparity that is obscured in the Government's 2024 framework's focus on aggregate performance.

Similarly, in the Income and Wealth dimension, although the Government's 2024 report shows slight overall improvements, the recalculated metrics highlight persistent financial disparities. For budgeting and policymaking, these disparities should not be overlooked. The equality score of -0.4 suggests that the gains in income and wealth are not being distributed equitably across society. Vulnerable groups – such as low-income households, those unable to work due to long-standing health conditions, the unemployed, and renters – are being left behind. While the report acknowledges these issues in its narrative, they are absent from the core performance scores, presenting a positive view of progress.

The same critique applies to other dimensions. In Work and Job Quality, the Government's 2024 report celebrates full employment, and while this reflects massive improvements, the recalculated sustainability score reveals a different story. Despite the positive employment figures, there has been little to no progress in ensuring the sustainability of this growth, indicating that while short-term job creation is strong, there may be long-term concerns about job stability, quality, and future resilience.

By removing equality and sustainability from the core metrics, the Government's 2024 framework provides a simplified but incomplete picture of national wellbeing. While the report focuses on overall progress, it fails to address the deeper questions of who benefits and whether the improvements will last. In the next section, we introduce an alternative set of indicators that *Social Justice Ireland* believes provides a more meaningful and fuller assessment of wellbeing in Ireland.

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[3] A score of +1 reflects full equality, while 0 indicates a 100 per cent disparity between the best- and worst-performing groups, and a negative score represents a 200 per cent disparity (a negative score arises if the relative percentage difference exceeds 100 per cent). See Appendix 1 for greater detail.

Figure 2: Recalculated Government's Wellbeing Dashboard 2024

Note: This version applies the Government's more robust 2023 methodology to the data presented in the 2024 report.

(*) indicates the dimensions that have sustainability indicators

4 SJI's ALTERNATIVE WELLBEING FRAMEWORK

In this section, *Social Justice Ireland* presents its alternative wellbeing framework, offering a more inclusive and equitable approach to measuring progress. By integrating a broader range of meaningful indicators, it provides a more accurate and actionable picture of wellbeing in Ireland – one that places greater emphasis on those most at risk of being left behind.

4.1 RATIONALE AND METHODOLOGY

To better understand public priorities for wellbeing, *Social Justice Ireland* conducted a survey in 2022, asking respondents to rank a set of six potential indicators under each of the wellbeing dimensions, from one to six, with one being the least important and six being the most important (Benett, 2022). The selection included indicators from the Government's Dashboard and datasets readily available from the Central Statistics Office (CSO) and other reputable sources. This survey, disseminated over the summer months through our social media channels, our Weekly Digest, and our Members Bulletin, received 236 responses.

Based on the responses to our 2022 survey, we have proposed a series of alternative (highest-ranked by survey respondents) indicators for each of the 11 dimensions. In several cases, government indicators were retained, as they aligned with public priorities. However, in many dimensions, alternative indicators ranked higher and thus were selected to better reflect wellbeing concerns. The CSO has a vast collection of datasets that could apply to the eleven dimensions of the wellbeing framework. Many, we would suggest, offer a better approximation of wellbeing in Ireland and can better capture how policies are experienced by different segments of the population.

Our survey found that in the Safety and Security dimension, current indicators such as the *murder rate per 100,000 population* and *the population who worry about being a victim of crime,* were ranked lowest in importance as the respondents felt they do not capture the full reality of safety concerns in Ireland. In contrast, indicators on *incidences of gender-based violence* and *incidence of racism and/or discrimination* were ranked higher, as they better reflect the lived experiences of various groups in the society, offering a more accurate and meaningful assessment of safety and security. Notably, the third government indicator – *persons killed or injured on roads* – was retained, as respondents considered it more relevant than the number of gardaí. Similarly, in the Work and Job Quality dimension, while *mean weekly earnings* indicator was retained, alternative indicators like *in-work poverty* and the *number of long-term unemployed* were selected due to their higher rankings. These indicators highlight significant challenges faced by low-income workers and long-term jobseekers, which directly impact overall wellbeing. Moreover, under the Housing and Built Environment dimension, indicators like *new dwelling completions* or *average distance to everyday services* provide some contextual value but fall short in addressing immediate wellbeing concerns. Alternative indicators such as *mortgage debt burden* and *at-risk-of-poverty rates after rent and mortgage interest* were ranked higher. These indicators highlight the financial strain on households, particularly renters and low-income families, and better reflect the unequal distribution of housing affordability. These indicators also align more closely with the framework's core principles of equity and sustainability in housing policy.

This demonstrates that wellbeing measurement must go beyond surface-level statistics to capture the realities of diverse population groups. While the Government's simplified Dashboard provides a broad snapshot, it risks overlooking critical aspects of wellbeing. Societal wellbeing can only be considered truly strong when it prioritises those furthest behind. As emphasised in the commitment to "leave no one behind" made in the UN Sustainable Development Goals[4], ensuring the wellbeing of the most vulnerable must be the fundamental benchmark for progress. A more inclusive and participatory approach – one that reflects the lived experiences of all people, particularly those facing structural inequalities – is necessary for Ireland to develop a wellbeing framework that genuinely serves its society.

4.1.1 Scoring Wellbeing

The scoring for each dimension in this report is presented using performance, equality, and sustainability scores, using the Government's 2023 methodology as detailed in Appendix 1. Each score ranges from -1 to +1, with the following interpretations:

- **Performance:** A score of +1 reflects a 100 per cent improvement in the trend over approximately five years (depending on data availability) and/or that Ireland is the best-performing country for the indicator in EU or OECD. A score of 0 indicates no change and/or Ireland's performance is same as the EU or OECD average, while -1 represents a 100 per cent deterioration or that Ireland is the worst-performing country in EU or OECD.

- **Equality:** Equality scores measure disparities across demographic groups. A score of +1 indicates no difference between the best and worst-performing groups, while 0 reflects 100 per cent difference and -1 reflects 200 per cent difference (a negative score arises if the relative percentage difference exceeds 100 per cent).

- **Sustainability:** Sustainability scores consider performance of indicators tagged as 'sustainable'. A score of +1 indicates a 100 per cent improvement in the trend over approximately five years (depending on data availability) and/or that Ireland is the best-performing country for the indicator in EU or OECD. A score of 0 means no change in trend and -1 indicates 100 per cent deterioration and/or that Ireland is the worst-performing country in EU or OECD.

This scoring framework offers a structured approach to assess wellbeing across dimensions.

4.2 ALTERNATIVE WELLBEING FRAMEWORK: KEY FINDINGS

The alternative wellbeing indicators proposed by *Social Justice Ireland* provide a more comprehensive and nuanced perspective on Ireland's wellbeing (Figure 3). By prioritising indicators that reflect the lived experiences of individuals and different groups, the alternative set highlights key areas of progress, stagnation, and decline across the eleven dimensions.

Overall Findings

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[4] https://unsdg.un.org/2030-agenda/universal-values/leave-no-one-behind

- **Performance:** Four dimensions – Connections, Community and Participation; Knowledge, Skills and Innovation; Income and Wealth; and Work and Job Quality – show modest improvements. Two dimensions – Mental and Physical Health (+0.04); and Civic Engagement, Trust and Cultural Expression (+0.12) – show only marginal progress. However, five dimensions – Subjective Wellbeing; Housing and Built Environment; Environment, Climate and Biodiversity; Safety and Security; and Time Use – have declined, with negative performances.

- **Equality:** Disparities exist across all the nine dimensions measured for equality. Three dimensions show a relatively smaller gap in inequalities – Subjective Wellbeing (+0.57); Mental and Physical Health (+0.4); and Connections, Community and Participation (+0.65) – compared to other dimensions. However, as mentioned earlier, this still reflects a substantial gap between the best- and worst-performing groups. Four dimensions reflect around 100 per cent difference between the best- and worst-performing groups – Income and Wealth (0.1); Knowledge, Skills and Innovation (0.24); Environment, Climate and Biodiversity (0.08); and Time Use (-0.02). While two dimensions – Housing and Built Environment (-0.7); and Work and Job Quality (-0.15) – exhibit worsening divides, suggesting a deepening gap between advantaged and disadvantaged groups.

- **Sustainability:** Performance in sustainability remains marginal across all the six dimensions tagged for sustainability, however, this modest gain is not sufficient to indicate meaningful progress in ensuring long-term resilience. Knowledge, Skills and Innovation (+0.03) show little to no progress. Alarmingly, Environment, Climate and Biodiversity (-0.4) reflects a concerning decline, highlighting ongoing challenges in meeting emissions reduction targets and energy affordability concerns.

These findings illustrate that while Ireland has made some progress in certain areas, significant disparities and structural challenges persist, requiring sustained and targeted policy interventions. This contrasts with the Government's Wellbeing Dashboard (Figure 1), which tends to present a more optimistic narrative, often focusing on high-level international comparisons and aggregate trends that may mask inequalities and vulnerabilities within Irish society.

One area of relative progress is in Knowledge, Skills and Innovation dimension, where improvements in digital skills and reductions in early school leaving stand out. The Government's dashboard also reports positive trends in this dimension. However, the use of indicators like *reading and math performance in 15-year-olds* and the *number of research and development personnel*, while important, may not fully capture everyday skills gaps that affect wellbeing outcomes as the world of work is transforming rapidly and becoming increasingly digital. Digital skills among adults is essential to ensure economic resilience, equal access to opportunities, and inclusion in a changing labour market. However, concerns around equality and sustainability remain. Without sufficient focus on these areas, there is a risk that vulnerable groups will fall further behind in a digitally driven economy, exacerbating inequality. As discussed later in the report, the benefits of improvements are not equally distributed, with older people, lower-income groups and those outside the labour force, still facing barriers to access. Furthermore, long-term sustainability challenges persist, as Ireland's ability to maintain a highly skilled workforce will depend on continued investment in lifelong learning and digital inclusion to prevent growing disparities.

Similarly, positive trends in Connections, Community, and Participation dimension reflect stronger community ties, while positive performance in Work and Job Quality and Income and Wealth further

show economic improvements, particularly in reducing long-term unemployment and poverty risks. However, *Social Justice Ireland's* alternative wellbeing dashboard highlights inequalities within these dimensions more explicitly than the Government's version. For instance, while the Government Dashboard shows improvements in *median household net wealth* and *net government wealth*, our alternative dashboard points to persistent *in-work poverty* and *gaps in income equality* that disproportionately impact women, renters, and single-parent households.

In contrast, Housing and Built Environment and Environment continue to be a major challenge. While the Government Dashboard presents indicators like *new dwelling completions* and *energy ratings for homes*, as signs of progress, *Social Justice Ireland's* set of indicators provides a more realistic picture, focusing on *mortgage debt burden* and *at-risk-of-poverty rates after housing costs*. These indicators show that housing affordability has worsened in recent years, particularly for renters and low-income households, and housing inequalities are widening, emphasising the need for stronger policy interventions in housing.

Similarly, in the dimension of Environment, Climate, and Biodiversity, the Government Dashboard focuses on sustainability targets related to *pollution, grime or other environmental problems*, *waste generation*, and *emissions reductions*, while *Social Justice Ireland's* alternative dashboard emphasises the ongoing challenges of *biodiversity loss* and the *financial burden of energy costs on lower-income households*, in addition to *emissions reduction*. These differences in focus are critical, as the alternative dashboard paints a more realistic picture of the immediate and long-term challenges facing Irish households.

The differences between the two dashboards highlight why *Social Justice Ireland* proposed an alternative wellbeing framework as a more meaningful measure of wellbeing. The Government's Wellbeing Framework tends to focus on aggregate progress and international comparisons, which can mask the lived experiences of vulnerable populations. In contrast, our alternative wellbeing framework focuses on equity, inclusivity, and sustainability, ensuring that no group is left behind. Across dimensions, equality scores reflect widening disparities in housing, income, healthcare, and access to public services. Vulnerable groups – including renters, single-parent households, those unable to work due to long-term health problems, and individuals with lower education levels – continue to experience disproportionate challenges, hindering inclusive wellbeing. Addressing these issues through sustainable investments, equitable policies, and improved data collection will be essential to ensure inclusive and resilient progress for all.

In the subsequent section of this report, we present a detailed analysis of the alternative indicators under each of the eleven dimensions, using the Government's 2023 methodology.
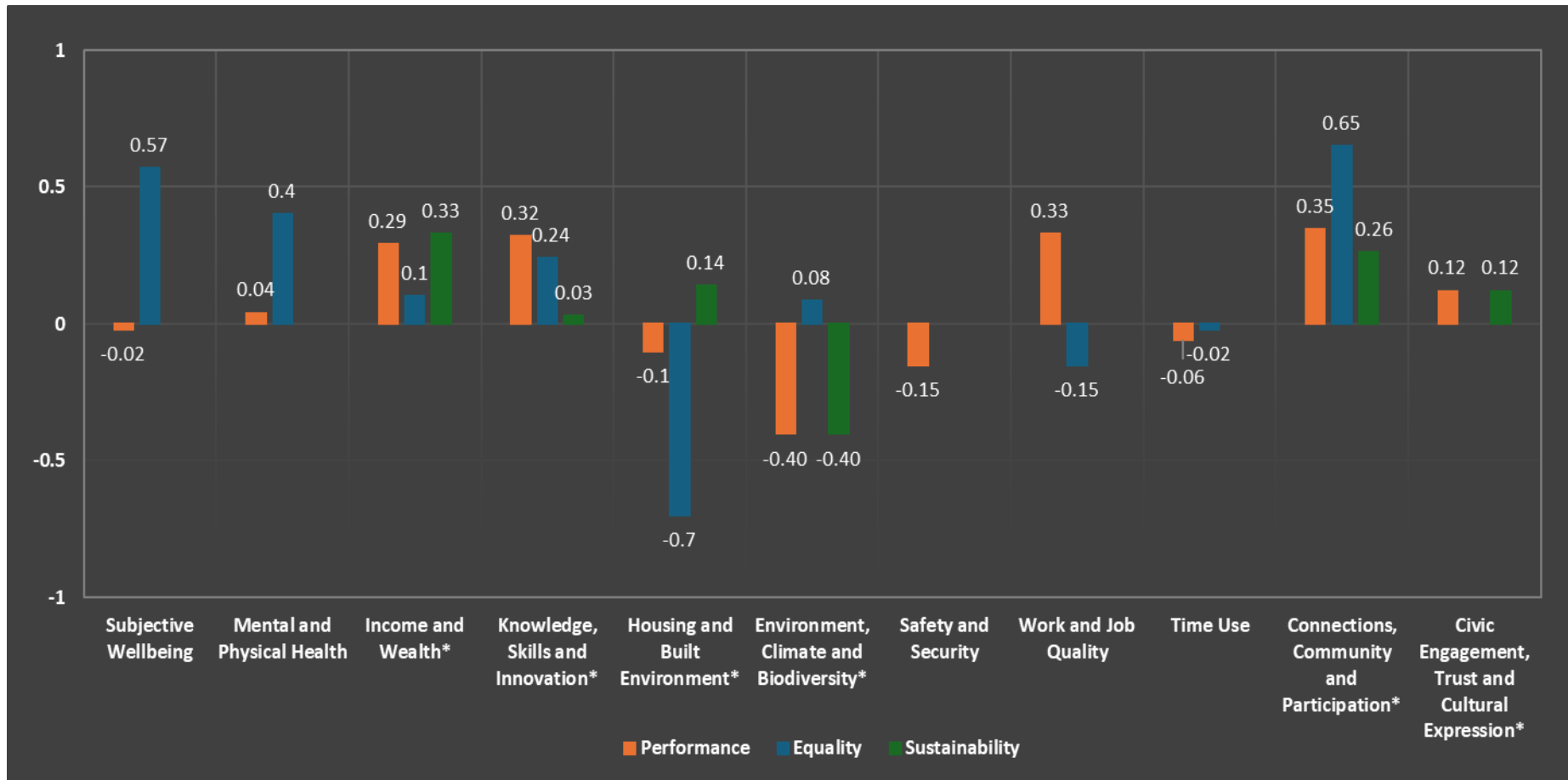
Figure 3: Social Justice Ireland's Alternative Wellbeing Dashboard
Note: (*) indicates that the dimensions that have sustainability indicators.

4.3 SUBJECTIVE WELLBEING

The indicators selected for this dimension were: **Overall life satisfaction; Social Inclusion;** and **Access to Public Services**.

Figure 4 presents the performance and equality scores for these key indicators, as well as for the overall Subjective Wellbeing dimension. The results paint a concerning picture: the overall performance score of -0.02 indicates a deterioration in subjective wellbeing compared to previous years, while an equality score of 0.57 suggests a disparity of over 40 per cent between the best and worst performing groups.

A closer look at the indicators reveals a mixed picture. While Overall Life Satisfaction shows moderate progress, significant disparities persist across different groups, particularly when considering health status and employment categories. Social Inclusion is difficult to assess accurately due to a lack of updated data, limiting its ability to provide an accurate and timely reflection of wellbeing. Meanwhile, Access to Public Services shows a concerning negative performance, driven by declining satisfaction levels, particularly in healthcare and administrative services. Each indicator is explored in greater detail below, providing further insights into the challenges and gaps that persist within this dimension.

Figure 4: Subjective Wellbeing dimension and indicator score

Indicator 1: Overall Life Satisfaction

The proportion of the population rating their overall life satisfaction as 'high' has shown a slight improvement, increasing from 26.8 per cent in 2020 to 28.9 per cent in 2023[5], as highlighted in the Government's Wellbeing Report. While not directly comparable due to some changes in methodology, it is worth noting that in 2018, overall satisfaction stood at 44.4 per cent, highlighting a significant decline since pre-pandemic levels.

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[5] https://data.cso.ie/table/WBB63

At the European level[6], Ireland's performance remains positive, with the current rate of 26.4 per cent above the EU average of 21.7 per cent. This is 6.6 percentage point lower than Austria, the best-performing country, where 33 per cent of respondents reported high overall life satisfaction.

A closer look at the data reveals notable disparities. By age group, older adults reported higher satisfaction levels, with 35.8 per cent of those aged 65+ rating their overall life satisfaction as high, compared to around 27 per cent for those aged 25-64 years, a difference of 8.8 percentage points. Health status further highlights these inequalities. Among individuals with 'very good' general health, 40.1 per cent reported high overall life satisfaction, while only 12.9 per cent of those with 'bad or very bad' health did so. This disparity has widened significantly, increasing from 18.4 percentage points in 2020 to 27.2 percentage points in 2023, indicating that individuals with poorer health are being left further behind.

Indicator 2: Social Inclusion

This indicator is one of those used by the government and was also identified by survey respondents as particularly relevant for measuring wellbeing. The most recent available data, from 2018[7], showed a mean score of 7.6 out of 10, suggesting a positive overall perception of social inclusion. Equality across age and gender is broadly consistent, but significant disparities emerge when looking at principal economic status. Individuals unable to work due to permanent sickness or disability reported the lowest mean score at 6.3, followed closely by the unemployed at 6.4. In contrast, those at work reported a mean score of 7.8, while students reported the highest score at 8.0. While this indicator provides some insights, it has limited utility as the most recent data is now nearly five years old. Without updated data, it is impossible to assess progress or emerging trends in social inclusion. This highlights the need for the government to ensure more frequent and robust data collection to maintain the relevance of such indicators.

Indicator 3: Access to Public Services

Finally, under this dimension we turn to access to public services. Access to public services is a critical determinant of wellbeing, and satisfaction with these services reveals a mixed and concerning picture. According to the CSO Trust Survey 2023, satisfaction with the education system remains relatively strong, with 70 per cent of the population reporting satisfaction in 2023, unchanged from 2021. In contrast, satisfaction with administrative services has declined significantly, falling from 63 per cent in 2021 to just 51 per cent in 2023. The most troubling trend is observed in satisfaction with the healthcare system, which dropped sharply from 32 per cent in 2021 to 26 per cent in 2023, reflecting widespread dissatisfaction with healthcare delivery (CSO, 2024).

At the international level, Ireland's performance varies considerably across different services. For the education system, Ireland ranks seventh highest among OECD countries, with a satisfaction rate of 68.1 per cent. Finland leads with 80.8 per cent, while the OECD average stands at 57.1 per cent. However, Ireland's performance in the healthcare system is far more concerning, as it recorded the lowest satisfaction rate of all OECD countries at 25.9 per cent, well below the OECD average of 52.4 per cent. In contrast, Belgium leads with an impressive satisfaction rate of 80.7 per cent. Similarly, satisfaction with administrative services places Ireland among the fifth lowest performers, with a rate

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[6] Eurostat [ILC_PW05]

[7] https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/hubs/p-wbhub/well-beinginformationhub/civicengagementtrustandculturalexpression/perceivedsocialinclusion/

of 51.2 per cent, compared to the OECD average of 65.7 per cent. Luxembourg tops this category with a satisfaction rate of 83.2 per cent (CSO, 2024).

These findings underscore significant challenges in Ireland's public services, particularly in healthcare and administrative sectors, where performance lags both domestically and internationally. Addressing these issues is crucial to improving wellbeing and restoring public trust.

4.4   MENTAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH

The indicators selected for this dimension were: **Inability to afford adequate healthcare; Outpatient and In-patient Waiting Lists;** and **Self-reported unmet need for medical attention.**

Figure 5 presents the performance and equality scores for these indicators, as well as for the overall Mental and Physical Health dimension. The results indicate a performance score of 0.04 for the dimension, reflecting marginal to no improvement in access to healthcare. Meanwhile, an equality score of 0.40 highlights unequal access to services across different groups, including barriers faced by younger individuals and women in securing affordable healthcare.

While some progress has been made in reducing financial barriers to healthcare, significant challenges remain, particularly in waiting lists for inpatient treatment and increasing unmet medical needs. These persistent delays in accessing timely medical care reflect broader systemic issues. These low scores also highlight that healthcare access challenges affect all demographics, emphasising the need for policy interventions and systemic improvements. Each indicator is discussed in detail below.

Figure 5: Mental and Physical Health indicators performance

Indicator 1: Inability to afford adequate healthcare

The inability to afford adequate healthcare is measured using Eurostat's indicator[8] on *self-reported unmet needs for healthcare services due to financial reasons*, which includes medical, dental, mental health care, and prescribed medicines. The latest available data, from 2019, shows that 12.1 per cent of the population in Ireland reported unmet healthcare needs, marking a significant improvement

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[8] Eurostat [HLTH_EHIS_UN2E]

from 35.9 per cent in 2014. However, it is important to note that 2019 is the most recent data available, making it outdated for accurately assessing the current landscape of healthcare access and affordability. This underscores the need for updated and timely data to track progress and identify emerging challenges effectively.

At the European level, Ireland's performance is better than the EU-27 average of 13 per cent. However, the best-performing countries, such as Cyprus (3.7 per cent) and the Netherlands (5.3 per cent), demonstrate what is achievable with more equitable healthcare systems. Within Ireland, disparities persist: 13.3 per cent of women reported unmet healthcare needs, compared to 10.7 per cent of men. In terms of age group, 16.6 per cent of individuals aged 25-34 reporting the highest unmet need, compared to just 6.4 per cent of those aged 65 and older. While progress is welcome, these findings highlight the need to address barriers faced by younger individuals and women to ensure access to affordable healthcare for all.

Indicator 2: Outpatient and In-patient Waiting Lists

Outpatient and inpatient waiting lists[9] remain a persistent challenge in Ireland's healthcare system. As of November 2024, there were 572,403 people awaiting outpatient treatment, reflecting a modest reduction from 636,695 in November 2021 – a 10 per cent decrease over three years. However, inpatient waiting lists have worsened, with 88,296 people awaiting treatment in October 2024, up from 75,740 in November 2021. These waiting lists, while showing minor progress in outpatient treatment, remain a significant concern due to their impact on timely access to care. Unlike other indicators, there is no international benchmark or comparable EU data, making it challenging to evaluate Ireland's performance relative to other countries.

Indicator 3: Self-reported unmet need for medical attention.

The final indicator in this dimension is as per the Government's Wellbeing Dashboard. The proportion of people aged 16 and over with self-reported unmet need for medical attention[10] increased slightly, from 2 per cent in 2018 to 2.7 per cent in 2023. While this rate aligns with the EU-27 average of 2.4 per cent, it remains significantly higher than the best-performing countries – Cyprus (0.1 per cent), Malta (0.1 per cent), and Germany (0.3 per cent).

When broken down by sex, the data reveals a higher unmet need among women (3.5 per cent) compared to men (1.8 per cent), a pattern consistent with broader trends in healthcare access. These figures highlight the gendered nature of healthcare disparities, as women are more likely to face unmet medical needs despite ongoing improvements in healthcare accessibility.

4.5 INCOME AND WEALTH

The indicators selected for this dimension were: **Poverty Risk of the population; Income Equality / Inequality;** and **Median real household disposable income**. These indicators provide a comprehensive view of income distribution, poverty, and economic disparities, which are essential for assessing the wellbeing of individuals and households.

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[9] Waiting List Numbers by Hospitals and Specialties as at 28th November 2024, www.ntpf.ie
[10] Eurostat [HLTH_SILC_08]

Figure 6 presents the performance, equality, and sustainability scores for the key indicators under this dimension, as well as the overall Income and Wealth dimension. The results show a modest positive performance (0.29) and sustainability score (0.33), indicating slight improvements in income levels and economic resilience. However, the equality score of 0.10 indicates almost 100 per cent income and wealth disparities across different demographic groups.

While the Poverty Risk of the Population indicator shows the highest performance and sustainability score (0.43), the equality score reveals significant disparities that persist across demographic groups and economic statuses. Similarly, Income Equality/Inequality presents a troubling equality score of -0.40, highlighting a widening income gap. This score reflects a substantial divide between the top and bottom income deciles, with the top 10 per cent of the earners receiving more than 5.5 times the income share of the bottom 10 per cent. Median Real Household Disposable Income shows relatively balanced performance scores, with relatively high equality score (0.49), however, it still indicates a 50 per cent disparity in distribution. This highlights the persistent challenges in achieving equitable and sustainable income growth in Ireland, emphasising the need for structural reforms to address these disparities. Further details on each of these indicators are explored in the sections below.
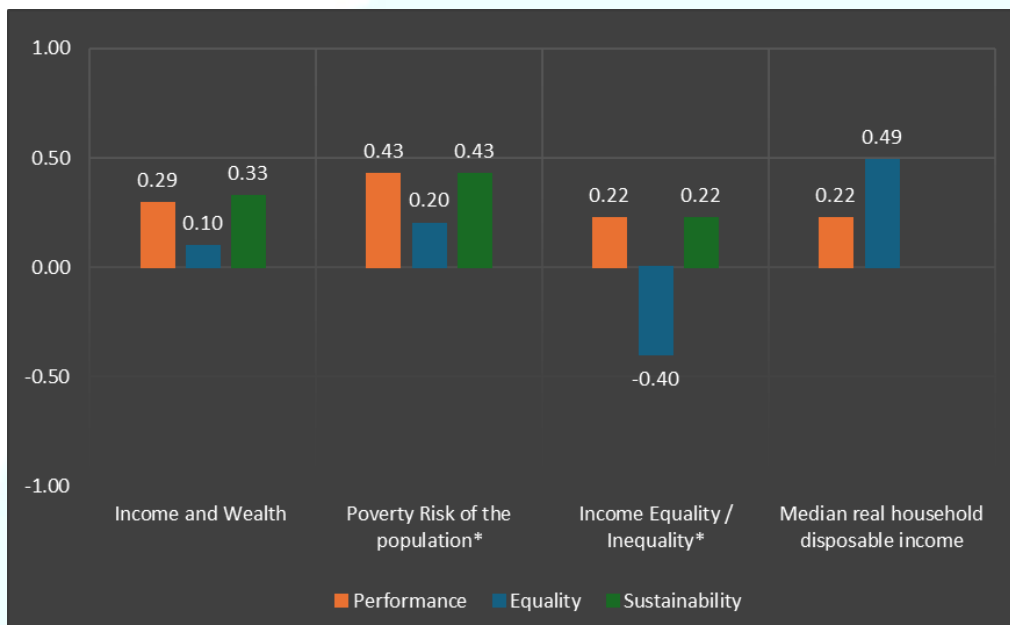

Figure 6: Income and Wealth dimension and indicators score
*Note: *Poverty Risk of Population and Income Equality / Inequality is a sustainability indicator and links to SDGs 1, 4, 5 and 10*

Indicator 1: Poverty Risk of the population

The proportion of the population at risk of poverty decreased from 13.2 per cent in 2020 to 10.6 per cent in the latest SILC data in 2023. *Social Justice Ireland* warmly welcomes this progress. However, it is essential to acknowledge that this decline, particularly during the cost-of-living crisis, was primarily driven by temporary government supports. These included electricity credits, one-off welfare payments, and additional fuel allowances, which cushioned low-income households during the crisis. These measures were temporary, and while they significantly impacted poverty rates in the short term, they must be considered carefully when analysing the overall dimension. In contrast, there was only a modest increase in core welfare payments during this period. Once the temporary measures are phased out (expected by early 2025), only permanent changes, which particularly benefit those on higher incomes such as adjustments to tax credits, PRSI, and the Universal Social Charge (USC), will

remain. While the 2023 and 2024 budgets allocated more resources to low-income households, including both temporary and permanent measures, the long-term adequacy of these changes remains a concern. Choices made in more recent budgets, where core welfare increases failed to keep pace with inflation, highlight this issue.

At the European level, Eurostat's 'at risk of poverty' measure uses a comparable threshold across member states[11], the poverty rates may differ from CSO's as they use a different equivalised scale. Ireland's poverty risk of 12 per cent in 2023 is below the EU-27 average of 16.2 per cent, placing it among the better-performing countries, just 2.2 percentage points above Czechia, the EU's best performer. Since 2008, Ireland's poverty levels have consistently remained below the EU average.

Diving deeper into the data reveals important demographic characteristics associated with poverty risk in Ireland. While at-risk-of-poverty rates are similar for men and women, significant disparities exist across other demographics. By age group, children under 18 have a 14.3 per cent risk of poverty, while adults aged 50-64 also face higher than average risk. In contrast, older adults aged 65+ experienced a substantial reduction in poverty risk, from 20.1 per cent in 2022 to 8.3 per cent in 2023, primarily due to temporary cost-of-living supports. Principal economic status plays a key role, with 27.8 per cent of individuals unable to work due to long-term health problems and 25.5 per cent of unemployed individuals at risk of poverty. Educational attainment also impacts poverty risk; individuals with primary or lower education levels have a 16.9 per cent risk of poverty, compared to 4.7 per cent for those with third-level degrees. Household composition adds another layer of disparity, with 27.1 per cent of single adults under 65 and 1-adult-with-children households facing the highest poverty risk compared to multi-adult households. Furthermore, tenure status reveals stark contrasts; 19.7 per cent of renters are at risk of poverty compared to just 6.5 per cent of owner-occupied households.

Indicator 2: Income Equality / Inequality

The 2023 SILC survey, published in March 2024, provides further insights into Ireland's income distribution (summarised in Figure 7). It reveals a significant gap between the top and bottom deciles, with the bottom 10 per cent receiving just 4.1 per cent of total income, while the top 10 per cent received nearly a quarter of the total. Overall, the share of the top 10 per cent is more than 5.5 times the share of the bottom 10 per cent. The poorest 60 per cent of households collectively received 40.6 per cent of total income, almost equivalent to the 37 per cent received by the top 20 per cent.

The Gini coefficient, a key measure of income inequality, declined to 27.5 in 2023, reflecting the pro-poor distributive effects of temporary cost-of-living measures. However, inequality is expected to rise again once these measures are withdrawn. At the European level, the indicators adopted by the EU at Laeken[12] assesses the income distribution of member states by comparing the ratio of equivalised disposable income received by the bottom quintile (20 per cent) to that of the top quintile – the higher the ratio, the greater the income difference. Ireland's ratio of 4.1 is below the EU average of 4.7.

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[11] Eurostat [ILC_LI02]
[12] In December 2001 the European Council agreed on a list of social indicators to guide the fight against poverty.
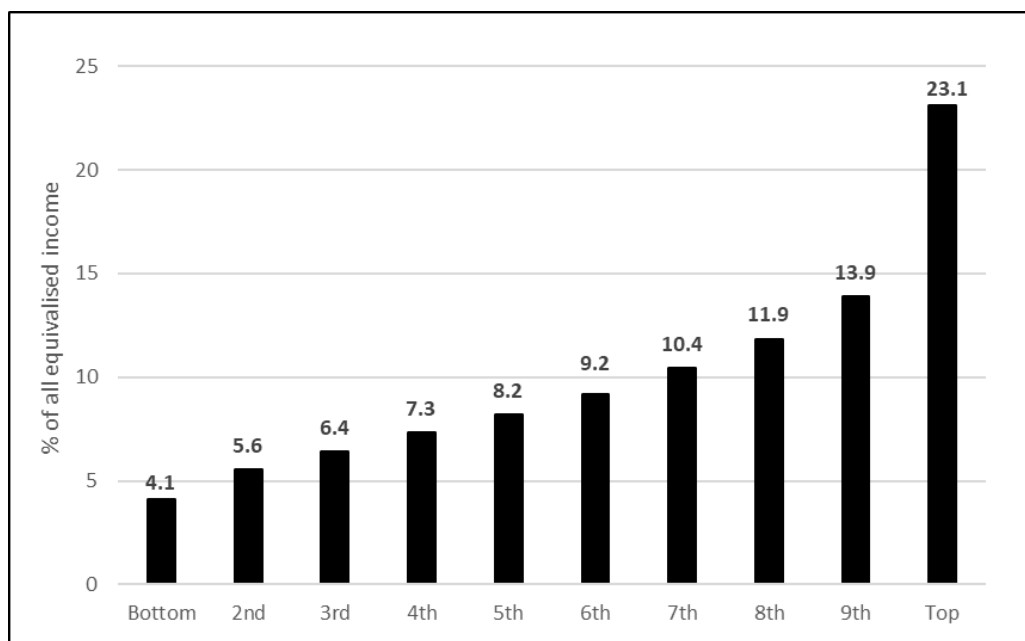
Figure 7: Ireland's Income Distribution by decile (or 10% group) in 2023
Source: CSO SILC (2024)

Indicator 3: Median real household disposable income

Median real household disposable income increased by 8 per cent between 2020 and 2023, reflecting overall income growth. However, it is worth noting that between 2022 and 2023, there was a decline in the real value of median income from €51,120 to €50,162, due to inflationary pressures. Disaggregated data reveals that not all households benefitted equally from income growth. Households with male heads of household had higher disposable incomes than those with female heads, and those unable to work due to long-term health problems had the lowest median disposable income at €26,410, down from €27,747 in 2022.

Educational disparities further exacerbate inequality, with households headed by individuals with primary or lower education levels earning €26,405 compared to €62,916 for those headed by individuals with third-level degrees. By household composition, only households with one adult aged under 65 or at least one adult aged 65+ saw stability in their incomes, while others experienced declines. Tenure status also plays a significant role, with owner-occupied households enjoying a median disposable income 1.45 times higher than that of renters. At the EU level, Ireland had the third highest equivalised net income in 2023 at €40,348, behind Luxembourg (€63,087) and Denmark (€43,789).

While Ireland has made notable progress in reducing poverty and maintaining relatively low levels of income inequality compared to the EU, much of this progress is attributable to temporary government interventions. The long-term sustainability of these gains remain uncertain, particularly for vulnerable groups, as these temporary supports are phased out. Persistent inequalities in income distribution, education, and housing tenure highlight the need for structural reforms to ensure sustainable and inclusive growth.

4.6 KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS AND INNOVATION

The indicators selected for this dimension were: **Early School Leavers; Lifelong learning rate;** and **Digital Skills**. These indicators reflect key areas of educational attainment and learning opportunities, which are central to improving societal wellbeing, equity, and innovation.

Figure 8 presents the performance, equality, and sustainability scores for the Knowledge, Skills, and Innovation dimension and its indicators. The results show moderate overall performance (0.32), low equality score (0.24), and negligible sustainability score (0.03), indicating some advancements have been made but persistent disparities remain.

Positive performances in Early School Leavers and Digital Skills, with both indicators performing well nationally as well as relative to international benchmarks. However, the Lifelong Learning Rate presents a concerning picture, showing stagnation. While improvements are noted across the indicators, disparities based on age, education level, income group, and employment status persist, highlighting the need for targeted interventions. Each indicator is discussed in detail below.
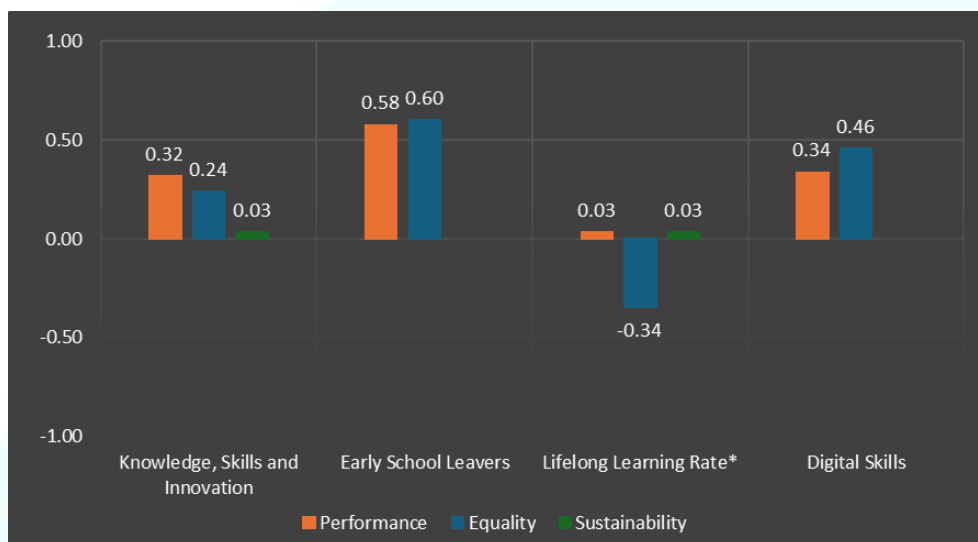

Figure 8: Knowledge, Skills and Innovation indicators performance
Note: Lifelong learning rate is a sustainability indicator and links to SDG 4

Indicator 1: Early School Leavers

Early school leavers are defined as individuals aged 18-24 whose highest level of education is lower secondary or below and who are not engaged in further formal or non-formal education. The proportion of early school leavers in Ireland has seen a significant and welcome decline in recent years. In Q2 2019, 5 per cent of individuals aged 18 to 24 were classified as early school leavers, a figure that has dropped to just 3 per cent in Q3 2024[13]. This represents a substantial improvement over the last two decades, where the rate fell from 14 per cent in the 2004.

Disparities between genders persist but are relatively small, with the rate for males at 3 per cent compared to 2 per cent for females. At a European level[14], Ireland ranks as one of the best performers in reducing early school leaving, with a rate of 4 per cent in 2023 – tying with Greece and Poland for second place. Croatia leads the EU with the lowest rate at 2 per cent, while the EU-27 average stands

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[13] https://data.cso.ie/table/EDQ07
[14] https://data.cso.ie/table/EATR05

at 10 per cent. This downward trend in early school leaving represents a major success story for Ireland's education system and demonstrates its commitment to improving educational outcomes.

Indicator 2: Lifelong Learning Rate

Lifelong learning, which measures participation in education and training among adults, remains a critical indicator of continuous skill development and adaptability in a changing economy. Between Q3 2019 and Q3 2024, Ireland's lifelong learning rate showed only slight improvement, increasing from 9.3 per cent to 9.8 per cent. However, this remains below 11.5 per cent achieved in 2021.

When compared to other EU countries[15], Ireland's rate of 17.3 per cent in 2023 is slightly above the EU-27 average of 16.4 per cent (different from the rate mentioned in the government's report). However, Ireland falls far behind the best-performing countries, such as Sweden (39 per cent), Denmark (33.2 per cent), and the Netherlands (29.3 per cent).

Disparities in lifelong learning participation are also evident across age groups and principal economic status. The rate is highest for students, as expected, but participation declines sharply with age: 9.7 per cent for those aged 25-34, and significantly lower for those aged 55-64. Similarly, individuals who are unable to work due to permanent sickness or disability report the lowest rate, highlighting the need for targeted supports to promote lifelong learning among different groups. This trend indicates that as individuals near retirement age, participation in learning declines, potentially reflecting a lack of opportunities or incentives to engage in further education. It is important to note that for equality score, students and individuals aged 18-24 years have been excluded, as their high participation rates reflect their primary status as learners rather than disparities related to employment or socio-economic conditions.

Indicator 3: Digital Skills

Digital skills are increasingly essential in modern economies, and Ireland performs well in this area. According to Eurostat data[16], 72.9 per cent of Irish citizens aged 16-74 had basic or above-basic overall digital skills in 2023, up from 70.5 per cent in 2021. Ireland ranks third among EU member states, behind the Netherlands (82.7 per cent) and Finland (82 per cent), and well above the EU average of 55.6 per cent.

However, disparities persist across demographics. By gender, the gap is relatively small, with 74.4 per cent of males and 71.4 per cent of females reporting basic or above-basic digital skills. By age group, the differences are more pronounced, while 88 per cent of individuals aged 25-34 possess basic digital skills, this drops to 47 per cent for those aged 55 and over. Education also plays a significant role as only 14.4 per cent of individuals with no or low formal education report basic digital skills, compared to 88.2 per cent of those with higher education.

Geographic disparities, though smaller, also exist. In rural areas, 71 per cent of individuals have basic or above-basic skills, compared to 74.5 per cent in towns and suburbs and 73 per cent in cities. Finally, employment status reveals significant gaps. Among individuals aged 25-64, 47 per cent of those who are retired or not in the labour force report basic digital skills, compared to 85.4 per cent of those who are employed, self-employed, or family workers. These trends highlight the importance of addressing

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[15] Eurostat [TRNG_LFS_01]
[16] Eurostat [ISOC_SK_DSKL_I21]

digital skill gaps among older adults, lower-income groups, and those outside the labour force to ensure equitable access to opportunities in an increasingly digital society.

Addressing these disparities through targeted policies and supports is essential to ensure that everyone can benefit from educational and skill development opportunities, contributing to Ireland's overall wellbeing and competitiveness.

4.7 HOUSING AND THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

The indicators selected for this dimension were: **Housing Affordability; At risk of poverty rate after rent and mortgage interest;** and **Mortgage Debt Burden**. These indicators are critical for understanding the intersection of housing costs, poverty, and debt, which significantly impact overall wellbeing.

Figure 9 presents the performance, equality, and sustainability scores for the key indicators under this dimension, as well as the overall Housing and Built Environment dimension. As shown in the graph, while Housing Affordability and the At-risk-of-poverty rate after rent and mortgage interest show negligible positive performance scores (0.14 and 0.07 respectively), their equality scores reveal stark disparities across income levels, household compositions, and tenure types. Notably, the slight positive performance score for housing affordability is driven solely by Ireland's relatively better position in comparison to the EU-27 average. Nationally, housing affordability has deteriorated, with increasing housing costs outpacing wage growth over the past decade. The Mortgage Debt Burden indicator reflects significant negative performance (-0.51), underscoring the growing challenges for households in long-term mortgage arrears.

Collectively, the figure highlights persistent challenges within Ireland's housing system. The performance and equality scores are negative, indicating deteriorating conditions and widening inequality, with sustainability showing only a slight positive score due to Ireland's relatively better ranking within the EU-27. Further details on each of these indicators are provided below.
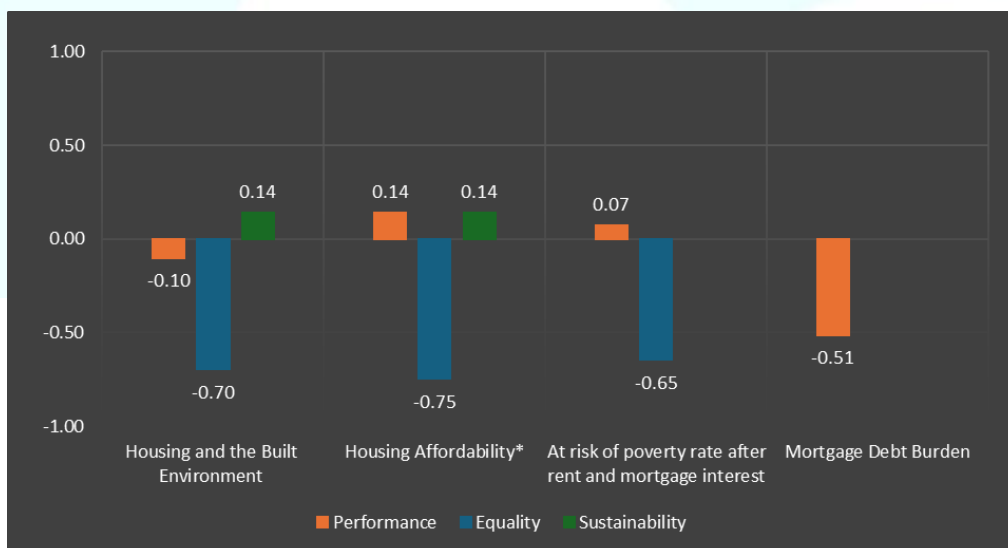

Figure 9: Housing and the Built Environment dimension and indicators score
Note: Housing Affordability is a sustainability indicator and links to SDGs 1 and 11.

Indicator 1: Housing Affordability

Housing affordability has worsened in recent years, becoming less affordable between 2013 and 2019, before recovering slightly in 2020 (Parliamentary Budget Office, 2022). However, it must be noted that an affordability calculation based on earnings in 2020 will be distorted as average earnings increased in response to lay-offs in lower-paid jobs during the pandemic. Between 2012 and 2020 house prices increased by 77 per cent and rents surged by over 90 per cent, compared to wage growth of just 23 per cent in the same period (Parliamentary Budget Office, 2022). Housing affordability continues to be a significant concern, and to analyse this issue further, we use the Housing Cost Overburden (HCO) rate, which is also used as a government indicator.

The HCO rate measures the percentage of the population living in households where total housing costs exceed 40 per cent of disposable income. Unlike narrower definitions of housing costs, this metric accounts for mortgage repayments or rent, utilities, structural insurance, and maintenance expenses. In 2023[17], the HCO rate in Ireland increased to 4.7 per cent, up from 3.4 per cent in 2018 and 3.7 per cent in 2022 (different from the rate mentioned in the report). While Ireland performs better than the EU-27 average of 8.8 per cent, ranking fourth behind Cyprus (2.6 per cent), Slovenia (3.7 per cent), and Croatia (4.0 per cent), hence a slightly positive performance score (0.14), inequalities within Ireland paint a more troubling picture.

For those below 60 per cent of median equivalised income, the HCO rate rises to 20.6 per cent, compared to just 2.5 per cent for those above this threshold. By income quintile, the rate is 16.3 per cent for the bottom quintile and only 0.2 per cent for the top quintile. Household composition also impacts HCO rates, with single adults younger than 65 years facing the highest rate of 24.2 per cent, while multi-adult households (including two adults, at least one aged 65 or older) have the lowest rate at 0.9 per cent. Tenure status reveals striking disparities, with tenants renting at market rates facing a 19.1 per cent HCO rate, compared to around 1 per cent for owner-occupiers with or without a mortgage. This is also a sustainability indicator and while the performance score for this indicator is positive (0.14) due to Ireland's relative position compared to the EU, housing affordability remains a pressing concern nationally.

Indicator 2: At risk of poverty rate after rent and mortgage interest

When looking at disposable income after mortgage interest and rent payments[18], the at-risk-of-poverty rate declined from 19.3 per cent in 2020 to 17.9 per cent in 2023. Over the same period, the overall poverty rate fell from 13.2 per cent to 10.6 per cent. This slight improvement in the at-risk-of-poverty rate after housing costs still reflects significant challenges, as it indicates that almost one million people, one in five of the total population, live below the poverty line because of housing costs.

Further, the results of SILC by household tenure status highlights how significantly housing costs impact on the living standards of renters and in particular low-income families who live in accommodation provided by local authorities or receive social housing supports. 19.7 per cent of renters are at risk of poverty, which increases to 42.1 per cent after including the housing costs, with this rate being 44 per cent for local authority tenants and almost 60 per cent for those on HAP, RAS and in receipt of rent supplement. These rates compare to an after-housing costs poverty rate of one in five for the whole population and less than one in ten for households who are owner occupiers. The

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[17] Eurostat [ILC_LVHO07A]
[18] https://data.cso.ie/table/SIA106

CSO analysis also highlighted that after housing costs there are big increases in poverty for single parent households, people who are unemployed, and people with long standing illness or disabilities. At EU-level comparable data on after-housing-costs poverty is housing cost overburden rate, which is mentioned above.

Indicator 3: Mortgage Debt Burden

Mortgage debt burden is another critical issue, particularly for those at risk of homelessness. Borrowers in mortgage arrears for over 10 years represent a significant and growing challenge. As of June 2024, 6,325 home mortgages were in arrears for over a decade (including 4,902 primary dwelling house (PDH) mortgages and 1,423 buy-to-let (BTL) mortgages), an almost 30 per cent increase from September 2019, when 4,885 mortgages were in arrears (3,450 PDH and 1,435 BTL (Central Bank of Ireland, 2024)). At the European level[19], Ireland had the fifth-highest rate of arrears on mortgage or rent payments in 2023, at 5 per cent, compared to the EU average of 3.1 per cent. Only Greece, Spain, France, and Cyprus reported higher rates.

These indicators highlight the persistent challenges in housing affordability, poverty, and mortgage debt in Ireland, emphasising the disproportionate impact on low-income households, renters, and vulnerable groups.

4.8 ENVIRONMENT, CLIMATE AND BIODIVERSITY

The indicators selected for this dimension were: **Access to reliable, affordable and sustainable energy sources; Biodiversity loss; Proportion of the population able to keep their homes adequately warm;** and **Greenhouse Gas Emissions**. These indicators highlight Ireland's pressing environmental challenges and the need for sustainable, equitable solutions.

Figure 10 presents the performance, equality, and sustainability scores for the key indicators under this dimension, as well as the overall Environment, Climate, and Biodiversity dimension. The results indicate widespread concerns, with both performance (-0.40) and sustainability (-0.40) showing negative trends. The equality score (0.08) suggests near 100 per cent inequality, indicating a stark divide in environmental outcomes across different demographic groups and insufficient progress in achieving national and international targets.

Both the indicators, Greenhouse Gas Emissions and Biodiversity Loss, show negative scores in performance and sustainability, highlighting Ireland's continued challenges in transitioning to a sustainable, low-carbon, and equitable future. Similarly, Access to Reliable, Affordable, and Sustainable Energy Sources and Proportion of the Population Able to Keep Their Homes Adequately Warm indicators reflect ongoing issues in energy affordability and home heating, particularly for lower-income households. Further details of each indicator are provided below, highlighting the specific gaps and challenges within this dimension.
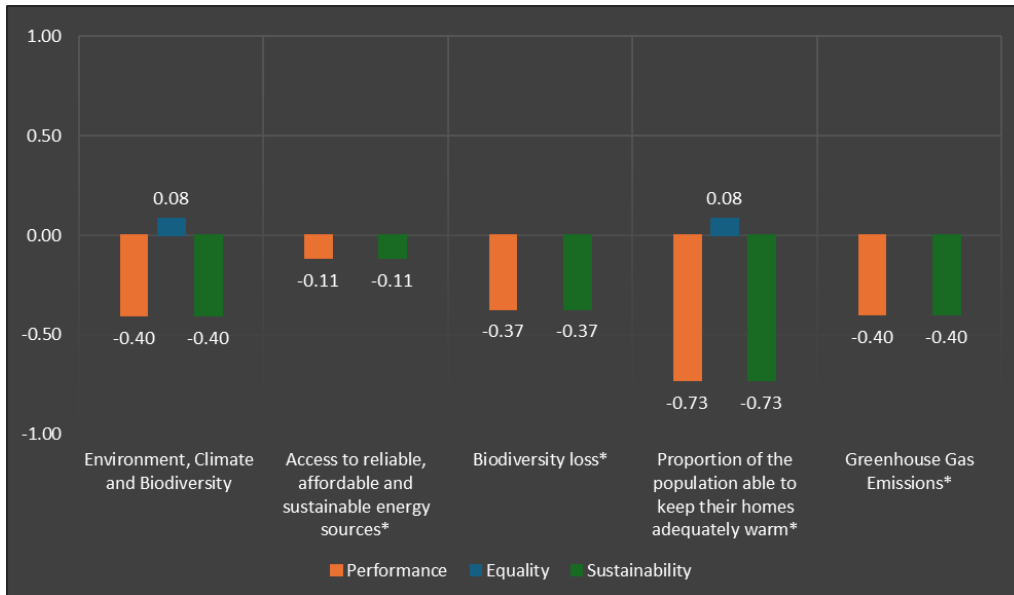
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[19] Eurostat [ILC_MDES06]

Figure 10: Environment, Climate and Biodiversity dimension and indicators score
*Note: *Access to reliable, affordable and sustainable energy sources, Biodiversity loss, Proportion of the population able to keep their homes adequately warm and Greenhouse Gas Emissions are all sustainability indicators and are linked to SDGs 7, 11, 13 and 15.*

Indicator 1: Access to reliable, affordable and sustainable energy sources

Ireland's fuel mix for electricity generation remains heavily dependent on carbon-based fossil fuels, although the share of renewables has shown some improvement in the recent years. In 2023, 40.7 per cent of Ireland's electricity supply came from renewable energy, down slightly from 42 per cent in 2020 (SEAI, 2024; SEAI, 2021). This decline runs contrary to Ireland's national targets to reduce emissions, increase renewable energy production, and eliminate reliance on fossil fuels. Compounding the challenge, Ireland's dependency on imported fossil fuels has worsened, rising from 72 per cent in 2020 to 82.6 per cent in 2023. At the European level[20], Ireland lags significantly behind other countries. In 2022, the EU average share of renewable energy in gross final energy consumption was 21.9 per cent, with the best-performing countries being Sweden (66.3 per cent) and Finland (47.9 per cent). In contrast, Ireland recorded just 13.1 per cent, far below the EU average and its annual 2030 target of 16 per cent. Looking ahead, Ireland's overall renewable energy share must rise to 43 per cent by 2030 to meet its ambitious goals. As of 2022, Ireland ranks last among EU member states for the share of renewable energy in gross final energy consumption. These figures highlight the urgent need for Ireland to accelerate its renewable energy transition.

Indicator 2: Biodiversity loss

In terms of biodiversity, Ireland has had the same number of Natura2000 sites (consisting of both Special Protected Areas (SPAs) under the EU Birds Directive and Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) under the EU Habitats Directive) between 2015 and 2020 (923,000 hectares). The common and farmland bird indices both improved between 2017 and 2022 (CSO, 2023). While at a European level[21], Ireland had the second lowest proportion of Surface of the terrestrial protected areas at 13.9 per cent, which comprised of nationally designated protected areas and Natura 2000 sites (both marine and terrestrial protected areas designated under the EU Habitats and Birds Directives), just ahead of

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[20] Eurostat [SDG_07_40]
[21] Eurostat [SDG_15_20]

Finland (13.4 per cent) and far below the EU average of 26.1 per cent. The best performing countries such as Bulgaria at 41 per cent followed by Slovenia at 40.5 per cent. Demonstrate far greater biodiversity protection. Ireland's low proportion of protected areas highlights a critical gap in addressing biodiversity loss.

Indicator 3: Proportion of the population able to keep their homes adequately warm

The proportion of the population unable to keep their home adequately warm has more than doubled, rising from 3.5 per cent in 2020 to 7.2 per cent in 2023. This places Ireland 15th (sharing its ranking with Hungary) among EU member states and still performing below the EU average of 10.6 per cent (Clark, Kavanagh, & McGeady, 2024). Luxembourg (2.1 per cent), Finland (2.6 per cent), and Slovenia (3.6 per cent) lead as the best-performing nations in this category.

Within Ireland, gender differences are minimal, with 6.7 per cent of men and 7.7 per cent of women unable to afford adequate warmth. However, disparities become stark when considering age, economic status, education level, and household composition. The highest rates of inadequate warmth are found among children under 17 years (9.3 per cent). Economic disparities are more pronounced: 18.5 per cent of unemployed individuals and 16.1 per cent of those unable to work due to long-standing health problems face this issue, compared to just 4.5 per cent of retirees and 5 per cent of employed individuals. Looking at the education levels of the head of the household, we see similar patterns as seen in income inequality and housing affordability, with 11.3 per cent of those with lower secondary education and 10.7 per cent of those with primary education or below unable to afford warmth, compared to just 3.4 per cent of those with third-level degrees. Household composition shows that lone-parent households (19 per cent) and single-person households (over 10 per cent) are most affected, while households with three or more adults have a much lower rate of 3.8 per cent. Tenure status further reveals that 15.3 per cent of renters or those in rent-free arrangements struggle to afford warmth, compared to just 3.6 per cent of owner-occupied households.

Indicator 4: Greenhouse Gas Emissions

Finally, greenhouse gas emissions present another critical challenge. Between 2017 and 2022, Ireland reduced its greenhouse gas emissions by only 4 per cent, far from the reductions needed to meet climate targets. In terms of international comparability[22], Ireland's emissions in 2022 were 13 tonnes per capita, the second highest among EU member states after Luxembourg (14.5 tonnes per capita) and significantly above the EU average of 7.3 tonnes per capita. Sweden, the best-performing country, recorded just 0.6 tonnes per capita, followed by Romania at 3.3 tonnes per capita. These figures highlight Ireland's ongoing struggle to reduce emissions and transition to a low-carbon economy.

While some progress has been made in renewable energy, Ireland continues to lag behind its EU peers in critical areas such as greenhouse gas emissions, renewable energy adoption, and biodiversity protection. The disparities in energy poverty further emphasise the need for inclusive, equitable solutions that prioritise vulnerable populations. Addressing these challenges will require bold, sustained policy action and increased investment in sustainable energy and conservation efforts.

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[22] Eurostat [SDG_13_10]

4.9 SAFETY AND SECURITY

The indicators selected for this dimension were: **Incidences of gender-based violence; Incidences of racism and/or discrimination;** and **Persons killed or injured on roads**.

Figure 11 presents the performance scores for each of these indicators as well as for the overall Safety and Security dimension. The figure highlights a concerning negative performance across incidences of gender-based violence and racism/discrimination, emphasising on the urgent need for targeted interventions. On the other hand, there has been a slight positive trend in road safety, both nationally and relative to other EU member states. Despite this improvement, the overall performance of the Safety and Security dimension remains poor, reflecting ongoing challenges that demand sustained attention and policy action. Each of these indicators is discussed in greater detail below.
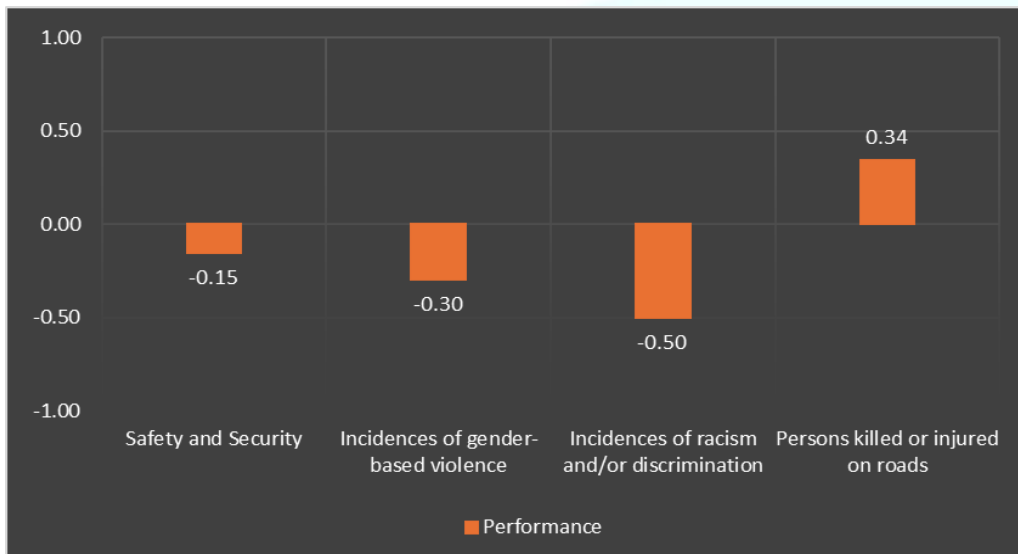

Figure 11: Safety and Security dimension and indicators score

Indicator 1: Incidences of gender-based violence

The lack of standardised national recording for "gender-based violence" remains a significant gap in data availability. However, recorded crime statistics related to sexual offences highlight a worrying trend. Between Q2 2020 and Q2 2024[23], there was a 38.5 per cent increase in recorded sexual offences, rising from 3,056 to 3,244 cases. While there has been a slight decrease from the previous year (3,705 cases), these figures indicate an overall upward trend.

In a European context[24], Ireland performs poorly on gender-based violence. The EU average for women who have experienced physical (including threats) or sexual violence is 30.7 per cent, while Ireland ranks among the worst-performing countries, with 40.7 per cent of women reporting experiences of violence. Ireland's eighth-place ranking highlights the scale of the challenge and the critical need for comprehensive measures to prevent and address gender-based violence effectively.

Indicator 2: Incidences of racism and/or discrimination

The most recent available data on discrimination is from Q1 2019, which reported a 50 per cent increase in the proportion of the population experiencing discrimination between Q3 2014 and Q1

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[23] Main Results Recorded Crime Q2 2024 - Central Statistics Office
[24] Eurostat [GBV_ANY_AGE]

2019. Specific groups reported significantly higher levels of discrimination, including non-Irish nationals, individuals from religions other than Roman Catholic, and the unemployed.

The data from the Irish Network Against Racism (INAR) highlights the growing prevalence of racism in Ireland. In 2022, INAR recorded 600 reports of racism, including 190 incidences of discrimination, 223 criminal offences, and 136 cases of hate speech (Michael, Reynolds, & Omidi, Reports of racism in Ireland: Data from iReport.ie - Annual Report 2022, 2023). This also represents more than 50 per cent increase from 2018, when 390 reports were recorded, comprising 118 incidences of discrimination, 103 criminal offences, and 118 cases of hate speech (Michael, 2019). While official statistics remain limited, these figures indicate that increasing racism and discrimination are issues that undermine safety and social cohesion in Ireland.

Indicator 3: Persons killed or injured on roads

As stated in Government's Wellbeing Report, the number of people killed or injured on Ireland's roads has seen a marginal reduction, providing a positive trend in an otherwise concerning dimension. Between 2017 and 2022, the number of road casualties decreased from 7,934 to 7,457 per annum.

At European level, Ireland performs well in road safety. As of 2021, Ireland recorded 30.83 deaths per million inhabitants, ranking 7th lowest in the EU and performing better than the EU average of 46.34 deaths per million inhabitants. Norway (21.38), Sweden (22), and the UK (26) were the top-performing countries.

While the reduction in road fatalities is welcome, ongoing efforts to promote road safety and reduce casualties must remain a priority. Further, incidences of gender-based violence and racism/discrimination highlight significant challenges that require urgent attention. The persistent upward trends in sexual offences and discrimination undermine overall wellbeing and security. Addressing these issues demands more comprehensive data collection, targeted interventions, and sustained policy focus to improve safety for all members of society.

4.10 WORK AND JOB QUALITY

The indicators selected for this dimension were: **In-work poverty; Mean weekly earnings;** and **Number of long-term unemployed**. These indicators provide insight into Ireland's labour market dynamics, income disparities, and employment challenges, particularly for vulnerable groups.

Figure 12 illustrates the performance and equality scores for key indicators under the Work and Job Quality dimension. While the performance score for this dimension is positive (0.33), the equality score (-0.15) points toward persistent and deepening disparities in income and employment outcomes across various demographics. The Number of Long-term Unemployed indicator shows the strongest performance score (0.45), reflecting Ireland's progress in reducing long-term unemployment. However, the equality scores for Mean Weekly Earnings remain concerning, pointing to structural inequalities within the labour market. Each indicator is examined in greater detail below, highlighting the challenges and opportunities in this dimension.
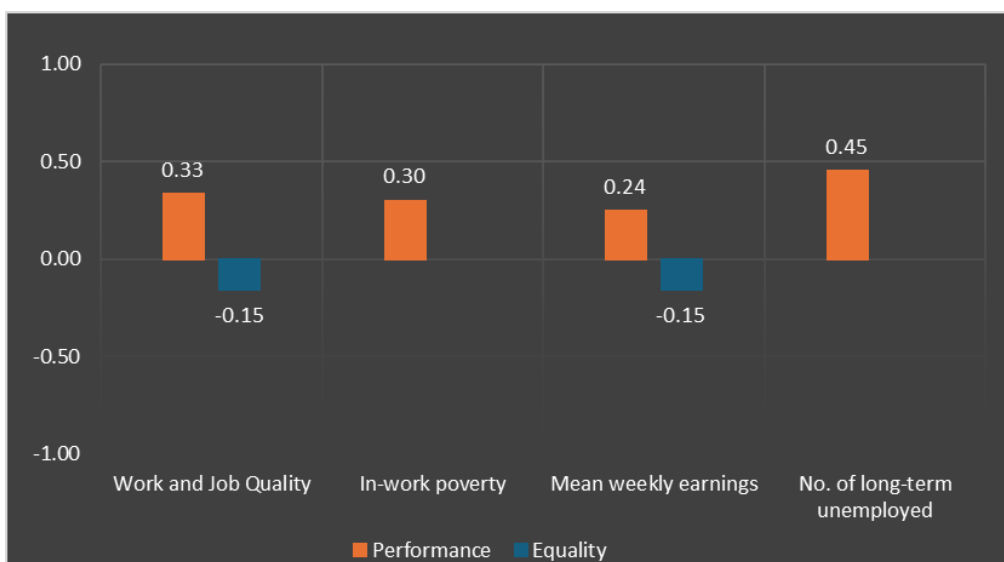
Figure 12: Work and Job Quality dimension and indicators score

Indicator 1: In-work poverty

The proportion of people in employment and at risk of poverty has seen slight fluctuations over recent years. This rate decreased from 5.1 per cent in 2018 to 4.4 per cent in 2019. However, as mentioned earlier due to changes in the time series, direct comparisons with subsequent years are not possible. In 2020, the rate rose to 6.5 per cent before declining to 5.8 per cent in 2023, based on SILC data, reflecting minimal improvement. These figures highlight a persistent problem: having a job is not, in itself, a guarantee of living in a poverty-free household. Over time poverty figures for the working poor have remained more-or-less static, reflecting a persistent problem with low earnings. In 2023, almost 145,000 people in employment were still at risk of poverty. This is a remarkable statistic, and it is important that policy better recognises and addresses this problem.

From a European[25] perspective, Ireland performs better than the EU-27 average of 8.3 per cent, with 5.6 per cent of employed persons at risk of poverty or social exclusion, ranking fifth behind Finland (2.8 per cent), Czechia (3.1 per cent), Belgium (4.7 per cent), and the Netherlands (5.2 per cent). However, the persistence of in-work poverty in Ireland reflects a broader issue of wage adequacy and highlights the importance of policies aimed at introducing living wage and reducing tax burdens for low-income workers.

Indicator 2: Mean weekly earnings

Mean weekly earnings have increased significantly over the past five years, rising from €769.09 in Q3 2019 to €955.49 in Q3 2024, a 24.2 per cent increase. This progress is commendable, as it reflects broader income growth within the labour market. However, significant income disparities persist across sectors. In Q3 2024, workers in the Information and Communications sector earned the highest mean weekly earnings at €1,656.40, while workers in Accommodation and Food Services earned just €443.75. Similarly, those in Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation earned €662.44, highlighting the uneven distribution of earnings across industries.

At the European level[26], the Annual net earnings of a full-time single worker without children earning an average wage indicator provides a useful cross-country comparison. Using purchasing power

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[25] Eurostat [ILC_LI04]
[26] Eurostat [EARN_NT_NETFT]

standards (PPS), a unit adjusted for price differences across countries to reflect real purchasing power. Ireland ranks sixth in the EU-27, with Irish workers average annual net income in 2023 being €30,327.16, slightly above the EU average of €27,530.41. The top three performing countries were the Netherlands (€38,855.65), Luxembourg (€35,797.96), and Austria (€35,089.92). While Ireland's relative position is positive, the stark disparities across industries highlight the need for more equitable wage distribution.

Indicator 3: Number of long-term unemployed

The rate of long-term unemployment (defined as being unemployed for 12 months or more) has improved significantly, declining from 1.4 per cent of the total labour force aged 15 to 74 years in Q3 2019 to 0.9 per cent in Q3 2024 (CSO, 2024). However, the profile of those who remain long-term unemployed reveals important challenges. Most long-term unemployed individuals are women aged 25-54. The improvements in the number of long-term employed are very welcome and given the current strength of the labour market, *Social Justice Ireland* believes that major emphasis should be placed on those who are trapped in long term unemployment – particularly those with the lowest education levels. Previous experiences, in Ireland and elsewhere, have shown that many of those under 25 and many of those over 55 find it challenging to return to employment after a period of unemployment.

At European level[27], the long-term unemployment rate is measured as a percentage of total unemployment. As of Q2 2024, Ireland's long-term unemployment rate stood at 21.3 per cent, well below the EU average of 33.4 per cent, placing Ireland sixth among EU member states. However, Ireland remains significantly behind the best-performing country, Norway, where the rate is just 11.1 per cent, highlighting the need for further efforts to address this issue comprehensively.

 As shown in Figure 12, Ireland's labour market has achieved positive progress in reducing long-term unemployment and increasing mean weekly earnings. However, the persistence of in-work poverty and significant income disparities across industries highlights areas that require closer examination and targeted attention. Policies to address wage adequacy, ensure equitable income distribution, and support vulnerable groups – particularly the long-term unemployed – are critical for promoting inclusive labour market outcomes. While Ireland performs relatively well in comparison to EU-27 averages, sustained efforts are needed to ensure that economic growth translates into meaningful improvements in job quality and worker wellbeing.

4.11 TIME USE

The indicators selected for this dimension were: **Long working hours in main job; Commuting Times;** and **Providing at least 20 hours of care per week**.

Figure 13 illustrates the performance and equality scores for the key indicators under the Time Use dimension. Overall, the Time Use dimension scores reveal concerning trends, with a negative score for both performance and equality aspects, indicating deteriorating conditions compared to previous years. While there is a marginally positive performance score for reducing long working hours (0.06), significant inequalities (-0.41) across sectors, genders, and age groups is evident. Commuting Times continue to show a negative performance (-0.23) and reveal disparities that affect quality of life. The

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[27] Eurostat [LFSQ_UPGAL]

indicator on caregiving responsibilities also presents disparity, with just 0.36 equality score, however, data limitations and the lack of frequent updates reduce the utility of caregiving indicators. Each indicator is explored further below.
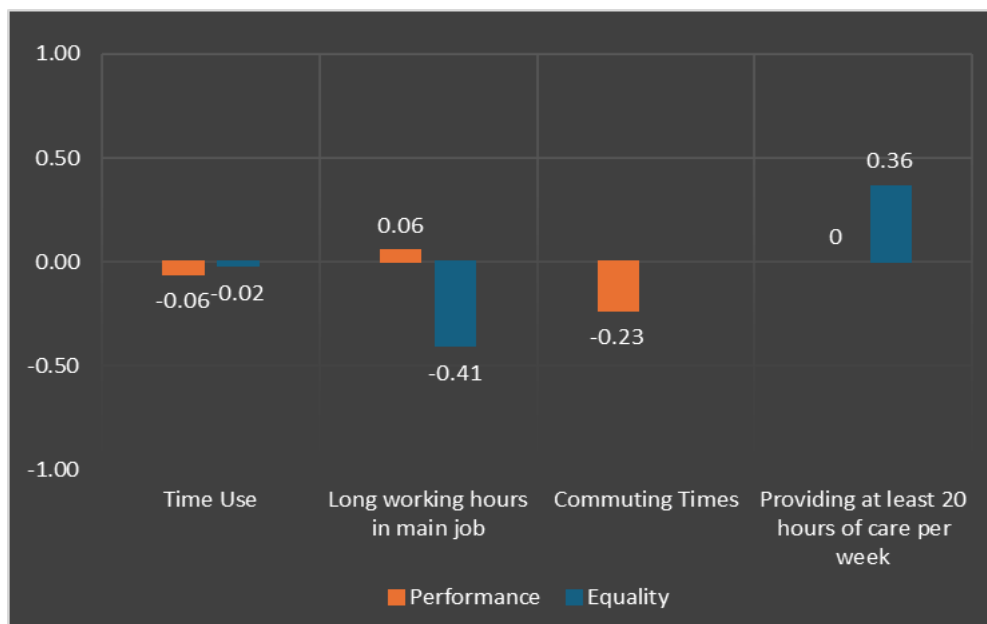

Figure 13: Time Use dimension and indicators score

Indicator 1: Long working hours in main job

The proportion of people in Ireland working long hours (49 hours or more) in their main job decreased between from 10.4 per cent in Q3 2019 to 7.8 per cent in Q3 2024. However, as with other aspects of the labour market included in the Government's Wellbeing Framework, the average proportion conceals significant inequalities across sectors, genders, and age groups. While just 3.4 per cent of those employed in the Human Health and Social Work Activities sector worked long hours, this figure rises dramatically to 40.7 per cent for those in the Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing sector. Similarly, gender disparities are notable - 11.5 per cent of men usually worked 49 hours or more per week in the Q3 2024, compared to 3.6 per cent of women. Age-related differences were also similar, with 15.3 per cent of individuals aged 65-74 years working long hours in comparison to 2.3 per cent of individuals aged 15-24 years. Ireland's overall long working hours rate is higher than the EU average. In 2023, EU-27 average[28] stood at 6.9 per cent, while Ireland's rate was 7.8 per cent. While the decline in long working hours is welcome, the persistent disparities across demographics and sectors emphasise the need for a more nuanced understanding of labour practices and their impact on wellbeing.

Indicator 2: Commuting Times

Average commuting times in Ireland have also shown a slight increase, rising from 28.2 minutes in 2016 to 29.1 minutes in 2022 (CSO, 2023). At a European level, the most recent comparable data is from 2019, when Ireland was joint fourth (alongside Belgium) for average commuting time, at 28 minutes. This is above the EU average of 25 minutes, with the shortest average commuting time recorded in Cyprus, at 19 minutes. While Ireland's commuting time remains longer than average, it is a critical area for analysis given its impact on quality of life and overall wellbeing.

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[28] Eurostat [LFSA_QOE_3A2]

In 2022, on average, males spent longer commuting to work (31.2 minutes) than females (26.9 minutes). Additionally, 11 per cent of commuters spent over an hour travelling to work, with males (13 per cent) more likely than females (8 per cent) to face long commutes. This difference may reflect underlying societal norms and expectations, where women are often expected to work closer to home to manage caregiving and household responsibilities. Moreover, when looking at age cohorts, a higher proportion of people aged 25 to 34 (12 per cent) travelled for an hour or more to work compared with all other age groups. Among males, the age group with the highest proportion commuting to work for an hour or more was the 35- to 44-year-olds (14 per cent). For female commuters, the age cohort with the highest proportion of long commutes (10 per cent) was younger, 25 to 34 years. Geographic disparities are also notable, with counties bordering Dublin experiencing the longest commutes, particularly Meath, where the average journey time was 35 minutes. Conversely, Galway City recorded the shortest commutes, averaging 23 minutes. (CSO, 2023).

Indicator 3: Providing at least 20 hours of care per week

The indicator on providing at least 20 hours of care per week highlights another important dimension of time use. This is also used in the Government's Wellbeing report and while this indicator is relevant, its current data limitations undermine its utility. The Irish Health Survey, conducted every six years, provides the most recent data from 2019, but changes in methodology mean it cannot be compared with results from 2015. This low frequency of data collection poses challenges for tracking progress, and the government should consider either increasing the survey frequency or exploring alternative data sources. The available 2019 data reveal significant gendered, age-related, and socioeconomic disparities. 37 per cent of women aged 15 and over provided at least 20 hours of care per week, compared to 23 per cent of men. Older age groups are more likely to provide care, with 51 per cent of individuals aged 75 and over reporting at least 20 hours of caregiving. Socioeconomic disparities are also evident: over 35 per cent of individuals from disadvantaged or very disadvantaged backgrounds provided at least 20 hours of care weekly, compared to 23 per cent of those from affluent backgrounds.

Notably, the Government's Wellbeing Dashboard does not provide data on caregiving at the European level, leaving an important gap in comparative analysis. While the chosen indicator is relevant, its infrequent updates and the lack of international benchmarking hinder its effectiveness in providing actionable insights. Expanding the availability and regularity of this data would significantly enhance its value for policy-making and wellbeing analysis.

4.12 CONNECTIONS, COMMUNITY AND PARTICIPATION

The indicators selected for this dimension were: **Population who feel lonely; Access to green / recreational space;** and **Population who have at least two people they can rely on**. These indicators reflect the critical role of social connections, access to nature, and interpersonal trust in fostering community participation and overall wellbeing.

Figure 14 presents the performance, equality, and sustainability scores for the key indicators under this dimension, as well as the overall Connections, Community, and Participation dimension, which shows positive trends. The dimension reports a relatively higher equality score (0.65) compared to other dimensions, alongside modest improvements in performance (0.35) and sustainability (0.26) overtime.

Both the indicators – the population who feel lonely and the population who have at least two people they can rely on – show positive scores for performance aspect indicating modest progress over time. The equality score of 0.92 for social support suggests that access to trusted relationships is relatively well distributed across demographic groups. However, the equality score of 0.38 for loneliness reveals that certain cohorts such as women, individuals aged 50-64 years, adults living alone, and single parents, experience significantly higher levels of loneliness. Meanwhile, access to green and recreational space, despite being a vital wellbeing indicator, does not show measurable progress due to a lack of comparable data. Each indicator is examined in greater detail below, highlighting the challenges and opportunities in this dimension.
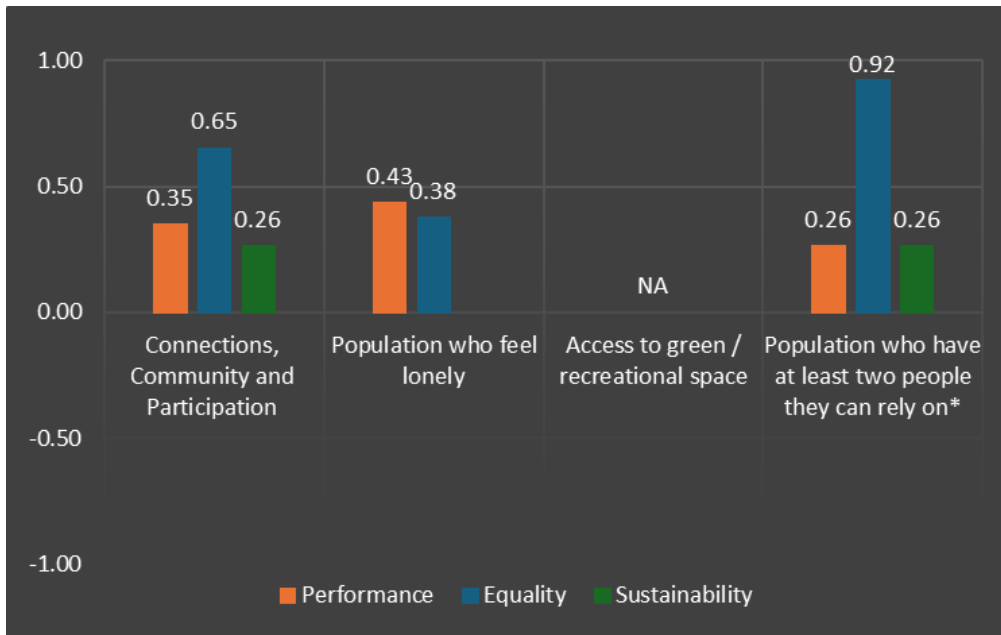

Figure 14: Connections, Community and Participation dimension and indicators score
*Note: *Population who have at least two people they can rely on is a sustainability indicator and links to SDGs 3 and 11*

Indicator 1: Population who feel lonely

The proportion of the population who reported feeling lonely at least some of the time decreased from 24.8 per cent in 2020 to 14.1 per cent in 2023, according to the CSO[29]. However, disparities remain across demographic groups. Women reported feeling lonelier than men. Within the age range of 16-64 years, individuals aged 50-64 years felt the loneliest (15.8 per cent), while loneliness was less prevalent among those aged 65 years and over (9.5 per cent). Household composition also significantly influenced loneliness levels. Adults living alone or with no other adults in the household reported the highest levels of loneliness: 29.4 per cent of adults of retirement age living alone, 28.5 per cent of adults of working age living alone, and 27.7 per cent of single parents reported feeling lonely at least some of the time. By comparison, households with two adults, at least one aged 65 or older, and households with three or more adults reported significantly lower loneliness rates, at 8.9 per cent and 11.8 per cent, respectively.

Studies on loneliness in Ireland have tended to concentrate on older people aged 50+ using data from the TILDA study[30], and indeed the 2023 CSO Report on this aspect in suggests that loneliness increases

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[29] Trend only available from 2020 due to break in time series.
[30] www.tilda.tcd.ie

with age. However learnings in respect of differences in social isolation among people living in urban or rural areas; loneliness by highest education achieved (Ward, May, Normand, Kenny, & Nolan, 2021); and the impact of loneliness on health outcomes and mortality risk (Donovan & Blazer, 2020) (Burns, Leavey, & Ward, 2022), would be worthy of study at a population level.

Indicator 2: Access to green / recreational space

Access to green and recreational spaces is another key indicator of wellbeing. The CSO's *Household Environmental Behaviours – Visits to Nature Areas Report Q3 2021* found urban green spaces were the most popular type of green and natural space visited by Irish households in Quarter 3 of 2021, with 32 per cent of households visiting most days and a further 34 per cent visiting most weeks. The figure was higher for urban households with 74 per cent visiting most weeks. Fields, farms and countryside, and woodland or forest areas were each visited by 31 per cent of households most weeks (CSO, 2021). At a European level, data from the European Environment Agency on urban green spaces places Dublin in the bottom half of EEA countries in terms of total green infrastructure; second for urban green space; and the bottom third for urban tree cover (EEA, 2022). While the data presents a positive picture, the lack of comparable data over time prevents this indicator from being marked as showing progress.

Indicator 3: Population who have at least two people they can rely on

The rate of people in Ireland with at least two people they can rely on was 77 per cent in 2019, according to the Irish Health Survey. However, as shared earlier, the results are incomparable with those from 2015, and the survey is only conducted every six years, further limiting its usefulness for tracking progress. At the EU level, the most recent data available is from 2015, when 96.2 per cent of the Irish population reported having at least two people they could count on, compared to the EU average of 94.1 per cent. Ireland ranked third among the top performers, behind Finland and Czechia (both 98.1 per cent) and Sweden (97.3 per cent). Notably, there was minimal variation across age groups, with 75 per cent to 81 per cent of respondents across all age ranges reporting that they had two or more people they could rely on in times of serious need. This indicator also links directly to SDGs 3 and 11, reflecting its sustainability aspect.

4.13 CIVIC ENGAGEMENT, TRUST, AND CULTURAL EXPRESSION

The indicators selected for this dimension were: **Trust in National Government; Satisfaction with how democracy works in Ireland;** and **Voter turn-out in National Elections**. These indicators are also aligned with sustainability goals, emphasising the resilience of governance and the need to ensure inclusive and participatory decision-making at all levels, alongside the development of effective, accountable, and transparent institutions.

Figure 15 presents the performance and sustainability scores for the key indicators under this dimension, as well as the overall Civic Engagement, Trust, and Cultural Expression dimension. The graph shows marginally positive performance and sustainability scores for the dimension overall.

Among the indicators, Satisfaction with how democracy works in Ireland (0.33), show modest positive performance and sustainability score, largely attributed to Ireland's relatively strong position among EU member states. While Trust in National Government is positive (0.07), it is negligible and therefore concerning. Also, this is primarily driven by Ireland's relatively strong position among EU member

states rather than an increase in public confidence. Meanwhile, Voter Turnout in National Elections shows a negative score, reflecting a concerning trend of declining electoral participation. Each indicator is examined in greater detail below to shed light on these findings.

Figure 15: Civic Engagement, Trust, and Cultural Expression dimension and indicators scores
*Note: *Trust in National Government, Satisfaction with how democracy works in Ireland, and Voter turn-out in National Elections are sustainability indicators and links to SDG 16*

Indicator 1: Trust in National Government

In the Eurobarometer Survey conducted in Summer 2022, 46 per cent of respondents in Ireland stated that they trusted the national government, while 49 per cent expressed trust in the national parliament. Conversely, 49 per cent indicated that they tended not to trust the national government, highlighting a split in public perception of governance (European Commission, 2022). By Spring 2024, trust levels had declined further, with only 43 per cent expressing trust in both the national government and parliament, marking a drop from the previous survey. At the same time, 50 per cent of respondents stated that they did not trust the national government, reflecting growing dissatisfaction (European Commission, 2024).

At the European level, trust in governance varies widely. Ireland ranks fifth for trust in the national government, tied with Finland. The EU-27 average stands significantly lower at 33 per cent, with Luxembourg leading at 72 per cent. For trust in national parliaments, Ireland ranks sixth, tied with Belgium and Germany, while the EU-27 average is 36 per cent. Sweden is the best-performing country, with 68 per cent of respondents expressing trust in their national parliament. While Ireland's position in these rankings is relatively strong, the downward trend in trust levels over time signals a need for continued focus on strengthening public confidence in governance.

## Indicator 2: Satisfaction with how democracy works in Ireland

The Eurobarometer Survey also provides valuable insights into public satisfaction with democracy in Ireland. According to the Spring 2024 Eurobarometer Report, the proportion of people satisfied with how democracy works in Ireland was 80 per cent in Spring 2024, down from 86 per cent in 2023.

Although this still represents a high level of satisfaction, the decline reflects concerns about democratic governance and civic processes.

In terms of international comparisons, Ireland ranks fourth among EU member states, with its satisfaction rate significantly above the EU-27 average of 58 per cent. Luxembourg and Denmark lead in this category, with 88 per cent of respondents expressing satisfaction. While Ireland's position is commendable, the drop in satisfaction highlights the need to address public concerns and strengthen democratic institutions.

Indicator 3: Voter turn-out in National Elections

Voter turn-out in national elections presents a less optimistic picture. In the 2024 General Election, voter turnout was 59.7 per cent, marking a decline of 3.2 percentage points compared to the 2020 General Election (62.9 per cent) (Irish Times, 2024; RTE, 2024). This continues a longer-term trend of declining electoral participation, as turnout in the 2016 General Election was 65.1 per cent, representing a cumulative drop of 5.4 percentage points over three election cycles (Oireachtas Library and Research Service, 2020). This steady decrease highlights challenges in engaging the electorate and fostering widespread civic participation.
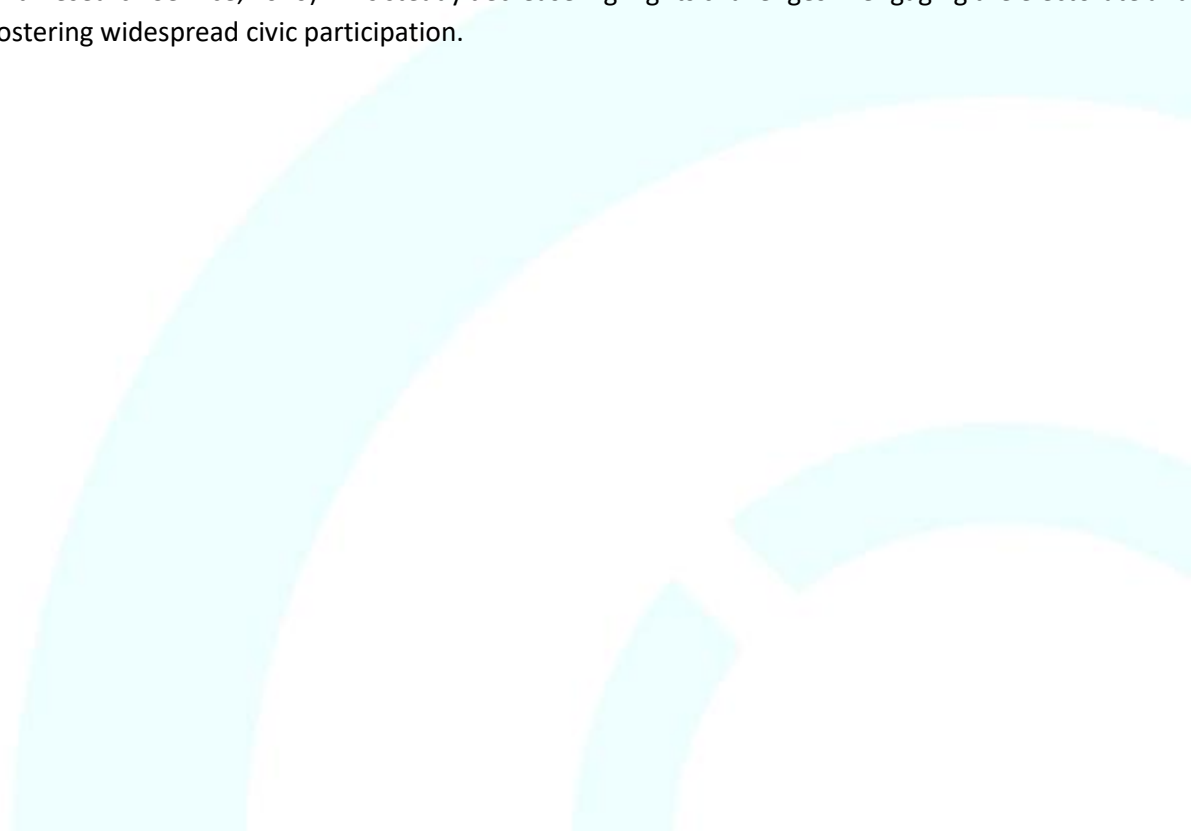
5 TOWARDS A FAIRER FUTURE: KEY POLICY PRIORITIES

The Wellbeing Framework is a valuable tool for guiding Ireland's policy decisions, aiming to improve the quality of life in Ireland by considering social, economic, and environmental factors. However, as this report highlights, the Government's current approach falls short in addressing critical issues of equality and sustainability, which are essential for ensuring that progress is inclusive and long-lasting.

Social Justice Ireland's alternative wellbeing framework seeks to bridge these gaps by incorporating more meaningful indicators that reflect the lived experiences of individuals and diverse groups. It goes beyond aggregate performance scores to reveal disparities in housing affordability, healthcare access, digital literacy, and gender-based violence, among others. While there is still scope for improvement in methodology and indicators (as the data needs to be available for them), by prioritising equality and sustainability, the alternative framework provides a more nuanced picture of Ireland's wellbeing, identifying areas that require targeted interventions and focusing especially on those furthest behind.

Thus, the key question is how to effectively improve wellbeing. This is where a comprehensive, coherent policy agenda guided by principles of fairness, sustainability, and the common good would be transformative. With this, *Social Justice Ireland* proposes an integrated policy framework for a new social contract, identifying five key policy outcomes mentioned below (McGeady, Murphy, Rawat, & Rogers, 2024).

Vibrant Economy	An economy that works for everyone must go beyond headline growth figures. *Social Justice Ireland's* alternative framework shows that economic performance cannot be viewed in isolation from inequalities in housing, healthcare, and job quality. It highlights that in-work poverty, income adequacy, and housing affordability remain critical challenges, despite positive economic trends. Building a vibrant economy means ensuring that economic gains are shared fairly across society.
Decent Services and Infrastructure	Wellbeing requires more than income – it demands access to quality services, such as healthcare, housing, and education. Our alternative framework exposes gaps in healthcare access, long waiting lists, and housing stress that disproportionately affect low-income households, renters, and disadvantaged groups. Addressing these gaps through equitable public services is essential for fostering resilience and improving wellbeing.
Just Taxation	Ensuring that everyone pays their fair share is central to funding public services and reducing inequality. The alternative framework highlights income inequality and the need for progressive taxation policies that support social infrastructure to enhance wellbeing.
Good Governance	Trust in institutions is a cornerstone of societal wellbeing. Our alternative framework includes indicators like trust in government and satisfaction with democracy, revealing a decline in public confidence. Without transparent, accountable governance, policies aimed at improving wellbeing will lack public buy-in. Strengthening civic engagement and trust in institutions is key to a functioning democracy that serves all citizens.
Sustainability	As demonstrated in this report, long-term wellbeing cannot be achieved without policies that address social, economic, and environmental sustainability in a holistic and integrated manner, recognising that wellbeing must be long-lasting, maintained across generations and shared equitably.

Each of these five key policy outcomes can be achieved with a new social contract that prioritises wellbeing. It is not enough to have progress in three or even four of the five, while neglecting other areas. All five areas for attention must be worked on simultaneously. It is not a question of getting the economy right and everything else will follow. That narrow focus has led to a cycle of boom-and-bust economics that ignores the long-term wellbeing of society.

The *Sustainable Progress Index*, developed and published annually by *Social Justice Ireland*, further emphasises the need to measure progress in a way that accounts for social, economic, and environmental sustainability, ensuring that no group is left behind in the pursuit of wellbeing. Ireland faces critical challenges in housing, healthcare, income inequality, and climate action, which require bold and transformative policies (Clark, Kavanagh, & McGeady, 2024). *Social Justice Ireland's* alternative wellbeing framework provides a measure to assess where we are, identify key issues, and determine whether the progress made is inclusive and sustainable. This approach ensures that wellbeing improvements enhance life in Ireland, particularly for those who are most vulnerable.

As Ireland continues to embed the Wellbeing Framework in its policymaking processes, it is essential to prioritise equity, inclusion, and long-term sustainability. By adopting a more comprehensive and nuanced approach to wellbeing measurement, policymakers can ensure that Ireland's progress is both resilient and inclusive, paving the way for a fairer and more just society.

As a starting point, the following policy recommendations linked to the outcomes for a renewed social contract would make a significant difference in improving Ireland's Wellbeing:

Vibrant Economy	• Support the widespread adoption of the Living Wage. • Introduce Refundable Tax Credits and support low paid workers through the Tax Credits System. • Plan for projected labour market changes and social insurance fund shortfalls.
Decent Services and Infrastructure	• Set a target of 20 per cent of all housing stock in Ireland to be social housing. • Enhance the process of planning and investment so that the healthcare system can cope with the increase and diversity in population and the ageing of the population projected for the coming decades. • Invest in capacity building for communities. • Establish an expert social infrastructure and community planning forum.
Just Taxation	• Publish an Annual Resourcing Statement. • Set a new tax-take target on a per-capita basis to ensure long-term fiscal stability. • Provide an Annual Review of Tax Expenditures to ensure transparency and accountability. • Introduce a Minimum Effective Corporate Tax Rate of 10 per cent.
Good Governance	• Adequately resource the Public Participation Network (PPN) structures for participation at Local Authority level. • Establish a Dialogue Forum in Every Local Authority involving the LA and the PPN. • Establish a social dialogue process at regional and national level.
Sustainability	• Integrate climate adaptation and natural capital accounting into the annual budgetary process and our national accounting systems. • Integrate green budgeting and social impact assessment of all climate proposals into the policy making process. • Apply the principle of the 'common good' to public investment into climate research and development.

For greater detail on the policy recommendations, please see *Social Justice Ireland's* proposal and response to the Programme for Government and our annual Socio-Economic Review.

APPENDIX 1

This page lays out the methodology described in the Government's *Understanding Life in Ireland: The Well-being Framework 2023 (page 39 and 40)*. The following content is a verbatim excerpt from the report:

Note: Throughout and across all methods, performance is relative compared to previous performance and other countries' performance. For example, General Government Wealth remains negative (-€108.3 billion). However, over the last five years this figure has improved by almost 25% which is the basis of positive assessment over time.

Progress

Progress measurement is the average of 1) the percentage change over time (approximately 5 years, depending on data availability) and 2) a measure of international comparison.

International comparison measures the difference between Ireland's position (X_{ie}) and the average ($\bar{X}$) in comparison with the best performing country (X_{bc}) and the average:

$$International\ comparison = \frac{X_{ie} - \bar{X}}{X_{bc} - \bar{X}}$$

Where trend is not available, the international comparison measure is used on its own (and vice versa).

Therefore, where performance is 1, this means there was 100% improvement in the indicator over c. 5 years and/or Ireland is the best performing country. Where performance is 0 this means that there was no change over the last 5 years and/or Ireland's score is the same as the average. Where performance is -1, this means there was 100% deterioration in the indicator over c. 5 years and/or Ireland is the worst performing country.

Practical Example: Healthy Life Years

Healthy Life Years reduced slightly over the period 2015 to 2020 by 1.5% (or - 0.015).

Ireland is above the EU average by 2.2 years. By comparison, the top performer is above the EU average by 8.7 years: 2.2/8.7=0.25.

Therefore, the average is (-.015+0.25)/2 = 0.12

Equality

Equality measurement is 1 minus the average percentage difference of the best and worst performing groups for each indicator available on the CSO's Wellbeing Hub. Therefore, if there was perfect equality across groups the result would be 1. Where the average difference is greater than 100%, then the score is negative.

Practical Example: School-aged children who reported being happy with their life

91.1% of male school aged children who reported being happy with their life at present, compared to 85.6% of female children – this is a percentage difference of 6.2%.

88.6% of traveller children reported being happy with their life at present (the highest performing group) compared to 83.5% of children with a disability – this is a percentage difference of 5.8%.

The average of the two (0.062+0.058)/2 resulted in an average of 6% (or 0.06).

This can be read as 6% inequality, or 94% equality (1-0.06=0.94).

Sustainability

Sustainability is the progress scores for those indicators that have been tagged as sustainable. For any dimension that contains sustainability indicators, an average of sustainability indicators can be compared to the performance of all of the indicators.

Practical Example: Environment, Climate and Biodiversity:

Indicators	Performance	Sustainability
Pollution, Grime or Other Environmental Problems	-0.037	
Water Bodies assessed as High or Good	-0.077	-0.077
Greenhouse gas emissions	-0.469	-0.469
Waste generated	-0.303	-0.303

Performance Calculation: ([-0.037] + [-0.077] + [-0.469] + [-0.303])/4 = -0.221

Sustainability Calculation: ([-0.077] + [-0.469] + [-0.303])/3 = -0.283

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Social Justice Ireland is an independent think-tank and justice advocacy organisation of individuals and groups throughout Ireland who are committed to working to build a just society where human rights are respected, human dignity is protected, human development is facilitated and the environment is respected and protected.

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