



34th Dáil must put the Common Good at the heart of policy

Response to 'Securing our Future'



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Introduction

Social Justice Ireland welcomes the publication of 'Securing our Future', the Programme for Government which will shape the policy landscape in Ireland for the next five years and beyond.

The programme contains several causes for concern with a lack of real ambition around poverty and income adequacy and a lack of policy coherence in some areas with some policies seemingly at odds with each other.

The programme also contains several policies and proposals that, if fully resourced and implemented, would represent a positive difference to society, to our wellbeing and to our communities.

Social Justice Ireland looks forward to engaging with Government, elected representatives and Oireachtas Committees in the lifetime of the 34th Dáil to ensure that the Common Good and the protection of the most vulnerable in our society is at the heart of the design, implementation and delivery of the proposals set out in 'Securing our Future'.

Positive developments

- We welcome the commitment to run progressive budgets through the lifetime of this government. Essential to the delivery of progressive budgets is a commitment to the principle of benchmarking core social welfare rates to average earnings moving towards a system of indexation overtime. It also requires progressive taxation policies and measures in a fair tax system where those who have more pay more, while those who have less pay less. We look forward to engaging with Government on this issue.
- We welcome the commitment to a progressive social protection system that is sustainable and fair. Our social welfare system is the minimum floor under which no one in society should fall. A commitment to benchmarking core social welfare rates is the foundation of a progressive, sustainable and fair social protection system. As our population grows and ages, Government should establish an expert forum to examine what a minimum social floor of services and income for all demographic cohorts out to 2057 might look like.
- We welcome the commitment to extend the Fuel Allowance to recipients of the Working Family Payment.
- We welcome the commitment to the introduction of an annual cost of disability support payment. The design and delivery of this policy should be informed by the analysis and recommendations of the comprehensive '[Cost of Disability in Ireland – Research Report](#)'. We look forward to engaging with Government to progress this and develop this support payment to become a weekly support payment over time.
- We welcome the commitment to prepare and submit a new Medium Term Fiscal Plan setting out sustainable budgetary plans for the next five years. Our economy and society require strong and well-resourced social infrastructure and services, key to securing economic and societal growth is clarity around the on-going resourcing required, ensuring a sufficient tax take and a broad tax base.
- We welcome the commitment to establish a new Unit for Future Planning. In addition to demographic changes and accurate estimates of the demand for essential services and employment, this Unit should also consider the impact of inward migration. The work of this

Unit should inform planning around future delivery of services and social supports, and the resourcing required for the continued funding of these on an ongoing basis.

- We welcome the commitment to maintain a broad tax base we look forward to engaging with Government in the development and maintenance of a broad tax base. The first step on this path should be a revised tax take target on a per capita basis.
- We welcome the commitment to run Budget surpluses and to fund appropriate levels of current and capital expenditure growth to meet the needs of our people and address the challenges of our growing population. Key to delivery on this commitment will be a revised per capita tax take target to ensure sufficient revenue is raised to meet the needs of a growing population across all stages of the life cycle.
- We welcome the commitment to explore Regional Economic Development Zones and look forward to engaging further on this issue to ensure balanced regional and sub-regional development, exploring how these zones can support the regions to respond to digital and climate challenges and opportunities and ensuring the principles of a Just Transition and leaving no one behind is embedded in rural and regional development policy.
- We welcome the commitment to increase public sector investment to address infrastructural deficits including using windfall receipts to address strategic gaps in key areas. Housing, energy and water infrastructure should be priority areas for the investment of windfall revenue.
- We welcome the commitment to publish a National Financial Literacy Strategy. We look forward to engaging with Government further in this regard and ensuring that adult literacy is also prioritised and addressed during the next five years.

Causes for concern

- The absence of a commitment regarding an ambitious national target to reduce poverty is very concerning. While we welcome the commitment to a new child poverty target, we regret that there is no focus on overall poverty levels in the State. An ambitious national poverty target with sub-targets for vulnerable groups is essential to address current high levels of poverty, income inequality and social exclusion. With the prolonged and disproportionate impact of the cost-of-living crisis on vulnerable and low-income households, the absence of a clear policy commitment to protect the most vulnerable in Irish society is totally inadequate if we are to build a genuinely fair society.
- The failure to reference or address income adequacy in the programme is a cause for substantial concern. While poverty is multi-faceted, it cannot be addressed without policies that address income adequacy which should be combined with the provision of properly resourced services and infrastructure.
- We regret that the issue of low pay was not addressed in the programme. The introduction of Refundable Tax Credits and supporting the widespread adoption of the living wage and two key policies to support low paid workers. Their absence from the programme for government is extremely concerning.
- The lack of ambition on new social housing targets, and housing targets overall is very disappointing. Lack of access to affordable housing is having major negative social and economic impacts, yet there is a lack of urgency in the programme as to how this challenge will be addressed. Simply maintaining current housing targets will not address the current

shortfall of housing stock, pent up demand or future housing need. Government should set a target of 20 per cent of all housing stock to be social housing by 2040.

- The limited detail regarding how our climate targets will be reached is concerning. Ireland faces substantial fines in 2030 if we miss our legally binding targets. Rather than pursuing potential reframing or reclassification of certain emissions groups, we should focus instead on implementing policies that will assist us in meeting our targets.

Growing our economy



The government's plan to create 300,000 new jobs by 2030 is ambitious, as outlined in the Programme for Government. However, this must be complemented by policies to ensure workers have access to adequate and quality infrastructure, public services and housing to support these jobs. Job creation must prioritise high-quality employment with fair pay and conditions.

We welcome the government's recognition of the vital work of the Low Pay Commission and trust that this reflects a renewed commitment to the introduction of a Living Wage in Ireland. Addressing the issue of low pay through a Living Wage is essential to ensure workers can achieve a minimum acceptable standard of living, and to reduce in-work poverty, which affects over 145,000 people despite their employment.

Many jobs currently leave workers living below the poverty line. To address the issue of the working poor, we recommend introducing Refundable Tax Credits. This would allow low-income workers to receive the full value of their tax credits, improving their ability to manage living costs and make Ireland's tax system fairer and more effective for lower-income earners.

In 'Securing our Future' the government parties commit to sustainable public finances through the preparation of a Medium-Term Fiscal Plan. We welcome this and expect that it would include:

1. An Annual Statement outlining the resources required to maintain existing services, deliver additional services, and address demographic changes. This should be integral to the annual budget process.
2. A commitment to an Annual Review of Tax Expenditures to be presented to the Oireachtas as part of the Budgetary process to ensure transparency and accountability. An examination of the comprehensive tax expenditure data published by the Revenue Commissioners in 2023 shows that there are approximately 132 discretionary tax breaks involving revenue forgone of €17.2 billion per annum; these are tax relieving measures that could be phased out, restructured, or delivered more appropriately as direct expenditure.

We also welcome the forward planning aspect of preparing for a downturn in the public finances and Government's commitment to maintain a broad tax base and implement progressive changes in the taxation to prepare for future budgetary challenges relating to ageing population. We look forward to

engaging with the government to explore avenues for reforming and broadening the tax base, creating a more equitable and sustainable foundation for Ireland’s future development.

Social Justice Ireland believes that, over the period ahead, policy should focus on increasing Ireland’s tax-take to support essential public services and infrastructure. We propose a new tax-take target of **€15,000 per capita in 2017 terms**, increasing annually in line with nominal GNI*. This translates to approximately €25,500 per capita in 2024, requiring an additional €26 billion per annum in stable, recurring tax revenue to be raised excluding windfall gains. Our target is calculated using CSO population data, ESRI population projections, and CSO and Department of Finance data on recent and future nominal overall taxation levels.

Achieving this would align Ireland with European standards while providing sustainable resources for public investment, fostering economic growth, and improving living standards for all.

The purpose of economic development is to drive and support our social and environmental goals. Ireland’s economy should be one which works for all, now and into the future. Over the next five years Government should strive to create a new economic model based on fairness. This would ensure that the benefits accruing from a vibrant economy would be distributed in a more equal manner. Among other things, this would mean that people with a job have sufficient income to live life with dignity, that social welfare payments are set at an adequate level and are indexed to average earnings, and that public services are funded sufficiently in order to close the gap between the living standards of the least well off in society and what is considered to be a minimum socially acceptable standard of living in a developed Western country.

Delivery and Reform



Ireland’s demographics are changing, we are living longer which is a huge success story. Now is the time to plan for this success story, to build on it, and ensure that we use our economic success to provide the services and infrastructure that people need now, and into the future. To this end, we warmly welcome the commitment to establish a new Unit for Future Planning. In addition to demographic changes and accurate estimates of the demand for essential services and employment, this Unit should also consider the impact of inward migration. The work of this Unit should inform planning around future delivery of services and social supports, and the resourcing required for the continued funding of these on an ongoing basis.

Ireland needs to have a real debate about the levels of services and infrastructure it wishes to have in the coming decades, and how these are to be financed. The work of the Unit for Future Planning should help inform these discussions and bring clarity as to what types of services and infrastructure deficits exist currently that need to be resourced and addressed, and clarity around costs. The work of this Unit can also support informed discussions regarding the types of services and infrastructure people and communities need and expect in the future, and associated costs. To support this work

Government should in parallel establish an expert forum to examine what a minimum social floor of services and income for all demographic cohorts out to 2057 might look like.

Regardless of what levels of services and infrastructure are agreed upon, one thing is absolutely clear, the proportion of revenue that we collect will have to increase in years to come, and our tax take will have to increase. Ireland can achieve this in a fair, equitable, transparent and accountable manner. Partly by reforming the tax code and broadening the tax base and making sure that those who benefit the most from Ireland's economic system contribute the most. We welcome the commitment in 'Securing our Future' to maintain a broad tax base and look forward to further engagement on specific proposals as to how this might be achieved. An absolute priority is a new tax take target on a per capital basis to bring clarity as to the revenue required to meet the needs of a growing and ageing population and what types of revenue streams are required now, and in the future to fund and maintain our infrastructure and services. A clear view of how much revenue is required on an ongoing basis, and how this might be generated is essential for fiscal clarity. An annual statement outlining how much resourcing is required to maintain existing levels of service, and how much resourcing is required to deliver additional services and meet changing demographic needs, and how this might be raised should become an integral part of the annual budgetary process.

Accelerating Housing Supply



We welcome the Programme for Government commitment of building over 300,000 homes by 2030, averaging 50,000 houses annually. This aligns broadly with the recommendations of the Housing Commission. However, the Housing Commissions report highlights an existing deficit of up to 256,000 homes. This significant shortfall underscores the urgent need for emergency construction measures to address the current housing crisis in addition to what is outlined in the Programme for Government.

We also welcome the increased focus on cost rentals and affordable homes and ensure speedy water network connections to service land. These measures are welcomed. However, the housing targets do not sufficiently address the scale of the crisis. The emphasis on 'Starter Homes' should simply be an emphasis on homes, thereby removing the implication of wealth creation via a property 'ladder'.

We welcome the commitment to support households impacted by defective building materials. It is imperative that the planned review engages fully with affected homeowners.

The commitment to build approximately 12,000 new social homes annually is positive, but inadequate to address the ongoing needs of at least 115,425 households, as estimated by the Parliamentary Budget Office. *Social Justice Ireland* recommends setting a target for 20 per cent of all housing stock to be social housing by 2040, aligning with the Housing Commission's report. This target should be achieved by directly increasing the State's investment in social housing and decentralising responsibility to Local Authorities .

We welcome the government’s commitment to leverage state capital investment to promote Modern Methods of Construction and setting binding targets for MMC use in at least 25 per cent of all State-backed housing. To support the achievement of this target, we propose, that by decentralising responsibility for social housing construction to Local Authorities they can become anchor clients of MMCs., as this can provide the scale and stability necessary to make modular construction financially viable.

The proposal to enact a new Compulsory Purchase Orders (CPO) Bill and strengthen the Land Development Agency’s (LDA) powers is welcome. We further propose introducing Compulsory Sale Orders alongside CPOs to compel the sale of vacant and derelict sites for housing.

While the government plans to increase the Rent Tax Credit, its current structure disproportionately benefits higher-income earners. Data from the Revenue Commissioners shows regressive distribution, with low-income renters receiving negligible benefits. *Social Justice Ireland* proposes converting this credit into a grant or making it refundable to benefit low-income tenants.

We welcome the commitment to reduce homelessness and prioritising social housing allocations for families in long-term homelessness. However, given the current deficit in social housing, achieving this goal will be challenging.

The extension of Help to Buy Scheme and First Home Scheme (now to second-hand homes) disproportionately supports higher income earners to purchase higher-priced properties. It continues to maintain high house prices by artificially inflating incomes, rather than investing to increase housing supply. We propose redirecting resources to boost housing supply instead of artificially inflating incomes.

We welcome practical housing options for positive ageing and expect a lifecycle approach to housing delivery. This includes adopting Universal Design principles to ensure housing is suitable for older people and those with disabilities, as committed to in the Government’s policy statement on housing for older populations.

Protecting our Environment



Climate change is one of the most pressing challenges we face; how we adapt, mitigate and manage this transition now will, in large part, determine the type of world in which future generations live. When adapting to meet this challenge, we must also grasp the opportunity to address social and economic challenges that already exist, making sure that the actions we take begin to address these problems rather than exacerbate them.

We welcome the continued commitment to the 2030 and 2050 legally binding targets, and the commitment to set new ambitious 2040 targets for the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. We also welcome the commitment to support the Just Transition Commission in its work, commitments

to empower communities to take advantage of renewable energy opportunities, commitments regarding reducing emissions from our built environment and continuation of planned carbon tax increases.

However, policy coherence remains a concern, with a commitment to data centre expansion having potentially serious implications for our renewable energy targets, our water usage and achieving emissions reductions from the energy sector. Likewise, the commitment to the prompt lifting of the passenger cap at Dublin airport is also at odds with our legally binding targets. Strong policies with clear adaptation goals, defined responsibilities and commitments that are coordinated across government and across sectors can deliver progress on mitigating the worst impacts of climate change. However, if different Departments are tasked with pursuing policies that are at odds with meeting our climate goals, this will make a difficult situation even more challenging. Strong policy coherence, alongside the mainstreaming of climate adaptation into fiscal and budgetary policy, and governance focused on addressing inequalities is required.

Social Justice Ireland looks forward to engaging with Government on what pursuing a Just Transition approach to meeting climate goals might look like as we transform our economy and society. We will engage with Government on how it can deliver quality services and a robust social infrastructure to support those people, communities, sectors and regions who will be most impacted, cognisant that these may change over time. This will necessitate a Just Transition approach to meeting climate goals, managing change, and addressing the multifaceted social and economic challenges. We will continue to make policy proposals that would support investment in thriving communities across the country, especially in rural areas.

We welcome the commitment to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. With just five years left, and substantial progress still to be made, the SDGs should be incorporated into the budget process to track progress on investment. While the commitment to climate finance is welcome, clarity is required as to how much of this money is considered part of existing Overseas Development Assistance allocations and how much is new funding for climate finance.

We welcome the commitments to the Circular Economy, supporting sustainable agricultural methods and proposed investment in green skills and in our research capacity. We will engage with Government to ensure the application of the principle of the ‘common good’ to public investment into climate research and development to ensure the resulting innovations remain a public good and accessible to all.

Investing in our Future



We warmly welcome the commitment in ‘Securing our Future’ to affordable, accessible and high-quality childcare. We look forward to engaging with Government to ensure that investment in this area reaches the levels required to deliver on this commitment. Investment in this area needs to

increase by a minimum of 0.1 per cent of GNI* with a view to reaching 1 per cent of GNI* by 2030 in line with the top performing countries in the OECD. This level of investment is crucial to ensuring that all children have access to quality childcare and after-school care which supports their development.

We welcome the commitment to the retain the Child Poverty and Wellbeing Unit. It is essential that Government sets itself ambitious national poverty targets, including a child poverty target and implements the necessary policies to achieve these targets. Income adequacy is crucial to addressing child poverty. Child poverty cannot be addressed in isolation and must be understood in the context of household poverty. The benchmarking of core social welfare rates to average earnings, improvements in the pay and conditions for parents in low paid jobs, and adequate child benefit are key policy levers in achieving child poverty goals.

We welcome the continued commitment to DEIS, and proposed enhancement of the programme. The improvement of educational outcomes for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds and disadvantaged communities must remain a policy priority, with additional resources focused on addressing the persistence of educational disadvantage. We also welcome the commitment to reduce the pupil teacher ratio at primary level during the next five years. *Social Justice Ireland* has consistently advocated for progress in this regard and looks forward to working with Government to look at specific policies and the necessary budgetary allocations required annually over the lifetime of the Government to ensure that this goal is achieved.

We also welcome the commitments in relation to supports and places for students with additional educational needs. We look forward to seeing progress in this area, and in particular will be engaging with Government in relation to specific budgetary proposals and priorities that would see progress in this areas including additional places in special schools and mainstream schools, the budgetary allocations (current and capital) required to support these places and a multi-annual funding strategy to ensure that targets in this area are achieved.

We welcome the commitments in relation to increased pathways to further and higher education and increased apprenticeship places. Overall, we are concerned that there is insufficient attention in ‘Securing our Future’ in relation to the ongoing funding challenges for the sector, and what is required to address existing funding shortfalls.

A Caring Society



As we live longer, ensuring that we have as many healthy years as possible must be a policy priority. Planning for that change in demography will require a different approach to healthcare – one we can access in our communities, close to home. We therefore welcome the commitment to develop a ‘multi-annual funding approach for our health service’. *Social Justice Ireland* calls for budgetary allocations that are valid, realistic and transparent and that they take existing commitments into account and look forward to working with Government to shape this.

Increased recruitment across the health system is welcomed as well as training and educational opportunities to ensure that supply. However, housing and transport infrastructure also needs to be in place so that people can afford to live and travel to their places of work.

We welcome the prioritisation and funding for a new Disability Strategy and that the Cabinet Committee on Children, Disability and Education will be retained. Increased staffing levels will support the commitment to support children and families with additional needs to access the services needed in a timely manner. Acknowledging that Ireland has a poor track record in supporting disabled people into employment has resulted in commitments to support and expand current initiatives.

Social Protection commitments appear to focus on work activation supports for those who may have the capacity to work. This needs to be balanced with access to other necessary supports. A permanent cost of disability payment is to be welcomed, however, a more regular payment period than once a year might be preferable. There is a continued emphasis on supports for families and the expansion of eligibility for Fuel Allowance to families in receipt of the Working Family Payment is to be welcomed and will be vital if Government is to improve the standards of living of low-income families.

We welcome the commitment to a new Working Age Payment to address long-standing inconsistencies in the social protection systems. The tapering of payments as people take up employment and engaging with other departments in relation to eligibility for supports will be important elements of this reform. We welcome the commitment to review means tests across the social welfare system. In addition to using the Report on Means Testing by the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Social Protection with a view to creating a fairer social welfare system, Government should consider the comprehensive proposals of this Committee on Indexation and Benchmarking.

Thriving Communities



We warmly welcome the commitment to balanced regional development in 'Securing our Future' and look forward to engaging with Government as to the policies necessary to achieve this aim. We welcome the commitment to explore Regional Economic Development Zones and look forward to engaging further on this issue to ensure balanced regional and sub-regional development, how these zones can support the regions to respond to digital and climate challenges and opportunities and the application of Just Transition principles across rural and regional development policy. The distinct needs and opportunities of rural Ireland must be at the heart policy in this area and the acknowledgement that public investment is one of the main instruments for rural development, particularly to mitigate the market failures in the provision of certain goods and services.

Access to services and infrastructure is one of the key challenges facing rural communities. We look forward to engaging with Government on how rural proofing and delivery of public services in rural communities is in accordance with the equivalence principle. Rural development policy is place-based, reflecting the strengths, assets, and challenges a region faces, and should have multi-stakeholder

input. Capacity building is vital to ensure that rural communities are fully engaged with as part of policy development, particularly in relation to implementing appropriate mitigation and transition programmes to support the transition to a low carbon society. This requires investment in capacity building within communities, through a community development approach supported by increased funding for community development, and for community development workers.

Strengthening our democracy



Democracy and maintaining democratic systems are vital if we are to deliver a society which ensures that all people from different cultures are welcomed in a way that is consistent with our history, our obligations as world citizens and with our economic status, and that every person has a genuine voice in shaping the decisions that affect them. That democratic systems are under threat across the world means there is no place for complacency.

We welcome the commitments to countering mis and dis-information and support for independent journalism. We welcome political reform and the increased support for greater diversity and inclusion in our political representation. Local democracy must be supported as this is where the majority of people will engage with politics and policy through interaction with their local councillors, Public Participation Networks (PPN) and others. We look forward to engaging with Government on what a 'Local Democracy Taskforce' might produce if it is to deliver on rebalancing power and increase autonomy and accountability at local Government level.

Adequately resourcing the PPN structures for participation at Local Authority (LA) level, establishing a Dialogue Forum in every Local Authority involving the LA and the PPN and establishing a social dialogue process are all essential to protecting and strengthening our democracy at local and national level.

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



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