

# **Building a Better Future 2016-2026**

**Social  
Democrats**

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## INTRODUCTION

The Social Democrats are ambitious for Ireland's future. We want Ireland to be a republic in which every person has opportunity and dignity. We are a new party, unhindered by the past and the old style of politics. Irish people have enormous resources of energy, creativity, and compassion. We deserve better than an economy that swings between boom and bust; a political system that refuses to be accountable to its citizens; public services that fail those citizens when they need them most; and a society hampered by poverty, division and injustice.

Irish people are tired of short-term thinking, stroke politics, electoral bribes and power that refuses to be held to account. We call for open and transparent government. Honest politics that works in the best interests of the people and not the party or the selected few. We are asking the Irish people to join us in building a new politics that reflects the best of Irish culture. The most prosperous, inclusive and progressive countries on earth are social democracies. We believe Ireland can join this group, and that a great many Irish people want us to. We know that a strong, creative, prosperous, fair, equal and democratic country - in which all children have the opportunity to achieve their potential - is not just an aspiration. It can, and should be, Ireland's reality.

Achieving this requires equal focus on three core areas.

- First:** Policies that support a healthy, inclusive and progressive society.
- Second:** Policies that ensure a strong, stable and vibrant economy, and support Ireland's SMEs with the same vigour that's applied to the multinational sector
- Third:** Policies that make politics and government more transparent and responsive to public, rather than party need.

In this manifesto we set our priorities in each of these areas, which include:

**Investing in public services, ensuring a recovery for all and building an inclusive and progressive society.**

- Ending child poverty;
- Ending the housing crisis;
- Building an Irish National Health Service;
- Driving quality and access in education;
- Enabling those with disability.

### **Fostering a strong, stable and vibrant economy, which supports innovation, indigenous and foreign business, job creation and development.**

- Helping SMEs create 100,000 jobs;
- Building a community banking sector;
- Reducing the cost of living;
- Managing our national finances responsibly.

### **Creating better, more open and accountable politics, with decisions based on evidence.**

- Establishing an Anti-Corruption Agency;
- Creating a strong parliament;
- Demanding transparency and evidence.

The Social Democrats know that none of these aspirations matter without the trust that is fostered through personal and collective integrity. We will respect the Irish people enough to tell them the truth as we see it. We will have respect for divergent viewpoints and philosophies but we will not compromise our basic principles in pursuit of power or popularity. We will not make promises we know we cannot keep. We will put the long-term needs of our society ahead of opportunistic gain.

It is time to take Ireland on a better path, to a better future. One in which every citizen is afforded opportunity and dignity. One in which we look to the coming decade not with uncertainty, but with ambition, determination and hope.

## **A WORD ON OUR FISCAL APPROACH**

A growing number of people in Ireland and international organisations are warning against exactly the sort of auction politics we're seeing from the establishment parties. Fine Gael and Labour are proposing to massively erode the tax base – abolishing the USC, for example, would wipe €4-5bn off the revenue base each year. They are justifying this recklessness on the grounds of a growing economy and unexpected tax returns.

This is exactly what Fianna Fáil did before the crash in 2008 – they ignored all the warnings, and pointed to the good news. Then as now, our economy was growing faster than other countries, unexpected tax revenues were appearing, home ownership was becoming impossible and commercial rents were soaring. Then as now, government investment was too low. Then as now, pre-election promises were aimed at buying votes at any cost. The result of all of this was a lost decade, and a great deal of hardship for millions of people.

**INTRODUCTION**

What Fine Gael / Labour are proposing is, however, even more irresponsible than what Fianna Fáil did. Why? Because there are no safety nets left. When the crash hit in 2008, many households, business and voluntary groups were able to cut back. The State was able to borrow vast sums of money. Today, people, businesses, and voluntary groups have nothing left to give. Public services are over-stretched and the state can't borrow additional funds. So if another global economic shock hits Ireland, as it did in 2008, we will be far more vulnerable to it than we were then.

The chances of such a shock are rising rapidly. Stock markets are seeing big drops in recent weeks, and emerging market economies, including China, are slowing down.

The Social Democrats don't want Ireland to experience another lost decade. We believe the economic breathing space available should not be used to buy the election, but instead to safeguard the future. We are proposing the tax base be maintained, with some minor adjustments. Instead of stripping out billions, we should be doing things like creating a modern healthcare system, putting in place the infrastructure needed to support business for years to come, sorting out the housing market, rebuilding communities and supporting parents in areas like affordable childcare. €4 to 5bn a year would let us do a lot of very good things in the short term, and let us start planning for big long term challenges like pensions, flooding and climate change.

The way to put money back in people's pockets is by reducing the costs of living. We are proposing a range of measures to do this, including in the areas of childcare, healthcare, insurance, education and energy.

Many people in Ireland want a credible alternative to the political cartel. They want a political vision that marries strong social vision with responsible economics and better government. That is exactly what the Social Democrats are offering.

### A WORD ON OUR COSTINGS

We are aware of the false promises made by so many parties before elections. We do not believe that false promises should be ‘something you do during an election campaign’. We are therefore stating very clearly that this manifesto lays out our priorities and our plans for the short, medium and long-term. They are the policies we will champion in the next Dáil. Are they ambitious? Yes, they are, because we believe Ireland and its political system must be ambitious if we are not to repeat the mistakes of the past.

The fiscal approach taken by the Social Democrats will ensure that higher than usual levels of State funds will be available as opposed to the other parties alternative approach of eroding the tax base. For example, abolishing the USC would reduce the revenue base by €4-€5 billion per year. This is a significant sum of money that we believe would be best used for strategic investment in repairing and building top quality public services.

It is important to note that many of the policies we propose would save very significant sums of money in the medium term. For example, investment in children has a return of about seven to one. This means that money invested today would radically reduce future costs. Similarly, moving to a modern, community-based healthcare system would require up-front investment. However, that investment would quickly start to reduce a range of existing healthcare costs.

Ultimately this is about long-term, strategic measures that will both immediately and in the future reduce the overall cost of living for those in every section of society.

## REDUCE THE COST OF LIVING

The cost of living remains very high in Ireland. Years of austerity have left families with several new household bills as a range of new charges have been introduced. We continue to have some of the highest costs for childcare, housing and healthcare among developed countries, while even services that are meant to be free, such as primary education, are not free at all with parents under strain each year just to send their child to school.

These costs have impacted harshly on living standards, particularly for low and middle income families, and have undermined the ability of many families to make ends meet. They have also undermined our competitiveness by driving up costs across the economy and fuelling wage pressures.

Simply cutting income taxes, as most other political parties are promising to do, won't address these costs. In fact, cutting taxes is likely to increase general demand in the economy and drive up costs even further.

By investing in public services and targeting some key costs in family budgets, the Social Democrats believe that government can have a far more positive impact on household budgets, without eroding the tax-base. It would also be a far fairer approach, leaving no-one behind.

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## **THE SOCIAL DEMOCRATS WOULD IMPROVE FAMILY BUDGETS BY PRIORITISING THE FOLLOWING MEASURES:**

### **AFFORDABLE CHILDCARE**

Improve state funding for childcare providers by increasing capitation rates, link funding to quality improvements and reduce and cap childcare charges (see separate childcare proposals). Introduce paid parental leave for the first 12 months of a child's life and legislate for better work flexibility for toddler years and beyond.

### **REDUCE PRESCRIPTION CHARGES**

Halve prescription charges for most of the 1.7 million people with a medical card. This would greatly improve prescription compliance.

### **INTRODUCE FREE PRIMARY EDUCATION**

The public investment of €103m would mean parents would save on the cost of school books and school transport costs.

### **REDUCE PUBLIC TRANSPORT FARES**

Restore subsidies to public transport providers on the basis that all of the extra funding is used to reduce fares.

### **END WATER CHARGES**

Save up to €260 per year by ending the idiocy of a charging system that is costing as much as it is collecting.

### **LEGISLATE FOR RENT CERTAINTY AND SECURE OCCUPANCY**

Stop rent costs spiralling by ensuring future rent increases would be linked to the cost of living. We would strengthen legislation to provide for far more robust tenure security (see our Housing section for more details).



REDUCE THE COST OF LIVING

**ESTABLISH A NEW RETRO-FITTING HOME ENERGY SCHEME**

Save on heating bills by allowing all families access to a new retro-fitting scheme that can be paid for through the utility bill and so doesn't require the family to have up-front funds.

**REDUCE MOTOR INSURANCE COSTS**

Provide better non-litigation methods to settle personal injury claims so that legal costs are reduced, improve industry data-sharing to reduce fraud and enhance competition, and reform how claims costs are set by the Courts and the PIAB so that Irish settlements come more into line with the average costs in other countries.

**ESTABLISH A LOCAL AUTHORITY FUND TO ENABLE MORE HOUSING ESTATES TO BE TAKEN IN CHARGE**

This would reduce/eliminate management fees for thousands of families living in regular houses. We would also reform planning law to address current legal difficulties faced by Local Authorities.

**REDUCE THIRD LEVEL FEES**

Reduce and cap student charges to €2,000 per student per year.

**EXTEND FREE GP CARE TO ALL CHILDREN**

Complete the roll-out of free GP Care to all children.

**ENSURE COMPETITION WORKS FOR THE MAXIMUM BENEFIT OF CONSUMERS**

Some sectors, such as energy, have not seen wholesale price reductions passed on to consumers. We would confer new market investigation powers on the Independent Anti-Corruption Agency to do whole-market investigations. This would ensure that competition is working to drive down consumer prices. We would give powers to market regulators such as the CER and the Central Bank to refer their industries for whole-market investigations, as in the UK.

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In the medium/longer term, other policies that the Social Democrats are committed to such as lowering the cost of housing and a single-tier health service would also deliver significant savings for families in mortgage costs and health insurance.

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## BUILD AN IRISH NHS

Our health service is at breaking point following decades of mismanagement and the resulting problems have a hugely negative impact on people’s health and well-being. Vulnerable patients are left on trolleys for days in overcrowded emergency departments. Citizens are dying after spending years on waiting lists for life-saving operations. Rural communities live in fear of accidents when ambulances can take hours to arrive. Patients and their families must travel for basic procedures that could be done closer to home. We have a very hospital-focused health system (rather than a community care focus as in higher performing countries) and a top-heavy administration of the service.

Yet there is hope – we have incredibly talented frontline healthcare staff, we have a health budget in line with other developed countries with great health systems, and widespread public support for major reform of our health service. This is a great opportunity to undertake a root-and-branch reform. As the Chinese proverb goes: “The best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago. The second best time is now”.

The focus of health reform must be on the great opportunities we have to improve health outcomes and reduce the cost – these include tackling the A&E and waiting list crises, expanding primary care provision, delivering a smart ambulance service, preventing health

problems before they happen, and getting value for money from administration and procurement.

Implementation is key - we can have all of the plans in the world but if there is no means or political will to implement them, they are worthless. We need to set out a long-term vision for the service, restore frontline staff morale, work across government departments, and build cross-party support for a modern single tier healthcare system. We must ensure there is a publicly funded, universally accessible, high quality healthcare system along the lines of the NHS model in the UK when it was properly resourced. This, in

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time, would end the current two-tier health service and reduce the need for private health insurance in Ireland by making public and private healthcare effectively equivalent in terms of quality and accessibility. Inevitably, implementation would bring up challenges and roadblocks and the approach to reform must include a dedicated team to drive reform, openness &

data transparency, and aligning of incentives across the system.

If fundamental reform of the health service were easy, it would be done already. But we are ready and prepared to take on the challenge so that we can have a health service that keeps all of our citizens healthy and of which we can all be proud.

**BUILD AN IRISH NHS**

The aim of the Social Democrats is to build an Irish National Health Service - a publicly funded health service that would be accessible to all, improve health outcomes and reduce the cost to deliver high quality healthcare. Over the next decade, we would propose to:

- Phase 1:** Re-orientate the health service by switching activity and care away from acute hospitals and into the community;
- Phase 2:** Provide universal access to primary and community healthcare services
- Phase 3:** End the current two-tier hospital service by raising the standard of our public hospital service in terms of access and quality,

**THE SOCIAL DEMOCRATS PRIORITIES IN THE NEXT DÁIL TERM WOULD BE:**

**Support Staff:**

- Launch a major recruitment programme for G.P.s and nurses to come back from abroad to be centrally involved in this major organisational and cultural reform programme;
- Invest in primary care centres around the country and progressively build up primary care services through the recruitment of additional frontline community health staff that would be able to deliver better care, at lower cost, closer to home;
- Determine the most appropriate skill mix across the health service;
- Develop a new career structure for specialist hospital doctors.

**Improve Access:**

- Launch evidence-based health campaigns to reduce the cost on the health service from obesity, tobacco, alcohol and drugs and review and optimise preventative care guidelines;
- Carry out a full health-need and socioeconomic analysis of each health area, and establish an objective resource allocation model to determine all staff/ facilities allocations;
- Publish up-to-date Waiting List Data on-line so that patients can be referred to hospitals and consultants with the shortest waiting times;
- Align Community Healthcare Organisations with Hospital Group areas;
  - Provide full medical cards for children who qualify for Domiciliary Care Allowance, free GP-Care for all children, and improve medical card access for older people (see section on older persons);
- Reduce spend on health service administration, improve commissioning of private sector care, and move towards the average OECD per capita spend on pharmaceutical drugs.

### Service Delivery

- Reduce A&E pressure and waiting lists by implementing measures that reduce demand for these services and improve efficiency of the service. Examples of these measures include out of hours minor injury units in the community, improved diagnostic technology in hospitals and step-down facilities for patients that need medical supervision but not necessarily hospital care;
- Improve access to diagnostics for GPs;
- Complete and implement the 5 main Chronic Disease Management programmes at primary care level i.e. diabetes, COPD, asthma, stroke, and heart failure. While these would be led by GPs, it would be necessary to significantly improve practice supports, increase the number of practice nurses, and improve access to allied health professionals in order to fully roll out these key reforms;
- Build a smart ambulance service that positions ambulances dynamically to minimise response times, ensure that it works seamlessly with first responders in rural areas, and has sufficient vehicles and staff to ensure quicker responses.

### Implementation is as important as policy in health reform.

#### Our approach would be:

- Co-create a long-term vision for our health service by working collaboratively with staff and patients to make it happen;
- Work across government departments, including housing, finance and education, to optimise for overall government spend;
- Create transparency in the health service with open data that would allow opportunities to improve the service to be identified;
- Remove disincentives in health service that encourage poorer outcomes and higher cost;
- Reform and extend the Fair Deal scheme to provide a legal entitlement to a home-care package;
- Fund A Vision for Change so that mental health and counselling services can be built up around the country, with a particular focus on adolescents. adolescents (see Mental Health section).

## TACKLE CORRUPTION WITH AN INDEPENDENT ANTI-CORRUPTION AGENCY

Ireland does not have an effective means of preventing, detecting, and prosecuting corruption and white collar crime. Various Tribunals and Commissions of Inquiry have come and gone with little consequences for corrupt and reckless behaviour. Anti-corruption law is spread across a multitude of legislation, and responsibility for preventing and prosecuting corruption is spread across a multitude of agencies.

The Social Democrats have a plan to tackle white collar crime and corruption and we believe this can improve accountability, end cronyism, and restore confidence in public life.

### THE SOCIAL DEMOCRATS ARE MAKING THE FOLLOWING PROPOSALS:

- Establish a new law enforcement body, an Independent Anti-Corruption Agency (IACA), to tackle white collar crime and corruption in the corporate world and political spheres;
- The IACA would act as a standing Commission of Investigation and would end the need for expensive and ineffective Tribunals of Inquiry;
- The IACA would initially assume some/all of the remit of a number of existing bodies including the Standards in Public Office Commission; the Office of the Director of Corporate Enforcement; the Registrar of Lobbyists and the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission. It would act as an advisory body to several other public bodies;
- The IACA would have a monitoring and investigative role over public procurement activities, and would be able to conduct sectoral reviews and initiate investigations as it saw fit;
- Establish a new Dáil oversight committee, called the Public Interest Committee, to oversee IACA and Ministerial resource allocation decisions;
- Update anti-corruption legislation, to include, among other things, minimum standards for eligibility to hold public office.

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Our full proposals for an Independent Anti-Corruption Agency are set out in a detailed policy document, Independent Anti-Corruption Agency, available at [www.socialdemocrats.ie](http://www.socialdemocrats.ie) or on request.

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## CREATE A COMMUNITY BANKING SECTOR

There has never been a greater need and demand for full-service community banking in Ireland. Post-recession, many people would rather bank with publicly-owned, or community-owned, institutions. Across the country, households and small businesses are finding it difficult to secure loans, including for mortgages and business investment. A new report outlining the opportunities for local banking, done in consultation with Irish Rural Link, points out that 'improved access to finance will be vital for a continuous economic recovery and development - especially for the local Irish SME sector and the local population across the country.' The Social Democrats agree.

Ireland has about 380 credit unions and over 1,100 post offices across the country, giving them a physical presence in towns and villages in every county. We propose an ambitious project where the State and Central Bank of Ireland would work with both networks to build a strong community banking sector in Ireland.

This would result in credit union and post office customers having full current account facilities, including debit cards and online banking. Enhanced loan facilities would be provided by credit unions (on an opt-in basis by branch). In addition, we propose a feasibility study for post office branches to offer enhanced services, potentially via the broker model used by the Royal Mail in the UK.

### THE PROPOSAL WOULD HAVE NUMEROUS BENEFITS, INCLUDING:

- Access to financial services in smaller towns and villages;
- Increased access to credit for local businesses and the self-employed, including the c.€8bn of credit union deposits which are currently unused;
- Local savings being available for local investment;
- The choice to bank with publicly-owned institutions;
- Profits reinvested locally and distributed to members;
- Increased sustainability for credit unions, and in particular for post offices, which are under sustained financial pressure.

**CREATE A COMMUNITY  
BANKING SECTOR**

**AS PART OF THE REQUIRED PROJECT, THE SOCIAL DEMOCRATS PROPOSE:**

**Enhanced services for credit unions,  
to include:**

- Provision of full current accounts for personal and small business banking, including debit cards that can be used on the full national and international ATM network;
- Provision of mortgage lending, with expertise and financial aggregation of risk provided at a county and/or regional basis;
- Provision of online banking and associated services including electronic payments;
- Support for on-going development of lending expertise, in particular with regard to mortgages and business lending;
- Support for all corporate governance changes required to ensure compliant oversight of new financial activity;
- Increased savings limit beyond €100k for credit union customers;
- Wider investment options for credit union deposits than current options (limited mainly to government bonds, bank bonds and cash deposits);
- Feasibility study to see if credit unions could become conduits for small savings loans underwritten by the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland, as per the model currently used in the retail banks.

**Enhanced services for post offices,  
to include:**

- Provision of full current accounts, as per the credit unions;
- Provision of online banking, as per the credit unions;
- Feasibility study to see if post offices could become brokers for wider banking services, including lending, as per Royal Mail model in the UK.

## END CHILD POVERTY

The early years of a child's life are precious and set the foundation for success in life. There is only one chance to make the most of this formative stage and we have a duty to ensure that every child gets a good start.

Disgracefully, it is children who have borne the brunt of austerity and inequality. 130,000 children live in consistent poverty in Ireland, a figure which has doubled since 2008. One in 9 children have to go without basics such as proper food, adequate heating and warm clothes.

Poverty robs children of their potential. It's time we put an end to this. All children deserve an equal chance in life.

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### A SUMMARY OF OUR PRIORITIES IN THIS AREA

- Set official all-of-Government target of ending Consistent Child Poverty by 2021 – led by An Taoiseach;
- Within 6 months develop a New Anti-Poverty Strategy, with clear targets, timeframes and lines of responsibility, and with families as a key focus;
- Replicate targeted area-based investment similar to the YoungBallymun programme in other disadvantaged areas to allow larger numbers of children to benefit from a programme with proven success in improving learning and well-being outcomes;
- Provide free primary education to cover the costs of transport, books and classroom resources;
- Subsidise childcare services for low income families and in disadvantaged areas, with some funding to make childcare more affordable where services are not viable (see further childcare proposals in childcare section);
- Invest heavily in early years supports such as speech and language, early childhood health clinics, parental leave, social work, childcare & public health nursing;
- Extend the school meals programme on a priority basis to ensure that all children have access to nutritious food;
- Increase spending on early years up to the OECD average;
- Implement a range of programmes and initiatives of support to parents in the critical 0-3 stage of development, focusing on parental well-being and early infant development;
- Poverty-proof all Budgets and set against the targets of the new Anti-Poverty Strategy.



## BACK LOCAL BUSINESSES TO GROW AND CREATE JOBS

Ireland's small and medium-sized enterprises, SMEs, account for 3 in every 4 jobs in private sector employment. There are about 185,000 businesses in Ireland, and SMEs account for 99% of them. While employment is on the rise, the rate of job growth for SMEs is far behind total growth. Why? Because our local businesses and self-employed aren't getting the level of backing given to multinationals. The Social Democrats want to see Ireland's success in foreign direct investment mirrored for local businesses and the self-employed.

There are still 190,000 people looking for jobs in Ireland, with a further potential additional workforce of 35,000. And while total unemployment has thankfully fallen below 10%, it is still nearly 20% for youth. Properly supporting Ireland's SME sector is the greatest opportunity available to create new jobs, and in particular new jobs for Ireland's youth.

The Social Democrats believe that Ireland's SMEs could be supported in the creation of about 100,000 new jobs. Among the policies we would prioritise are:

### REDUCING COSTS AND ADMIN:

- Reforming the commercial rates regime to account for turnover and employment, thus lowering the rate paid by many small and medium-sized local businesses;
- Simplifying compliance for small business and the self-employed, including review of all paperwork and removing unnecessary bureaucracy (e.g., in tax, employment, change-of-use planning and certifications);
- Implementing a user-friendly web portal for businesses to file tax returns, employment compliance, etc., similar to the Altinn system successfully introduced in Norway<sup>1</sup>.
- Tasking the Commission for Energy Regulation with ensuring lower energy costs for businesses, in light of significant falls in global oil prices.

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1. In 2003 the Norwegian eGovernment system was established initially to assist corporations do their statutory reporting, and has progressed to delivering the services of 33 public agencies, including some of the municipalities. 86% of all Norwegian business used Altinn. More than 80 million forms that would have otherwise been printed were made unnecessary. 17% less hours were spent on administration. The total hours spent on administration by Norwegian business dropped from 6,000 to just less than 3,000 in roughly ten years. Since its introduction the total money saved was \$7billion.

### SUPPORTING INNOVATION AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP:

- Introducing new apprenticeship programmes, including advanced qualifications;
- Improving self-employed tax credits and providing same social protections as PAYE workers on a voluntary opt-in basis;
- Making R&D tax credits available for small businesses, ensuring simplicity of access to qualification;
- Building a network of innovation centres to provide high quality affordable offices/incubator units for start-ups;
- Investing in education to support innovation (see education policy recommendations for detail);
- Expanding mentoring programmes for small businesses and the self-employed.

### ENSURING CREDIT AVAILABLE TO SMES AND THE SELF EMPLOYED:

- Creating a community banking sector in Ireland (see specific policy);
- Reviewing the current programme by the Strategic Investment Bank to ensure planned additional lending is occurring, and enhancing the programme if necessary.

### INVESTING IN INFRASTRUCTURE AND PLANNING FOR THE LONG TERM:

- Accelerating the roll-out of high speed affordable broadband for local businesses;
- Significantly increasing investment in other productive infrastructure, including transport links and innovation hubs;
- Developing regional enterprise plans to drive economic recovery outside Dublin;
- Supporting the connection of local businesses to the supply chains of multinationals in Ireland;
- Enhancing training for businesses in client sourcing, to include training in social media and networking.

### INCREASING ACCESS TO WORK AND OTHER POLICIES FOR SMES:

- Supporting parents and making childcare and early years education affordable;
- Developing programmes to increase participation in senior roles of women and minority groups;
- Instigating a Smart Cities initiative to stimulate innovation and investment in all of Ireland's cities (see specific policy recommendations);
- Introducing measures to improve participation of people with disabilities.

## MAKE HOUSING AFFORDABLE

The Social Democrats want to ensure that vibrant, sustainable communities are developed with good tenure and social mix so that every person and every family is able to access the right type and location of housing, at the right time of life.

Housing policy in Ireland has largely been seen as a market responsibility, which has led to an over-exposure to economic shocks for both individuals and the state. Since the property crash the private rented sector has doubled in size and now accounts for at least one in five households. Renting has become the most expensive form and least secure housing tenure.

Because of decades of under-investment, Local Authority housing lists have grown beyond 100,000. More and more individuals and families find themselves either homeless or at risk of homelessness. Yet there are thousands of vacant housing units and also ample evidence of significant levels of over-accommodation. The absence of a

housing delivery agency primarily with a co-ordination function, has directly led to a repeated housing boom-and-bust situation.

The Social Democrats believe in the state's vital co-ordinating role in helping to deliver a proper, first-class housing system. We

*The Social Democrats believe in the state's vital co-ordinating role in helping to deliver a proper, first-class housing system.*

recognise that the state's role in directly providing housing steadies the market, insulates against economic shocks and ensures that our communities develop in a sustainable, coordinated way, well-served by physical and social infrastructure, so that the optimal quality of life can be achieved. Housing must also be delivered to scale.

In general, the cost of risk can be substantially reduced, and therefore aid affordability, by building certainty and predictability into every stage of housing delivery. We believe that the coordinating model we propose would bring about a great degree of certainty to home-purchasers, builders, suppliers, lenders and the exchequer – the kind of reliability that is noticeably absent in both boom and bust periods.

### THE SOCIAL DEMOCRATS WOULD PRIORITISE THE FOLLOWING POLICIES:

- Create a new Department of Housing Communities and Planning with a Minister at full Cabinet level;
- Establish a key new body, Housing Ireland, and give it a central, hands-on co-ordinating remit in the procurement, planning, design and delivery of new homes and the creation of sustainable communities.

### OUR PROPOSALS CONTINUED:

**This new body would replace an existing agency, the Housing Agency. Some of the key roles/tasks of this new body would include:**

- work in conjunction with the Private Sector, Local and Regional Authorities, NAMA, Approved Housing Bodies and the Co-operative movement to ensure delivery of supply, help achieve scale, and provide long-term planning for the future;
- utilise innovative financing models, and work with local authorities to produce local master plans for in-fill, brown-field and green-field sites so that funding constraints and planning risks that have slowed up the supply of new homes can be addressed;
- have a specific target of reducing public waiting lists by 10,000 per annum by the provision of appropriate housing;

### **As immediate measures to improve housing supply:**

- An immediate increase in Rent Supplement/HAP limits as a short-term measure to prevent homelessness;
- An immediate investment in the financial contribution scheme for senior citizens, to incentivise scaling-down where desired and where possible, and in the process free up family homes;
- New financial incentives to encourage the use of over the shop/business premises;
- New fiscal measures to encourage the use of vacant accommodation;
- Reform the Fair Deal Scheme conditions to improve incentives to let vacant homes;
- The introduction of a development site levy as early as possible before 2019;

MAKING HOUSING  
AFFORDABLE

**FURTHER PROPOSALS:**

- Reinstatement of the Part V requirement of 20% for social and starter housing. Immediately set down binding guidelines that NAMA builds sustainably, not just with a focus on the number of units;
- Rent Certainty – we would link future rent increases in areas of high rental inflation to the cost of living.
- Secure Occupancy for Tenants – We would undertake a review of current security of tenure provisions to robustly strengthen tenure security, including ensuring that tenancies don't end with the sale of the property and that tenants acquire security of tenure rights after two months, instead of six.
- Change planning laws so that all new developments must include a range of homes suitable for all stages of the life-cycle;
- Amend the Multi Unit Development Act to reduce costs for certain home-owners;
- Reduce the interest rate applying to Local Property Tax deferrals to the level of State borrowing costs, and explore other ways that this tax can be reformed to improve ability to pay.
- We will be publishing a wider housing policy in advance of the General Election.

## DRIVE QUALITY AND ACCESS IN EDUCATION

Everybody, regardless of background or means, should get the best education possible. It is the single greatest driver of opportunity, quality of life, social equality and economic growth. Ireland should be a republic in which every child has the opportunity to achieve their potential – that can only happen with a well-funded and modern education system. Such a system should ensure that our early years professionals, teachers, principals, lecturers and professors are free to be the very best they can be. Resources must be targeted to where they are most needed, and every effort must be taken to ensure access at all levels across all socioeconomic backgrounds.

Literacy is key to unlocking other areas of learning. It is simply unacceptable that 44% of pupils in the most disadvantaged primary schools perform at or below the lowest levels of reading proficiency. Parents play the most fundamental role in children's learning and it is essential that they are given the supports they need to do this. Social Democrats would invest in the delivery, by schools, community organisations and others, of a range of programmes and initiatives to engage and support parents in their children's learning and development.

As a small country in an increasingly globalised and competitive world, Ireland's education system is our single greatest competitive advantage. And yet, funding to Ireland's schools and colleges has been cut year-on-year – resources for teachers, schools and colleges have been slashed, and much-needed modernisation across the sector hasn't happened.

Let's be clear – Ireland has a good education system by international standards. But the on-going lack of investment and modernisation means that many are being left behind, and that what's been achieved is being put at risk. We must strive, instead, to have an education system that helps every child achieve their potential, one that competes with the best education systems on earth.

The Social Democrats believe Higher Education is predominantly a public good, and our ambition is to provide universal equality of opportunity to a world-class, globally competitive third-level system. It's clear that significant investment in Higher Education is required to address the chronic underfunding of recent years, significant demographic demand, and to maintain, protect and enhance quality.

There are many policies that should be implemented in the next Dáil term and others that will take longer to bring to fruition. Listed here are what the Social Democrats believe should be the policy priorities in education for the next ten years.

**PRIMARY AND POST-PRIMARY:**

- Steadily reducing primary school class sizes to the EU average of 20;
- Making primary education free by funding school books, schools transport and classroom resources;
- Restoring capitation grants for schools to 2010 levels;
- Ensuring resources are targeted to greatest need, including both areas of high economic disadvantage (as pursued by the DEIS programme) and the needs of disadvantaged students outside these areas;
- Investing in Special Needs Assistants, SNAs, including removal of cap, to ensure sufficient resource and provide continuous professional development for SNAs;
- Ensuring SEN students have access to education based on their needs;<sup>2</sup>
- Connecting every school with fibre broadband and funding ICT hardware and software for education;
- Equipping teachers to help close the gap in literacy outcomes, and reinstating literacy and numeracy professional development services;<sup>3</sup>
- Ensuring pluralism in schools, by ending the practice of children being refused a place in a school because of their parents' belief system (see separate section on pluralism in education);
- Introducing curriculum to proactively develop children's mental health and wellbeing in the classroom;
- Enhancing continuous professional development for teachers and principals;
- Re-establishing the role of career guidance councillors;
- Lifting the moratorium on the recruitment of Special Duties posts, allowing principals focus on school leadership;
- Introducing skills-based courses to include innovation, entrepreneurship, communications and critical thinking, together with required professional development for teachers.<sup>4</sup>

### THIRD-LEVEL:

- Capping and then reducing the Student Contribution Charge to the level of the Dutch system (€1.9-€2K) in the lifetime of the next Government;
- Reforming the maintenance grants scheme, to provide better targeting of supports;
- Investing in access programmes, building on existing successes, to ensure broad sociodemographic representation across the third level system;
- Restoring maintenance grants for postgraduate students;
- Progressively increase funding to achieve EU average funding levels;
- Improving the level of autonomy of colleges, together with accountability for results – a programme of modernisation that must be developed in partnership with the third level sector;
- Creating new apprenticeships and advanced qualifications.

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2 Multiple approaches to this should be considered, including working with the NCSE to increase the cap on resource teachers, or working with the NCTE in rolling out the proposed changes in 'Delivery for Students with Special Educational Needs'.

3 For example, increasing capitation to allow schools to budget for CPD or providing in service for CPD in Literacy and Numeracy.

4This would complement Civil, Social & Political Education, CSPE, course now in place



## EMPOWER THOSE WITH DISABILITIES

Ireland is not a society of equals. A number of groups are unfairly treated, including disabled people. The 13% of the Irish people who have disabilities and/or mental health difficulties (CSO, 2012) are at significantly greater risk than non-disabled people of experiencing poverty, social exclusion, unemployment and lack of opportunity for education, training and retraining.

This unfair treatment of disabled people is not unique to Ireland but is a deep rooted global problem. So ten years ago the United Nations agreed on global action in the form of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, 2006). Ireland took a leadership position when it signed the Convention on the first day possible in 2007 but the State has regressed in the intervening years.

To date, Ireland has not ratified the UNCRPD and this failure means that the convention is not yet in force in this country. In contrast, over 150 other countries including the overwhelming majority of EU member states, are implementing the Convention. The current government committed to ratification of the Convention in its programme in 2011 but that promise has not been kept. Furthermore, recession and austerity measures since 2007 have been especially

and disproportionately severe in their impact on people with disabilities and their families. This is a very short-sighted approach as well as being unjust. Long term problems are being stored up which will impact negatively both on individual lives and on public spending in the future, especially where disabled children and young people are affected.

The UNCRPD maps out a very broad ranging set of requirements along with implementation mechanisms. These are aimed at improving the lives of people with disabilities across the whole of society including economic life, social life, political involvement, independent living in the community, transport, housing and many other policy areas. The plans were developed in consultation with the global movement of people with disabilities, including Irish representatives.

So the primary action to which the Social Democrats are committed is to ensure that any incoming government provides dignity and opportunity to people with disabilities by ratifying the UNCRPD as a matter of urgency. Ratification would then be followed by the development of a national implementation plan accompanied by monitoring, reporting and enforcement processes.

### THE AREAS FOR PRIORITY ATTENTION IN THIS PROGRAMME OF REAL AND CONCRETE CHANGE WILL

1. Ensuring that personal assistant and other individualised social care services are restored and improved so that the policy of independent living is honoured;
2. Ending barriers to disabled people entering or remaining within the paid work force such as inadequate educational provision, continuing benefit traps, discriminatory access rules and attitudes;
3. Recognising the extra costs of living for disabled people and helping them to stay out of poverty through a specific cost of disability payment, as has been promised but not delivered.

## **MANAGE IRELAND'S NATIONAL FINANCES RESPONSIBLY**

Ireland is still firmly locked into a repeated sequence of pre-election budget giveaways and promises that erode the tax base and set the country up for a fall. The worst example of this was Fianna Fáil during the bubble, leading to economic instability, recession and high levels of public debt. This allegation of irresponsible fiscal policy by FG/Labour is now being reported on by the EU.

Fine Gael / Labour are now repeating exactly what Fianna Fáil did – they're using one-off revenues, largely from unexpected corporation tax returns, to fund large scale tax cuts. The results can already be seen in things like increased child poverty and people on trolleys in A&E Departments.

The size of the crash could be bigger under Fine Gael / Labour, as the various safety mechanisms that kicked in at the time of the last recession are gone. Public debt is too high for any serious future borrowing, households have nothing left to give, businesses have nothing left to give, public services are already severely cut-back.

The Social Democrats propose an end to this boom-and-bust cycle, through responsible fiscal management. To this end, there are many policies the Social Democrats would prioritise, including:

- Maintaining the tax base at its current level;
- Running a structurally balanced budget;
- Increasing investment in social and productive infrastructure (e.g., schools, broadband, transport, flood defences, primary care centres, community centres);
- Putting money back into people's pockets by reducing the cost of living (see that topic separately);
- Refuting validity of outstanding Anglo / INBS promissory note debt of €25 billion and seek multilateral agreement on burden sharing at earliest opportunity;
- Beginning the fiscal planning necessary for the long-term provision of services, including pensions and healthcare.

## CALL FOR A EUROZONE DEBT CONFERENCE

Our National Debt has increased from €93 billion to €183 billion during the lifetime of the current Government. This has caused and will continue to cause deep hardship for our citizens. A significant portion of this extra debt arose from the banking collapse and the decisions of this and the previous government to bail-out the banks using our money and that of future generations. There remains a deep sense of injustice that these banking debts were foisted on the Irish people due to a combination of weak and incompetent Irish politicians and bullying from European Institutions.

Other countries in the Eurozone are also suffering severe hardship arising from debt problems. We strongly believe a Eurozone debt conference should be convened to address this issue in a collegiate and rational manner. This would help reinvigorate the solidarity among nations that should be at the core of the European project.

At a minimum the €25bn Anglo/INBS debt should be classified by the Irish State as odious debt, and full write-off should be pursued vigorously by the new Government.

A European debt conference was held in London in 1952 to restructure Germany's debts, including the writing off of significant amount. This restructuring was one of the drivers of Germany's subsequent economic growth.

## **SUPPORTING CHILDCARE AND EARLY-YEARS EDUCATION**

As parents we put our children first. Yet when it comes to Government investment, children are always last in line. This is why we have one of the most undeveloped childcare systems in the EU, why our pre-school services are so under-funded when compared with other developed countries, and why parents must still pay significant contributions for early years care and education.

Our children deserve a much better start in life and there is much evidence to suggest that if they get this, our economy and society will reap the rewards in the long run. The Social Democrats want to put children first by starting a multi-year programme of investment for children's services, especially for very young children.

This programme would invest in the child's early years by ensuring parents have the choice to stay at home in the first precious year of their child's life through extended paid parental leave arrangements, and more flexible work options for parents. Furthermore, it would also help develop more affordable and higher quality childcare. It would also provide a significant boost to enterprise by giving many parents the choice of returning to work.

### **THE SOCIAL DEMOCRATS WOULD PRIORITISE THE FOLLOWING POLICIES:**

**Providing funding so that paid parental leave (counting maternity benefit) is extended to 36 weeks and commit to increasing this to 52 weeks over three budgets. We would supplement this with legislation to guarantee flexible work options for parents;**

**Significantly improving childcare through a range of measures including:**

- Investing in quality of service provision via higher capitation payments to childcare providers, and linking funding to increased quality.
- Setting maximum fees for parents for childcare, ensuring public funding does not simply push up prices, and enabling all families to benefit, with higher quality incentivised;
- Extending subsidised childcare places to lower-income families in all areas, through extension and reform of the Community Childcare Subvention;
- Investing in educational supports for childcare workers;
- Carrying out a full economic review of the cost of childcare based on quality standards, implementation of national curricula, and the introduction of a proper career structure for staff.

## **SUPPORT PENSIONS AND SERVICES FOR OLDER PERSONS**

The Social Democrats want to ensure that people can feel confident about what they will receive at retirement, whether this is a pension payable from the state or a pension through a savings arrangement. This confidence requires clarity and simplicity in communication, certainty that the rules governing the pension environment will remain unchanged as well as responsible planning for future increases to the pensions payable from the state.

However, security in old age is not just about income. It is critical that we provide decent public services for older people to ensure their full participation in society, to counteract isolation, and to ensure they have access to appropriate housing and healthcare.

### **PENSION INCOME:**

- Raise the State Pension at least in line with the Consumer Price Index (CPI), with further increases for pensioners living on their own;
- Reform State Pension entitlement criteria to reflect time out of workforce for various reasons such as family care;
- Give an unequivocal commitment that future raids on pension funds, such as the pension levy that was imposed by Fine Gael/Labour Government (and which removed €2.3 billion from people's savings) will not recur;
- Introduce legislation to prevent employers with the financial resources to meet the liabilities in their pension schemes, from simply walking away from the benefit promises;
- Commit that workers who wish to save to make their retirement years more comfortable would continue to be encouraged to do so and would continue to be financially incentivised by the State up to certain limits;
- Ensure tax incentives for pension savings are limited to provide pensions no greater than €60,000 p.a. The Fine Gael/Labour Government promised to do this but did not fully introduce this measure;
- Ensure structures are in place to keep pension scheme costs to a modest level.

### HOUSING:

Expand the list of work covered by the existing local authority housing aid grants scheme to include items such as windows and poorly functioning or damaged boilers;

- Provide ring fenced local authority funding to build senior citizen accommodation, and fund financial contribution schemes in areas where it is demographically desirable;
- Increase the budget for the community alert scheme by €1 million to provide a partial grant for annual monitoring costs (generally €60 - €80 per annum);
- Change planning laws so that all new developments must include a range of homes suitable for all stages of the life-cycle.

### MEDICAL:

- Reform and extend the Fair Deal scheme to cover home-care packages;
- Assess applications for the over 70s medical card on the net income of the applicant to make it easier for people with large medical bills to qualify; introduce a transitional income band for those over 60;
- Recognise the importance of informal carers and the billions they save the state each year by removing the habitual residency condition for those with previous PRSI contributions;

### COMMUNITY:

- Adopt an implementation plan for the National Positive Ageing Strategy;
- Recognise the intrinsic value of active retirement to the mental and intellectual well-being of senior citizens and protect funding to community groups providing social and educational opportunities to older people;
- Give a commitment to protecting the Free Travel Scheme, and to improving rural public transport by ensuring it is linked to transport hubs;
- Allow older people in areas with poor transport connectivity to exchange their free travel pass for “travel vouchers”, in the same manner as the UK’s Rural Transport Voucher scheme.

## SUPPORT THE ARTS

Our policy on the arts is a continuation of our policy of evidence-based decision making. For too long, successive governments have largely ignored the Arts as an afterthought, a peripheral concern to which little time, money or creative thought should be devoted. A 55% cut in arts funding since 2008 typifies this mind-set.

Here, we recognise the importance of the Arts as:

- A binding agent in our communities both rural and urban, an important forum for the formation of our national identity and for holding our democracy to account and an indispensable resource for the effective functioning of our society as a whole.
- Key to our continued success in attracting foreign direct investment and especially as we move towards changing STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Maths) into STEAM in the “smart” economy and an expanding technology sector.
- A potential cornerstone of a stronger, more equal economic recovery.
- A central component in our current and future success in the all-important tourism sector. 87% of overseas visitors listed Ireland’s “Interesting history and culture” as key to their decision to visit Ireland in 2014.
- Key to the success of the Irish film industry, with further potential for the growth of film studios.

### HOW WE DRIVE SUCCESS:

Success for the arts in Ireland will be dependent on the level of joined-up thinking and collaboration across government departments, state bodies and arts organisations/practitioners. Post review, liaison between the department for the arts and communications and the departments of social welfare, tourism and education will be of particular importance.

#### 1. REVIEW

Before any investment or restructuring is done, a full review of arts funding and administration as well as consultation with stakeholders across the arts sector on the successes and failures of our current system is required. This review would incorporate research into equality in the arts sector, the life of artists in Ireland today, funding practices and administrative processes as well as the relationship and need for enhanced collaboration between the arts and areas such as education, tourism and the social welfare system.

### 2. RESTRUCTURING

- Formation of a new advisory body of arts practitioners and administrators to reflect the importance of a “bottom up” approach to decision-making and policy formation which includes input from the entire arts sector.
- Establishment of a new Department for the Arts, Culture and Communications tasked with using its cross-sectoral competencies to foster and platform new Irish creative talent across traditional and digital media. Engendering symbiosis between the state broadcaster and the creative sector is a key concern of this initiative.
- Establishing a digital broadcasting unit within RTÉ tasked with delivering Irish film, television and arts programming to a wider domestic and international audience.

### 3. INVESTMENT

- Progressive restoration of total arts funding to pre-crash levels.
- Establishment of special commercial rates for creative/arts spaces as well as “rates holidays” for new projects.
- Reconvene the expert group to recommend a solution to the barrier of the commercial rates regime, as applied to film studios
- Expansion of tax break for lower income artists to include a wider range of arts practitioners beyond the current narrow limitations.
- New program of grants, bursaries and other investments in working artists via the social welfare system to allow time for skill development and work on large projects.

### 4. EDUCATION

- Enhanced investment in arts education in recognition of its unique, proven ability to raise performance standards across the board and improve dropout rates and engagement with education for disadvantaged students in particular. The aim over the lifetime of the next government, would be universal access to arts education at both primary and secondary levels.

### 5. EQUALITY

- It is no longer good enough that diversity of all kinds is not a default concern of arts programming and administration in this state. The Social Democrats wholeheartedly support the Waking the Feminists movement and are committed to ensuring that state-funded arts organisations and programs lead the way in advancing equality and diversity in Irish society.



## SUPPORT MENTAL HEALTH

Decades of chronic under-resourcing and a lack of integration have hampered the effective development of mental health services in Ireland. This lack of appropriate services due to inadequate resource allocation has stigmatised people suffering with mental health issues and isolated them in terms of treatment choices. The Social Democrats want to eliminate that stigma and create a culture that fosters a positive approach to mental well-being.

The Social Democrats commit to delivering all aspects of the 2006 ‘Vision for Change’ strategy as a cornerstone of our mental health plan. Fully implemented, this strategy will not only be responsive to individuals suffering from mental health issues, but will also work to proactively equip people with basic tools to positively strengthen awareness of their own mental health and recognise when to seek help.

### PROACTIVE CARE

- As with any medical condition, prevention is always better than cure. With regard to mental-health this poses a particular challenge as outmoded attitudes and cultural perceptions have contributed to a culture of silence. The Social Democrats want to change this.
- Early intervention is critical in addressing emerging mental health difficulties and we support the extension of successful infant mental health and well-being programmes where these are currently being provided on a pilot basis.
- As part of the ‘Driving Quality and Access in Education’ portion of our manifesto, we have committed to the introduction of a curriculum to proactively develop children’s mental health and well-being.
- In addition, the Social Democrats also recognise the importance for children of parental mental-health. To this end special focus will be given to vulnerable new parents in the allocation of resources, (this also forms part of the ‘early years’ portion of our manifesto.)
- As part of our plan for education we have committed to restoring guidance counsellors to all secondary schools. Building on this restoration, we will commit to developing a system whereby guidance counsellors are equipped with the skills to deliver classes on positive mental well-being in secondary schools
- We support the aims of Connecting for Life; in particular we would seek to urgently address adolescent suicide by equipping teachers and guidance counsellors with best-practice training to be able to effectively identify and respond to children in need.

### ENHANCING RESPONSIVENESS

- Suicide is one of the biggest killers in our community; it is not acceptable that people should have to wait for crisis intervention.
- The Social Democrats will work to ensure that in conjunction with pro-active efforts to improve mental well-being there are also dedicated mental health teams on call 24/7 in each hospital area.

### HOLISTIC AND INCLUSIVE CARE

- Studies have shown that prescribed physical exercise, CBT, Mindfulness and other forms of treatment are at least as effective in treating depression and anxiety as SSRIs and other drugs. We will work to ensure that these options are offered to service users, empowering them to make choices about how they themselves want their treatment to develop.
- For too long the solution to mental health issues in Ireland was seen to be medication. While we recognise that medication plays a critical role in the treatment for many, too often GPs see this as the only treatment option in the absence of adequate talk and therapeutic services.
- We will further invest in community mental-health teams as part of our primary care policy and allied health professionals will form a core of this investment.
- The Social Democrats will work to fully resource and expand the Counselling in Primary Care service (CIPC) to ensure better access to properly accredited community based services that suit the needs of users.
- We will ring-fence specialised mental-health funding for the most ‘at-risk’ groups, including young parents, the Travelling Community, asylum seekers, the LGBTQ community and persons with physical and mental disabilities.
- A core aspect of the Social Democrat mental health policy is to tackle the service distinction between addiction and mental health. Substance abuse and mental health issues often go hand in hand, and the first point of contact with a service provider for individuals with a dual-diagnosis should seek to tackle both issues in a holistic fashion. A study by the UK Dept. of Health, suggest that 75% of users of drug services and 85% of users of alcohol services experienced mental health problems. 44% of mental health service users reported drug use. (Weaver et al, 2002)<sup>5</sup>. The Social Democrats would realign the mental-health and addiction services of the HSE to tackle the intertwined issues of addiction and mental health in a complimentary fashion.
- Specifically in relation to substance misuse issues The Social Democrats support:
  - \* The early enactment of all sections of the Public Health (Alcohol) Bill.
  - \* The amendment of the Misuse of Drugs Act to address the widespread problem of the street trading and abuse of prescription drugs.
  - \* The restoration of resources to the Garda Drug unit
  - \* A fundamental review of drug treatment services
  - \* An enhanced role for drug and alcohol task forces.
- In line with our international obligations the Social Democrats have committed to enacting the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities as a priority. This will be done in conjunction with new legislation on patient advocacy, the regulation of community based counselling and therapy services and Advance Healthcare Directives.

5. <http://www.dualdiagnosis.ie/>

## ENSURE FAIR PAY AND DECENT WORK

Fair terms and conditions of employment, protecting rights of representation for workers, and ensuring respect and dignity in the workplace are fundamental to the principles of social democracy and to our values as a party.

### THE PRIORITIES FOR THE SOCIAL DEMOCRATS ARE:

- Supporting the introduction of a living wage, which is based on the real cost of living. This would be done through achieving a social consensus as envisioned by the Living Wage Campaign, in consultation with employers and based on affordability.
- Banning zero hour contracts, as well as addressing the prevalence of ‘if and when’ contracts as identified in the recent study by the University of Limerick.
- Supporting the ICTU Charter, including the right to representation and collective bargaining, respect, equality & ethics at work, and fair public procurement.
- Extending the terms of reference of the Low Pay Commission to include a proper oversight framework for internships, low hours and precarious work in the wider economy.
- Reforming Irish labour activation policy by ensuring schemes are better regulated and targeted for different groups with very distinct needs (e.g., Graduates, early school leavers, long-term unemployed).
- Closing the legal loophole in Irish company law which led to the denial of entitlements to workers recently made redundant by Clery’s, by preventing company directors who are found to have engaged in this practice from serving as directors for a period of five years or more.
- Honouring the terms of the Lansdowne Road Agreement in full.
- Introducing a series of measures so that the cost of living for workers is reduced (e.g. childcare, water charges).
- Legislating to prevent employers with the financial resources to meet the liabilities in their pension schemes, from simply walking away from the benefit promises, as is standard in other EU countries.

## ENSURE PLURALISM IN EDUCATION

A modern Irish democracy must respect and reflect the diversity of Irish society and the citizens which it serves. The State has a responsibility to ensure that each child has access to a State-funded school within their locality, and that the ethos of the school is inclusive of their family's belief system.

A significant number of parents feel that that they have no option but to send their child to a school which does not align with their belief system. In areas where there is pressure on school places, many parents feel that they are required to adopt a particular religion for their child for the purpose of ensuring that their child can enrol in a State-funded school. This situation is entirely unacceptable.

Although there have been some attempts to introduce pluralism to the Irish Education system, 96% of State-funded schools remain denominationally-controlled. This is not reflective of the wishes of large numbers of parents and the Social Democrats believe that reform is urgently needed.

In 2015, the Social Democrats proposed an amendment to the Equality (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2013, to repeal section 7 (3) c of the Equal Status Act which currently allows schools to favour certain religions when deciding its enrolment policy. The government voted against the amendment and it was rejected by a majority in the Dáil.

### **THE SOCIAL DEMOCRATS ARE COMMITTED TO PLURALISM AND ENDING DISCRIMINATION IN EDUCATION AND PROPOSE THE FOLLOWING MEASURES:**

- Repeal of Section 7 (3) (c) of the Equal Status Act so that children cannot be refused admission to a local school on the basis of their religious beliefs.
- That the patronage of all new schools in developing areas should be representative of local parental preference.
- Where a demand for a new inclusive school is proven in an established area, the State should ensure that either a suitable denominational school building would be provided under an agreed divestment programme, a suitable public building would be made available, or funding would be provided for a new school building. Once the viability of a potential new school is established, the State should accommodate this demand within three years.
- The Minister for Education and Skills should be required to report annually to the Dáil on the progress of the State in ensuring an inclusive State-funded school system which reflects the diversity of Irish society and which upholds the right of all citizens to an education, appropriate to their beliefs.

## IMPROVE WELFARE

A strong social safety net is vital to prevent poverty and social exclusion. It must also provide security in old age and with the onset of disability or other difficult life events. The best designed welfare systems also ensure that there are good incentives and opportunities to progress out of unemployment or into education or training.

The social safety net in Ireland has been significantly eroded in recent years with cut-backs in the basic rates of social welfare payments by Fianna Fáil and the Green Party, and cuts in secondary benefits by Fine Gael and Labour. Some groups, such as lone parents and the young unemployed have been particularly badly affected. Meanwhile long-standing issues such as the cost of disability, older people living alone, and direct provision remain to be adequately addressed.

If we truly want to achieve a recovery for all, then we believe the priorities of the next Government should be as follows:

### 1. ELIMINATE POVERTY TRAPS BY:

- Progressing to a Living Wage and improving job protection and conditions for part-time and casual workers. (see section of Fair Employment for more details);
- Funding more affordable childcare (see childcare section for more details);
- Reforming Rent Supplement so that the barrier to full-time employment is completely eradicated;
- Providing far better information to jobseekers – particularly around part-time and casual work options and benefit retention, and by streamlining the application system so that casual workers can return to payment quickly when their casual work is exhausted;
- Exploring how better access to Family Income Supplement for the self-employed could be provided;
- Restoring genuine rehabilitative work option while retaining a benefit for long-term recipients of a disability payment;
- Giving greater discretion to decision makers and encouraging far greater feedback from frontline services when genuine anomalies in the social protection system are discovered;
- Restoring tapering arrangement for Lone Parents.

### 2. MAKE ACTIVATION ABOUT THE PERSON RATHER THAN JUST COST-CUTTING BY:

- Improving jobseeker/case officer ratios and ending private sector involvement in job activation programmes;
- Linking case interventions with needs of the workforce and interests of the jobseeker;
- Improving further education, training and apprenticeships options, and offering better basic literacy and job-hunting skills;
- Providing more one-to-one sessions;
- Scrapping JobBridge, as it has led to the exploitation of unemployed people, and introducing a new internship programme that offers genuine and career-advancing work experience;
- Guaranteeing subsidised childcare for lone parents.

### 3. INCREASE ALL SOCIAL WELFARE AND PENSION RATES AT LEAST IN LINE WITH COST OF LIVING INCREASES WITH EXTRA COMMITMENTS TO:

- Improve tapering arrangements for Lone Parents;
- Improve Living Alone Allowance above the CPI rate;
- Improve the rate for jobseekers who are under 25 above the CPI rate;
- Improve Rent Supplement and HAP rates as a short-term measure to reduce homelessness;
- Reinstate the full Christmas Bonus;
- Introduce a Cost of Disability Payment;
- Scrap the habitual residency condition for Carers payments.

### 4. END DIRECT PROVISION:

- Ireland's system of direct provision was only ever intended to be a short-term solution, but has become a national disgrace. We can and should do more to make a timely decision on a person's asylum status, particularly in light of the pressing Syrian, Somali and Afghani refugee crisis. A clear short to medium term goal of the Social Democrats would be to end Direct Provision.

IMPROVE WELFARE

**5. NEW ANTI-POVERTY STRATEGY:**

- The current anti-poverty strategy has been completely ignored by Fine Gael and Labour. Child Poverty has doubled since 2008 while poverty rates for Lone Parents remain particularly high. Within 6 months we would develop a New Anti-Poverty Strategy, with clear targets, timeframes and lines of responsibility, and with families as a key focus (see Child Poverty section for more initiatives in this area);
- All Budgets would be properly poverty-proofed and set against the targets set down by the new anti-poverty strategy.

**6. BETTER ADMINISTRATION:**

- Hire more medical officers so that the time it takes to decide on applications and appeals can be reduced. Reducing appeal times saves the state money;
- Explore the possibility of a unitary means-test across all Government schemes to cut down on form-filling and administration costs.

## **REPEAL THE 8TH AMENDMENT**

We will campaign in support of removing the 8th Amendment from the Constitution. The 8th Amendment (Article 40.3.3) was inserted into the Irish Constitution in 1983. Its immediate effect was to make it impossible for any meaningful or responsive legislation to address the issue without a referendum taking place. As a result of this amendment, later codified in the 2013 Protection of Life During Pregnancy Act, a woman is not allowed to avail of an abortion unless her life is deemed to be in immediate risk.

There is a pressing need to introduce a modern legislative regime. We support the urgent holding of a referendum to repeal the 8th Amendment in as short a timeframe as possible; but at the latest within 18 months of the general election. Within that period, we support the holding of a people's convention, the publishing of draft legislation (based on the recommendations of this convention) that would come into effect if the 8th Amendment was abolished, and the holding of a referendum on the removal of the 8th Amendment from the Constitution.

## **ABOLISH WATER CHARGES**

The money being charged on domestic water charges is not being used to run, or to upgrade, the water system. Even if everyone paid their water bill, the money collected would do nothing other than cover the costs of the water meters and the costs of billing.

Here's what the Social Democrats are proposing. Water charges should be abolished, as should the conservation grant. The meter rollout should be stopped. A full and open financial review of Irish Water should be conducted to identify what cost savings can be achieved each year and how they can be reinvested in the water system. Irish Water should be abolished and reconstituted as a public body, rather than as a commercial semi-state, to ensure it can never be privatised. Public ownership should be protected via a referendum to change the Constitution.



## END THE MORTGAGE CRISIS

Years of government inaction have allowed the mortgage crisis in Ireland become far worse than in other countries suffering similar economic difficulties. The result has been years of unnecessary stress and suffering for hundreds of thousands of men, women and children.

While total arrears are now falling, the recovery could be faster, fairer and less expensive if the right policy changes are made. It is important to recognise that the number of mortgages in arrears of over two years is not falling. This cohort represent tens of thousands of families in serious trouble, many

of whom are in court, have unsustainable loans and are most at risk of eviction and homelessness.

*The Social Democrats propose a comprehensive policy response to the mortgage crisis, addressing a wide range of opportunities and shortcomings.*

The Social Democrats propose a comprehensive policy response to the mortgage crisis, addressing a wide range of opportunities and shortcomings. Unlike the current situation, this response would minimise repossessions, provide equal and fair treatment for borrowers, ensure appropriate solutions are offered on a case by case basis, and minimise on-going social and economic damage. It would

do all of this without the need for further recapitalisation of the banks.

### THE MAIN ACTION POINTS INCLUDE:

- Mandating maximum income payment period of two years, post-bankruptcy;
- Creating a one-stop-shop for borrowers in distress, that is free at the point of use and provides expert financial and legal advice and representation;
- Equipping the courts to refuse possession orders based on the sustainability of a proposed restructure;
- Mandating a set of restructuring options to be considered in all cases;
- Improving access to the mortgage-to-rent scheme;
- Piloting local authority mortgage subsidy scheme for qualifying households;
- Increasing sustainability of restructures, by redefining it to include consideration of total debts, including residual debts and payments post-retirement.

## **SUPPORT THE IRISH LANGUAGE**

The Social Democrats acknowledge the important place that the Irish language has, and would support a range of measures to build on successes in recent years. We would task an Oireachtas Committee with conducting a major review of the 20-year strategy for the language, updating the strategy with the latest evidence (particularly around developing new speakers of the language).

Demand for new Gaelscoileanna and Gaelcholáistí is increasing, and this demand must be catered to as part of the overall reform of school patronage models. We would ensure that early years education facilities (particularly in Gaeltacht areas and in major towns) can be run through Irish.

We would conduct a review of the effectiveness of economic stimulus programmes in the Gaeltacht and fund measures that are proven to stimulate local economies and are cost effective. We would invest in greater training for Irish language teachers to equip them to inspire students to continue their language journey beyond school.

## **OPPOSE THE TRANSATLANTIC TRADE AND INVESTMENT PARTNERSHIP (TTIP)**

TTIP presents very serious concerns for the Social Democrats. While we support the removal of unnecessary barriers to trade where they bring benefits of sustainable economic growth and job creation, we do not consider consumer protections and product standards as barriers to be removed.

We recognise the threat the regulatory coordination principles contained in the draft agreement make for very hard won standards and citizen protections in how products are manufactured and sold. We do not support the dilution or watering down of consumer protections under any circumstances.

Furthermore, the proposed Investor-State Resolution mechanism appears to give undue influence and power to large corporations in determining public policy. The Social Democrats strongly believe that these provisions, as proposed, represent a threat to the proper democratic functioning of national parliaments and the right of governments to determine policy in the interests of the people alone. We also consider the secrecy of the process to be fundamentally undemocratic. We would therefore not support TTIP.

## UPDATE COPYRIGHT

Ireland's copyright law is outdated. Like many countries, we have not kept pace with advances in technology and our present law does not take into account the changed nature of how ideas and original work are consumed and enjoyed. We have no legal framework to support genuine innovation – artistic, technological or otherwise. At the same time, people who wilfully infringe on copyright face no serious deterrent, whilst innocent online intermediaries can be held accountable for those infringements. This needs to change – particularly if we are to safeguard jobs and enhance Ireland's reputation as a global centre for the information industry.

The Social Democrats, mindful of developments at EU level in both the development of new European copyright law and recent CJEU rulings, will work to fully implement the recommendations of the Copyright Review Committee, including introducing the report's suggested legislation to Dáil Éireann.

In particular, we want a new Copyright regime that will:

- Include strong citizen and consumer protections, including consumer representation in official dispute resolution mechanisms.
- Provide for genuine free speech and free expression.
- Move from a Fair Dealing system to Fair Use within an Irish and EU legal context.
- Provide legal certainty for all; strike a reasonable legal balance between the copyright holder's need to produce a return on his or her investment, and the public good which includes the right to innovatively build on what has gone before.

## **GROW AGRICULTURE AND FORESTRY**

The Social Democrats understand that Agriculture and the Agri-Food sector must be supported as a key indigenous industry, a major employer and one of our biggest exporters. We recognise that the strength of the industry lies in targeting that support to the small and medium farmers whose incomes have been in decline in recent years. Ireland must take steps to protect their work and produce, and to market that high quality brand overseas.

At the same time, we should be encouraging farmers to take advantage of new opportunities for income generation. Climate change and extreme weather events present as serious a threat to farmers' livelihoods as everyone else, perhaps more. By encouraging new farm practices such as biomass and renewable electricity generation, we can allow for new income supports to farmers as well as tackling harmful emissions.

### **THE PRIORITIES FOR THE SOCIAL DEMOCRATS ARE:**

- In a very competitive market, we understand the strength of Irish produce lies in its clean, high quality brand. We will take steps to protect and strongly trade from this brand, through a new green certification process. This label will apply to all Irish agricultural products that have reached the standard and will be strongly marketed abroad.
- We will enhance the continued viability of the family farm by encouraging greater participation in agricultural co-operatives, thereby achieving more efficient uses of resources, allowing for larger-scale capital investment and better equipping farmers to compete
- We will tackle the increasing threats to the incomes of small scale family farms by providing supports for farmers who wish to increase the microgenerating capacity of their farms through small-scale wind, solar and other forms of clean energy generation. We will also encourage wide scale participation in the GLAS scheme.
- We will provide extra incentive for the planting of trees for both longer-term carbon sequestration, and for the development of sustainable wood products and biomass.
- We will work to enhance the tourism and amenity potential of our forested land.
- We will continue other existing supports for afforestation, and will work to develop ambitious targets to 2030 for woodland coverage, including a vital concurrent target for Woodland Conservation and Sequestration.

## TACKLE CRIME AND SUPPORT POLICING

Morale within Garda Síochána has been described by many within the force as at an all-time low. This follows a number of scandals which led to high profile enquiries. Their findings included identifying massive systems failures in how crimes are recorded, managed and classified. Inadequate training and management leading to widespread gaps and inefficiencies were also found. The closure of stations, and new roster and pay arrangements, have also contributed to the morale problem.

It is essential that the culture within the force changes to one where clear lines of accountability are established, a training and modernisation program is accelerated and the force receives the investment in the systems, equipment and personnel essential for a modern police force to do the job asked of it.

### PRIORITIES

**Phase in recommendations outlined in the Garda Inspectorate Report in conjunction with the All Party Justice Committee. Priorities for the Social Democrats include:**

- Invest in modern IT systems - phase out the Pulse System;
- Develop new in-service training programs;
- Maximise the use of new systems to support investigation of crime and a more consistent approach to the recording/classification/detection of crimes;
- Design better accountability into every level of management;
- Implement new investigation management systems with inbuilt performance measurements;
- Deploy personnel based on crime statistics and demographic changes;
- Ensure that Gardaí deployments can support wide scale adoption of a Community Policing model;
- Review the new roster arrangements against crime investigation strategies;
- Introduce a work force planning program aimed at recruitment and upskilling;

# TRANSPORT

## OBJECTIVE

Comprehensive development of our public transport infrastructure is in Ireland's vital social and economic interest. However, historical investment in high capacity solutions like rail has been lacking; and big public transport projects are too often victim of short-term political considerations. While a high-quality road network is essential and requires investment to be delivered, this should not be at the expense of better-capacity, cleaner and more efficient forms of public transport which can serve as viable alternatives to car-based travel.

The Social Democrats believe that future population growth, particularly in our urban centres, must be adequately planned for today in terms of transport provision if we are to avoid unsustainable urban sprawl, disconnected communities and ever-increasing car commutes. To do this we need to support a modal shift away from carbon intense, car-based transport towards high-capacity public transport options. We must also drastically reduce emissions in transport if we are to meet emissions reduction targets.

## PRIORITIES:

- Rebalancing of capital spending in public transport incrementally, ensuring capital spending on roads is at least matched by capital spending on other forms of public transport on a multi-annual basis;
- Encouraging greater use of public transport by reducing public transport fares (see Cost of Living proposals);
- Building the DART Underground at the earliest practicable date.
- Delivering new road infrastructure where there is a critical need, e.g. a high-grade connection between Cork, Limerick and Galway;
- Examining ways to rollout a national smart ticketing system that is integrated, accessible and efficient, and applies to all forms of public transport. We would maintain free travel for those over 66;
- Ensuring focus on suburban and hinterland commuter transport in Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Galway and other urban centres; working to provide greater reliability and frequency of services to move people out of cars;
- Continuing the development of light rail and tram services where they are needed, along with the rollout of Bus Rapid Transit in specific urban centres;
- Enhancing cycling infrastructure in our major cities and towns, and work on developing inter-urban cycleways and scenic greenways. We would implement cycle-friendly traffic management systems in major city and town centres.;
- Increasing incentives and subsidies to purchase Electric Vehicles, including subsidies for the installation of charge points domestically. We would increase the availability of fast-charge points nationwide;
- Reviewing current regulations governing taxi-drivers, with a particular focus on age of vehicle requirements, and improve consultation processes with the industry.

## CHAMPION CLEAN ENERGY

### OBJECTIVE

Securing safe, clean and dependable energy sources is one of the most pressing challenges the State faces in the first half of this century. The Social Democrats recognise that fossil fuel based generation must eventually be phased out in its entirety and that

this will form an essential part of Ireland's overall climate strategy. Ireland has made important steps forward in the development of renewable capacity, but we still remain among the most fossil-fuel dependent nations in Europe. This must change.

### PRIORITIES FOR THE SOCIAL DEMOCRATS INCLUDE:

- Set a target to see Ireland as a leader among the 23 coastal EU Member States in developing and harnessing ocean energy, and recognise the great potential that exists there. We will increase funding for new and existing research and development tenders in ocean energy.
- Establish a new Offshore Wind Development Agency with a specific mandate to attract investment -aiding this task by simplifying the regulatory and foreshore regime for offshore wind with the aims of reducing investor risk, and providing a stable regulatory setup. We will also prioritise State support for offshore through the introduction of a limited Feed-In-Tariff, subject to EU State-Aid approval and determined through a competitive bidding process.
- Our approach to the development of large-scale onshore wind needs to be fundamentally rethought. In many areas large scale development proposals have been imposed on local communities. This needs to change. The Social Democrats recognise that we must place community and citizen concerns at the heart of the planning process. We will seek urgent publication of updated planning guidelines to ensure that adequate consideration is given to community concerns around scale, height, density, setback and other considerations.
- Ensure that, where possible, there is a rebalance in the ownership model of onshore wind projects towards local communities, looking to the Danish and German models of community ownership for inspiration. Under this approach, it is local communities who will benefit most and who will have the final say on the scale of any proposed new developments.
- Introduce legislation to effectively underpin the Aarhus Convention in Irish law to ensure access to information on the environment is readily available.

### PRIORITIES FOR THE SOCIAL DEMOCRATS CONTINUED:

- Phase out state subsidies for carbon-intensive forms of electricity generation, favouring the subsidisation of renewables where appropriate.
- Continue the conversion of peat-burning electricity plants to co-fired biomass, and set an achievable target towards the elimination of peat-burning altogether utilising domestically-produced biomass as far as possible.
- Implement a credible plan to achieve full deployment of smart grid infrastructure.
- Encourage electricity suppliers to expand home microgeneration pilot schemes, covering wind, photovoltaic and combined heat and power. We will focus particularly on the capacity of small-holding farmers to benefit from such a scheme.
- Enhance the supports available for home energy retrofit, including the rollout of a Pay-As-You-Save scheme.
- Introduce a comprehensive energy auditing programme for all public buildings, to include retrofitting and other energy saving programmes where commercially viable.
- Work with Local Authorities and to greatly enhance Community Energy Schemes and Cooperatives, drawing on the Haringey model utilised in London and on our Smart Cities policy.



## ADDRESS CLIMATE CHANGE

The Social Democrats recognise the great opportunities and benefits in transitioning to a low-carbon, energy efficient economy. We understand that action on climate is needed today. We want to guarantee our future environmental, social and economic health by implementing robust domestic emissions-reduction legislation with credible, incremental national and sectoral plans, based on ambitious but attainable goals.

### PRIORITIES FOR THE SOCIAL DEMOCRATS INCLUDE:

- Reforming our present climate-action regime to make it more robust, dependable and successful, by including:
  - specific domestic targets on emissions reduction and fossil fuel use, taking due regard of our emissions profile;
  - comprehensive, attainable mitigation action plans with regular reviews and mandatory corrective measures;
  - enhancements to the powers and functions of the Climate Change Advisory Council.
- Ensuring that Ireland is a world leader internationally on tackling harmful emissions, and that our negotiating position at EU level reflects the urgency with which action is required on climate change.
- Ensuring that emissions reduction targets are applied appropriately to all non-Emissions Trading Scheme sectors of economic life in the State.
- Funding technical assistance to aid organisations develop carbon mitigation programmes.
- Encouraging greater take-up of proven methods of carbon sequestration – chiefly forestry and wetlands.

## COMMUNITIES – THE THIRD SECTOR

### CURRENT SITUATION

One of Ireland’s strongest attributes is its community sector. Since the foundation of the State this sector has been depended upon to provide essential services, often in the absence of adequate public services. In recent years some of these services have been provided through Charities and Community Employment and Partnership Schemes, which have been vulnerable to cutbacks during the recent downturn.

It’s not hard to see that the under-development of public services has happened in part because of a pre-existing over-reliance on the community sector. We have also failed to recognise the sector as being that of a cohesive social movement of engaged citizens - with all the benefits that this official recognition could bring. The paternalistic approach by the State underpins the Irish model, and works against development of the kind of popular mass movement the Third Sector enjoys in places like Sweden and Denmark.

### VISION

The Social Democrats recognise that Irish society is a network of interwoven communities. We have a strong tradition of fostering positive interdependencies and building a robust sense of social solidarity in all our communities. We recognise that key supports are necessary to sustain community links, promote integration and positive self-development, and that more often these initiatives work best when community-led. We need to build the community sector into a cohesive Third Sector, modelled on the Swedish approach. This involves establishing a Third Sector Council to promote a collective policy agenda for the community sector. It ultimately involves the participation of civil society in collaborative policy-making in conjunction with civil servants, politicians, academics and other stakeholders.

### FIVE SPECIFIC POLICY POINTS:

- Establish a Third Sector Council based on the Swedish Model.
- Reform our political system commencing with the Local government system, in particular at Municipal level, to greatly increase the involvement of communities.
- Embark on a program of public service building involving, where appropriate, the Third Sector.
- Restore cuts to Pobal’s Community Development Programme to allow it to undertake the full range of vital activities in the community.
- Re-focus emphasis on community integration and positive outcomes, rather than just counting progression rates for community employment schemes.

## SMART CITIES

Rapid urbanisation creates opportunities and challenges. A smart city policy can provide a framework to re-think Ireland's urban centres to make life better for Irish citizens. It can help us to approach grand challenges such as environmental sustainability, the needs of an ageing population, and efficient transportation. We propose a holistic smart cities policy that aims to strengthen the infrastructure needed to inspire and promote multiple smart projects and initiatives.

This vision involves policies for supporting a range of actors, investing in infrastructure, research and development, and leveraging finance. It brings together government, the private sector and academia, to seek ways to use technology to bring about better lives and greater business opportunities.

This Irish smart cities policy builds on Irish strengths and seek to make Ireland outstanding in a global context. To make our vision a reality, we need to invest in infrastructure, education, smart governance, economic development.

### PRIORITIES FOR ACHIEVING THIS INCLUDE:

- Increasing connectivity, particularly in broadband rollout;
- Piloting free city wifi networks;
- Piloting an integrated, open-access, city-wide data sharing platform;
- Establishing a network of 'Smart City' innovation hubs/centres throughout the country;
- Educating users about the risks associated with data sharing and how to mitigate these;
- supporting national digital literacy programmes targeting marginalised groups and older people;
- Updating national and local government's information platforms;
- Ensuring adequate copyright and IP legislation, within EU framework;
- Enhancing the digital economy and society by maintaining and improving connectivity, use of internet, integration of digital tech, and digital public services;
- Marketing Ireland's cities as Smart Cities and locations to pilot smart city innovation;
- Supporting tourism by ensuring Irish cities are easily accessible digitally, navigable, and have apps and Wi-Fi to support this;
- Ensuring sufficient data regulation to protect citizens' rights;
- Establishing a national Smart Cities Pilot Fund to improve city services;
- Establishing a National Smart Cities Annual Awards to recognise innovation.

## **MAKE POLITICS WORK**

The Irish political system is cloaked in secrecy and bureaucratic red tape and is too far removed from the needs of the citizens it is supposed to serve.

We need to undertake a programme of substantial political reform that can bring real and meaningful change to the way politics is practiced in this country. There must be real and meaningful reform that will change the way politics is practiced in this country. We must revamp our public institutions and ensure they are fit for purpose and make them accessible and responsive to the needs of the citizens they are designed to serve whilst putting accountability to the forefront of our political system.

To achieve this, we are bringing forward comprehensive reform proposals in four key areas:

- Achieving greater transparency in decision-making;
- Establishing an independent Electoral Commission;
- Making genuine reforms to the Oireachtas;
- Fundamentally changing how we fund politics.

## **ENSURE GREATER TRANSPARENCY**

We want to introduce a new culture of open decision-making, where resources are allocated on the basis of identified need and no other consideration. Too often public money is used by Ministers as if it is their own. Public resources quickly become political slush funds where the needs of insiders or the electoral success of Government are favoured over genuine public need.

An over-riding purpose of our new political movement will be to finally end “Golden Circle” politics and as part of a range of new measures we want to arrest the culture of “jobs for the boys”.

- We would abolish the Economic Management Council.
- We would abolish the Official Secrets Act which we believe is inconsistent with whistle-blowers legislation.
- We would introduce a clear and transparent system of resource allocation, where allocations are based on objective, pre-constructed and evidence-based criteria.
- We would publish extensive data in open source as part of the introduction of a general presumption of openness in relation to State-held data.
- We would end the political appointment of judges and introduce a new system of judicial appointments so that qualification is based on an exam/open competition.
- Vetting of all senior appointments by Oireachtas Committees.

## ESTABLISH AN ELECTORAL COMMISSION

Though the centrepiece of our system of governance, the management of the democratic process has simply not been treated as a priority by governments past and present. The Social Democrats aim to change this. Rather than continuing to rely on a number of ad-hoc bodies to administer our electoral and referendum processes, it is our position that Irish electoral politics must instead be administered by an overarching independent statutory body with full operational and regulatory powers. Led by an individual known as the Chief Electoral Officer of Ireland, this body would be the Irish Electoral Commission.

### WHY DO WE NEED AN ELECTORAL COMMISSION?

The Irish electoral process enjoys a consistently high level of trust on the part of the Irish electorate; but we can do better. In particular, the mechanisms of our electoral process are disjointed and are under-performing; the inaccuracy of the electoral register is a prime example of how lack of coordination can lead to duplication and inaccuracy. An overarching body that would take full responsibility for overseeing and regulating all facets of the electoral process would strengthen existing levels of trust in the electoral process, streamline its administration, and provide a transparent one stop-shop for citizens to interact with on all matters electoral.

### WHAT WOULD THE IRISH ELECTORAL COMMISSION DO?

The remit of the Irish Electoral Commission ('the Commission') would pertain to all areas of the electoral process, including: voter registration, boundary divisions, campaign oversight, political financing, and voter education. The Commission would assume the current functions of the ad hoc Referendum Commissions formed to take responsibility for individual referendums, the Standards in Public Office Commission (SIPO), and much of the electoral functions currently carried out by Local Authorities around the country.

In addition to its responsibility for direct electoral engagement, the Commission would also conduct research and explore options to enhance and improve all aspects of the electoral process. Those electoral commissions operating in other jurisdictions regularly trial new options to increase mobilisation and make voting more accessible to all eligible voters. In that vein it one of the primary functions of the Commission would be to identify best practice initiatives to continually strengthen the electoral process in Ireland.

**ESTABLISH AN ELECTORAL  
COMMISSION****HOW WOULD THE IRISH ELECTORAL COMMISSION OPERATE?**

- This would be a permanent statutory body with financial accountability to the Comptroller & Auditor General. This is to be distinguished from the temporary, ad hoc nature of the highly successful and respected Referendum Commissions founded to take responsibility for specific referendum campaigns;
- The Commission is to be led by a Chief Electoral Officer appointed through an open, transparent, non-political recruitment process conducted by the Public Appointments Service with due regard to the achieving a gender balance within the Commission;
- Staff appointments to the Commission would be made through an open, transparent, non-political recruitment process conducted by the Public Appointments Service with due regard to the achieving a gender balance within the Commission;
- The Commission would have full powers of regulation, sanction and enforcement regarding matters of electoral politics;
- The Commission would take responsibility for administering a single unified electoral register for the Irish state. This would replace the 31 separate electoral registers maintained at present.

**WHAT REFORMS COULD THE IRISH ELECTORAL COMMISSION BRING ABOUT?**

- Centralised management of the electoral register to ensure more accurate measures of voter turnout and better strategies to increase voter participation;
- Voting locations selected to suit the electorate, not government institutions;
- Easier access to postal voting;
- Improved voting rights for recent emigrants;
- Rollout of on-going and thorough voter education initiatives aimed at mobilising citizens, increasing participation in the democratic process, and educating voters as to how the system works and how they can maximise their electoral choices;
- A more open and transparent electoral process brought about by comprehensive oversight and effective regulation.

## INTRODUCE GENUINE OIREACHTAS REFORM

Dáil Éireann is one of the weakest parliaments in liberal democracy and its lack of authority and autonomy has substantially undermined its ability to carry out the fundamental functions of scrutinizing and holding government to account. The Social Democrats believe we must return power to parliament so that the power to legislate, scrutinize government and hold the executive to account exists in reality and not just in theory.

### VOTING RIGHTS OF MEMBERS

The Irish Whip System is one of the most stringent in western democracy in that, as a rule, parliamentarians voting against the instructions of their party Whip face drastic consequences irrespective of the level of importance placed on the item being voted on. These consequences include being expelled from the parliamentary party, which results in the loss of much needed parliamentary funding and basic resources such as administrative, and research support. Crucially 'losing the Whip' also involves being removed from involvement in the Oireachtas Committee system and often having access to speaking time in the Dáil withdrawn. We see this as fundamentally undemocratic.

### CEANN COMHAIRLE

The Ceann Comhairle is a central figure in Irish parliamentary life and we recognise the vital role this office holder plays in ensuring the democratic functioning of Dáil Éireann. We believe the power to nominate and elect the Ceann Comhairle must be removed from the hands of government and placed back into the control of the members of the Dáil. It is imperative that the nomination process is open and that the election process be conducted through secret ballot.

### STANDING ORDERS

These are the backbone of parliament, yet a comprehensive review, revision and reform of the rules governing Dáil Éireann has not been undertaken since the foundation of the state. The Social Democrats believe it is time to change that and, as such, we propose to undertake a consultation process aimed at revising the current Standing Orders.



**INTRODUCE GENUINE  
OIREACTHAS REFORM****OIREACTHAS COMMITTEE SYSTEM**

The Oireachtas Committee System is not being used to its fullest potential and we propose to change that by strengthening their powers of scrutiny, ensuring the system operates independent of party patronage and placing committees at the centre of the legislative process.

- The number of Oireachtas Committees was reduced during the term of the 31st Dáil and this resulted in committees that were overburdened and ill-equipped to tackle the volume of business that came before them. We propose a slight expansion of the number of committees in order that each can conduct its work in a more focused and specialised fashion.
- The cost of increasing the number of committees will be offset by full removal of salary top-up payments made to committee chairpersons.
- We propose to alter the mechanism for appointment of committee chairpersons. First the d'Hondt system is to be applied in the apportionment of the number of committee chairpersonships each party and group receives. Second, as opposed to being appointed externally, the committees themselves must elect committee chairpersons to those positions.

**LEGISLATIVE PROCESS**

It is proposed that the first stage of the legislative process be changed significantly to strengthen the role of parliament in the legislative process and to place committees at the heart of the legislative process. The process through which government legislation is initiated in the Dáil and Seanad must be altered to incorporate increased committee engagement in the drafting stages, thereby strengthening the role of parliament in producing and scrutinising legislation prior to enactment. We propose the following additional changes to the legislative process:

- This process should not end with enactment; rather legislation must be subject to post-enactment scrutiny to ensure it is operating as was originally intended. This would be achieved by attaching a brief outcome report to all new legislation so as to ensure the precise intention of the legislation is clearly understood and having committees review the operation of legislation approximately one year after enactment.
- We propose that all legislation and policy decisions are poverty proofed by working with interested parties likely to be affected by the outcomes of each decision.

### EMPOWERING THE OIREACHTAS

As it currently stands the Oireachtas operates subject to the will of government; legislation is produced and enacted subject to the instruction of government ministers and the Government Chief Whip schedules all business. As such Dáil Éireann and Seanad Éireann lack the basic freedom to produce legislation and determine what items are debated, when and how. This has resulted in the Houses of the Oireachtas becoming one of the weakest parliaments in western democracy, a situation that is wholly unacceptable. The following reforms are proposed as a means of empowering the Oireachtas:

- It is proposed that a Dáil Business Committee and a Seanad Business Committee be established on a formal footing, that proceedings of these committees be minuted or that they sit in full public view. The purpose of these committees is to involve the parliament in a central way in the scheduling of the business of each house. This change is intended to alter the power deficit which currently exists where the Government as opposed to the Parliament determines the agenda.
- The Houses of the Oireachtas Commission is the body corporate charged with overall responsibility for running the Houses of the Oireachtas. Among other things this authority determines the distribution of parliamentary resources and presides over a range of other administrative functions of parliament. Yet government appoints the majority of the Commission with only minimal opposition involvement being permitted. We believe this is a major impediment to the independence of the Oireachtas and we therefore propose that the membership of the Commission be appointed subject to proportional representation determined under the d'Hondt system. We also propose that the salary top-up payment made to each member of the Commission be removed.
- There is currently an excessive amount of localism and short-termism in our national politics and we need to redistribute power to a reformed Local Government system so as to ensure that the National Parliament is freed up to direct its focus to national matters.
- We intend to introduce new requirements for public representatives to declare significant liabilities as well as assets.

It is the position of the Social Democrats that by bringing about a number of much-needed strategic reforms in the areas of political funding and parliamentary operations we can revitalise rebalance and re-invent our political system. By undertaking wholesale, meaningful reform of the system in a way that truly respects the democratically expressed will of the citizens, operating for the sole purpose of serving the best interests of the electorate rather than the political establishment we can create a system that citizens engage with, understand and, most importantly, can be proud of. Ultimately, this is about developing a culture that centres on openness and transparency that has at its heart the ultimate goal of serving the citizens.

## MAKE RADICAL CHANGES TO POLITICAL FUNDING

Effective political funding and Oireachtas reform cannot be brought about by piecemeal efforts at tinkering with the timing of Dáil business and introducing lip-service initiatives. It requires the introduction of meaningful changes that will result in a more open and accessible parliamentary and party system that caters to the needs and wishes of the citizens of Ireland. As it currently stands the Irish parliamentary and political funding systems work to the benefit of established parties, with the complex regulations governing both often resulting in confusion for those peering in from the outside. The Social Democrats propose a number of key reforms that would alter how we fund politics in order to bring about a more transparent, representative and accessible party system.

### CHANGE HOW POLITICS IS FUNDED

Politics is currently funded in a very insular way that is designed to protect the established parties and make it extremely difficult for new alternatives to emerge. Two streams of political funding presently exist; they are parliamentary funding and electoral funding. The former consists of funding and resources provided in respect of TDs and Senators to facilitate their work as parliamentarians, and the latter is provided to qualifying political parties on the basis of the proportion of 1st preference votes they received in the preceding General Election.

### PARLIAMENTARY FUNDING AND RESOURCES

Under the present parliamentary funding system the democratic mandate of each individual parliamentarian is neither fully recognised nor respected. When a TD or Senator leaves their parliamentary party or is expelled from its ranks the party continues to receive funding and resources from the Oireachtas on their behalf but both are withheld from the parliamentarian for whom they are meant. This undermines the mandate of such parliamentarians as lack of adequate resources directly affects their ability to perform their roles as legislators and public representatives.

We would change this system to ensure distribution of resources in such a way that parliamentarians have more control over the funding allocated to them. This would ensure all parliamentarians are allowed to operate on an equal footing and, we believe, would strengthen the parliament as a whole as it would empower parliamentarians to negotiate policy positions with their parties from a position of increased strength. We anticipate this would go some way towards loosening the rigidity of the party whip.

### FUNDING UNDER THE ELECTORAL ACTS

A second stream of political funding is paid to registered political parties who receive a minimum of 2% of all first preference votes cast in the preceding general election. These 'qualifying parties' are allocated an annual fixed sum payment and receive a share of an annual €4.98 million fund proportionate to the percentage of the vote they received. Interestingly though, the distribution of this fund does not take account of votes cast for non-qualifying parties and independents, so for example although the presently qualifying parties collectively received just 83% of first preferences cast in General Election 2011 they share 100% of the €4.98 million fund between them.

The Social Democrats propose that this distribution mechanism be changed so that parties receive sums calculated against the exact percentage of first preference votes received in the preceding general election, with the remainder of the fund being allocated to the Irish Electoral Commission to engage in political education and outreach work.

### ADDITIONAL MEASURES

- We will poverty proof all legislation and policy decisions by working together with interested parties who will be affected by the outcomes of each decision.
- We will systematically introduce an e-governance platform based on the Nordic initiative which provides for integrated service delivery and ensures accessibility to citizens.