

**Social
Democrats**



Climate Action, Nature Protection

A Greener, More Sustainable Ireland

For the Future
It Starts Here

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Key Points

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Create a revised Climate Action Plan that will allow us to reach our international targets by 2030 and avoid €8 billion in fines.
- Invest €5 billion in a renewable energy revolution, including a €200 million R&D fund so we become world leaders in floating off-shore wind.
- Install solar panels on 500,000 homes and make solar panels free to low-income households.
- Ensure the start of a fair transition for farmers through the creation of a €1.5 billion Fair Transition Fund.
- Expand and enhance grants for retrofitting, solar panels and Electric Vehicles.
- Fast-track the expansion of major public transport projects like MetroLink and Luas, in Dublin, Cork and Galway.

Biodiversity, Nature and Heritage

- Bring the Minister responsible for Biodiversity and Heritage under the Department overseeing Climate- and Environment-related matters.
- Prioritise the enactment of the Marine Protected Areas Bill.
- Design, fund and implement an ambitious National Nature Restoration Plan, and ringfence funding for nature restoration in the Infrastructure Climate and Nature Fund.
- Double the size of our National Parks, and ensure they feature highly protected areas.

Energy

- Capitalise a €5 billion Climate Transformation Fund to invest in state-owned wind energy generation.
- Install solar panels on 100,000 homes per year as part of a sustained state-led effort to harness the power-generating capability of the technology.

- Provide 100 per cent grants for solar panels to low-income homes via the Warmer Homes Scheme.
- Introduce a frontloaded ‘pay as you save’ national retrofitting programme, which would allow people to insulate their homes and pay the cost as they save on their energy bills over time.
- Introduce an Energy Poverty Act to establish statutory targets and definitions for Energy Poverty.

Agriculture

- Ensure the start of a fair transition for farmers through the creation of a €1.5 billion Fair Transition Fund.
- Use financial incentives, from the Fair Transition Fund, to encourage herd reduction in line with our environmental targets, and design a debt forgiveness scheme, using grant funding, that would allow indebted farms to move away from current models of farming without undue financial loss.
- Develop policy that ensures the Department of Agriculture, food processors and supermarkets pay farmers enough to support cleaner and less-polluting forms of agriculture and land use, whilst being financially sustainable.
- Phase out environmentally harmful subsidies and change the thrust of payments to farmers to ensure good practice is rewarded.

Transport

- Institute a €1 public transport fare, valid at off-peak times, that would incentivise public transport use.
- Plan, fund and deliver ambitious nation-wide public transport programmes, including high-capacity sustainable transport.
- Focus on the rapid electrification of industry and transport, accelerating delivery of renewable energy and grid expansion to meet increased demand.

Introduction

The Climate Crisis is the single biggest threat to our environment and to our long-term quality of life. The actions we take or fail to take now will affect our country and our planet for generations. Everybody must play their part in tackling it and preparing for its consequences.

We are at a critical juncture regarding our achievement of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals. With ecological crises accelerating before our eyes, as well as evidence of the limits of our economic model, it is clear that we cannot continue as we have been going.

As part of the next government, the Social Democrats will ensure that the necessary systems and structures are in place so that Ireland can play its role in creating a sustainable planet where no one is left behind.

This will require, among other things, a significant shift in how we do things in areas like:

- Biodiversity and Nature Protection
- Energy generation
- Transport modal use
- Agriculture
- Waste, Recycling, and the Circular Economy

A just transition is central to our approach to the climate emergency. We cannot allow the burden of making the necessary changes to fall disproportionately on the shoulders of those least responsible for the crisis. For example, as part of our efforts to end the burning peat, coal and unsustainable biomass for electricity we ensure that workers in carbon-intensive industries can transition to new, quality employment and training opportunities in low-carbon sectors.

We must also plan for what we know is coming. Regardless of the progress we make on climate action and climate change mitigation, we must accept that an element of climate adaptation will be necessary too. Our plan includes actions and changes relating to drainage and flood mitigation, afforestation and nature protection, early warning systems and protocols for dealing with situations that will arise, and a plan to incorporate nature-based solutions into climate adaptation.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Create a revised Climate Action Plan that will allow us to reach our international targets by 2030 and avoid €8 billion in fines.
- Respect the independence of the advisory and statutory agencies in the sector.
- Put a focus on the rapid electrification of industry and transport where feasible, accelerating the delivery of wind energy infrastructure (both on- and offshore), solar, and the necessary electricity grid development in order to meet increased demand.
- Ensure Ireland's plays its part in achieving the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs), and that government departments and ministers are held accountable for the delivery of the SDGs.
- Fund the Central Statistics Office to collect and regularly publish relevant data on, and monitor Ireland's progress towards, the SDGs.
- Follow through on plans to establish a National Just Transition Commission, putting it on a statutory footing, and resourcing it adequately so that it can carry out its agreed mandate.

It should also work with affected stakeholders in developing transition plans to ensure we maintain the principles of fairness and proportionality when reaching our climate action targets.

- Scale-up investment in retrofitting and cheap access to financing e.g. prioritising heat pumps in new builds and retrofits.
- Introduce a frontloaded 'pay as you save' national retrofitting programme, which would allow people to insulate their homes and pay the cost as they save on their energy bills over time.
- Develop an early warning system for floods, and invest in flood defences across the country in areas of high risk.
- Develop a national plan to deal with heat waves, including by establishing early warning systems and a framework for protecting vulnerable people.
- Restore the electric vehicle grant to €5,000, reversing the government's reduction to €3,500.
- Target EV subsidies to those who have fewer public transport options.
- Increase investment in the EV charging point network, including disability- and gender-proofing EV charging infrastructure.

Biodiversity, Nature and Heritage

Biodiversity, defined as the variety of plant and animal life in a particular habitat, enables nature to be productive, resilient and adaptable. Biodiversity and Nature loss is one of the biggest challenges that Ireland faces.

This is not a crisis that has just come upon us, but one years in the making. For far too long, we have relied on the false narrative that Ireland is a green and environmentally friendly country.

Nature is declining globally at rates unprecedented in human history. Ireland is not immune from that grave assessment. Between a quarter and a third of all species that have been assessed in Ireland are threatened with extinction, according to the National Biodiversity Data Centre, and the conservation status of our protected habitats is dis-improving.

We must meet this challenge head on. The outcomes of not doing so will be catastrophic. But the good news is that nature, our environment, and our wildlife are robust, as long as they are given the time and support to recover.

We know that the climate crisis and biodiversity loss are intrinsically linked, and both must be addressed in tandem. The Dáil declaration in 2019 of a Climate and Biodiversity Crisis was welcome, but it was not followed by an appropriate level of action. Biodiversity improvements and nature-based solutions need to be a key tool to tackle climate change.

Farmers are guardians of much of our land in Ireland and often have connections going back centuries to that land. We need to work with farmers and farming families to ensure that our biodiversity is restored. Combined with political will to act, we can reverse the decline in our biodiversity.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Bring the Minister responsible for Biodiversity and Heritage under the Department overseeing Climate- and Environment-related matters.
- Design, fund and implement an ambitious National Nature Restoration Plan, and ringfence funding for nature restoration in the Infrastructure Climate and Nature Fund.

- Double the size of our National Parks: adding land to ones that currently exist, and bringing new ones into existence, including in the midlands on old Bord na Móna land.
- Ensure our parks feature highly protected areas within them, and create management plans with nature protection as the priority.
- Increase resources for the National Parks and Wildlife Service to a level appropriate for them to carry out all their functions and develop new areas of responsibility.
- Increase funding to farmers for areas of Natural Constraint and Special Areas of Conservation, and aim to double protected nature reserve area by 2040.
- Increase funding for the conservation of endangered and vulnerable native species, and promote the expansion of wildlife corridors across the country, recognising the potential of rivers, canals, and roads.
- Examine the potential development of wildlife corridors between identified high-nature sites.
- Change and strengthen the remit of state entities to include protection and promotion of biodiversity.
- Develop a programme of peatland restoration and re-wetting on state land.
- Establish a framework for the creation of action plans for species deemed to be endangered.
- Develop a National Management Plan for Invasive Alien Species.
- Ensure planning authorities have all hedgerows assessed when making decisions and priority is given to protecting existing hedgerows and trees.
- Increase regulation of the sale of pesticides and herbicides.
- Establish a Wildlife Crime Unit in An Garda Síochána.
- Prioritise the enactment of the Marine Protected Areas Bill, and designate at least 30 per cent of our marine area as a Marine Protected Area, including 10 per cent to be strictly protected.
- Introduce a ban on trawlers 18 metres or more in length in the six nautical mile zone, ban bottom trawling in Marine Protected Areas, and phase out of destructive fishing practices in all water.
- Reform the Arterial Drainage Act to bring rivers back to more natural flows and good health, and develop land use management plans for river catchment areas to mitigate flooding risk.

- Remediate weirs and barriers to fish migration in rivers.
- Review Aquaculture Policy and licencing to ensure they align with climate, water and biodiversity policies.
- Map existing native woodland and remnant forests, and develop management strategies to protect and expand them.
- Publish a new forestry strategy, with an explicit goal of keeping Coillte and Ireland's forests in public ownership.
- Address delays in the issuing of forestry licences, especially afforestation and private felling licences.
- Mandate an increase in the percentage of trees planted that are native broadleaf.
- Fund a Farmland Bird Monitoring Programme.
- Ensure that implementation of the Hen Harrier Threat Response Plan is ambitious and fully resourced.
- Develop a results-based payment model for Irish agriculture, and create a voluntary purchase scheme for unprofitable farmland to be converted into protected native woodland.
- Provide additional supports to landowners to ensure the management of land and waterways for biodiversity is financially viable.
- Develop an Urban Biodiversity Strategy, and use state-owned buildings to showcase nature-friendly buildings and grounds.
- Work with local authorities and An Bord Pleanála in urban areas to prioritise the planting of trees and flowers in housing developments, and on streets.
- Mandate and fund local authorities to identify small patches of land for the planting of mini-forests in urban areas.
- Review the Heritage Act 1995, with a view to updating the definition of heritage to incorporate current international best practice.
- Establish a Heritage Research Unit in the Heritage Council.
- Support and encourage the work of those Tidy Towns groups who put focus on planting for biodiversity and nature protection.

Further information about our plans can be found in our Biodiversity & Nature Policy Document on our website.

Energy

The reliable supply of safe, secure and sustainable energy is essential for the prosperity of the Irish economy and society. Energy policy must ensure:

- **Security:** Ensuring reliable and secure energy supply into the future.
- **Affordability:** Keeping household and business costs as low as possible.
- **Sustainability:** Planning for the decarbonisation of Ireland's energy supply and an orderly transition to a carbon-free Ireland.
- **Equality:** Ensuring that the changes needed to achieve this benefit ordinary people and communities, and do not have a disproportionately negative effect on vulnerable groups or areas of the country.

Creating a more sustainable and secure future presents economic opportunities, as well as the possibility of Ireland becoming a net exporter of clean energy in the coming decade.

Failure to thus-far capitalise on the potential of our own renewable energy resources has meant excessive exposure to imported energy crises.

Ireland has thoroughly failed to meet its renewable energy targets, repeatedly missing emission-reduction deadlines set by international agreements and facing significant fines. The current path cannot continue.

A combination of procrastination, lack of ambition, and a purposeful back-loading for decarbonisation actions to the end of this decade has ensured that the task facing the next government is a huge one.

Sectoral Targets under the Climate Action Plan have set a target of 80 per cent renewable electricity by 2030. Failures by previous governments means that we need to do much more over the rest of the decade than would otherwise have been the case. However, our climate targets are now based in law.

The Social Democrats want to create a national energy policy that guarantees our future environmental, social and economic health and prosperity. In government we will strive to meet our commitment to a 51 per cent reduction in emissions by 2030, and achieving net zero emissions by 2050 through credible, incremental national and sectoral plans, based on ambitious but attainable goals.

Energy Security

Securing a reliable and sustainable future supply of affordable clean energy will be the main energy policy goal of the Social Democrats.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Scale up capacity within Bord na Móna and the ESB to deliver large renewable energy projects to exploit wind energy, both on and offshore.
- Invest to upgrade our port infrastructure to allow for the development of offshore wind farms, including allowing for the transport of materials to facilitate the maintenance and ongoing operation of offshore infrastructure.
- Invest to improve the interconnectivity between Ireland and other countries. We will need to manage high levels of wind and solar on the grid, which requires optimising a wide range of technologies and solutions, including battery storage, demand response, and transmission.
- Pursue policies to increase the electrification of our heating and transport systems, including increased funding for electric vehicles.
- Boost investment in upgrading the nations' electricity grid infrastructure, to allow for expanded future growth in electrification.
- Acknowledge that secure supply requires secure storage, and that energy storage is an essential part of an integrated energy system. We will invest in storage technologies that will allow us to capture energy from intermittent sources that would otherwise go to waste.
- Acknowledge that while offshore wind capacity is being planned and built, there will be a need for back-up fuel. We will examine the possibility of using hydrogen and other options as viable back-ups.
- Replace the temporary Energy Security Emergency Group with a permanent Energy Security Group, which would analyse issues of energy security going forward. This group will advise government on energy security matters and oversee the implementation of related measures.

Energy Affordability

Ensuring energy affordability for homes and businesses is important to mitigate deprivation and fuel poverty, and improve economic competitiveness. Fuel

poverty is often defined as a situation where a household spends more than 10 per cent of income heating the home, but more broadly might be viewed as a situation where households cannot afford to keep the home adequately heated.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Set the Fuel Allowance at a level that better reflects the cost to vulnerable households of heating their home.
- Expand eligibility for the Warmer Homes Scheme, which provides free home energy upgrades to homeowners who get certain social welfare payments, and include access to solar panels in the scheme.
- Ensure that all new housing developments include facilities for microgeneration and storage that enables maximum retention of energy produced, allowing households to reduce energy costs and generate income.
- Scale-up investment in retrofitting and cheap access to financing e.g. prioritising heat pumps in new builds and retrofits.
- Pilot a dedicated retrofitting programme for rural households relying on solid fuel and oil heating systems, and expand the Better Energy Homes scheme.
- Change regulations so that households using pre-paid power meters can avail of tariffs and deals currently limited to direct debit customers.
- Introduce an Energy Poverty Act to establish statutory targets and definitions for Energy Poverty.
- Advocate at EU level to ensure the link between gas and electricity prices on the wholesale market be broken.
- Increase funding to local authorities and their relevant Energy Agencies, to provide greater technical, financial and business planning expertise to Sustainable Energy Communities, as well as funding to provide long-term no-cost loans to help SECs through this process.
- Provide government backed low-interest green-loans to SECs in the construction of these renewable energy projects, and target at least 20 per cent of new renewable energy generation to be community owned by 2030, providing direct funding to assist capacity building and technical expertise.

Energy Sustainability

It must be a priority of the next Government to ensure the roll-out of renewable energy is sped up; is increased in scale and ambition; and the gains distributed equitably. The Social Democrats are planning for this next phase in the harnessing and development of renewable energy. We will have a strong focus on creating a more sustainable Ireland. As part of this, individual households and homes must be made more resilient to energy price and supply shocks.

In Government, the Social Democrats will

- Introduce a pay-as-you-save home insulation loan scheme.
- Install solar panels on 100,000 homes per year as part of a sustained state-led effort to harness the power-generating capability of the technology. Around one million homes in Ireland are suitable for solar panels but do not have them installed.
- Create an initial €200m fund to provide grants to households to install solar panels, reducing household emissions and cutting electricity bills by an average of up to 40 per cent over the course of a year.
- Enable local authorities to create a register of approved PV installers, allied with government grant funding, so they can efficiently manage PV installation at scale in council-owned private dwellings.
- Develop a Quality Mark scheme for businesses delivering retrofits and solar installations.
- Make access to, and affordability of, fossil-free alternatives like heat pumps and renewable district heating an urgent priority.
- Develop local district heating networks by incorporating district heating considerations into urban planning frameworks, allowing for community-owned heat networks to be set up.
- Enhance funding of local authorities and their associated Energy Agencies so they can support interested Sustainable Energy Communities (SECs) to become Solar Meitheals.

These Meitheals can then utilise their local authority's register of approved PV installers to create groups of homeowners, community organisations and/or small businesses who want to complete PV installations, thus achieving scale, efficiencies and saving.

- Examine the possibility for local authorities – or a central government authority – to bulk-buy solar panels to allow households to avail of further economies of scale. A standardised approach has the potential to cut costs by up to half.
- Build on existing grant schemes to support the purchase of microgeneration technologies in residential and commercial buildings, on farms, in public buildings, and in the community.
- Ensure a fair price is paid to microgenerators for the power generated.
- Support and fund local authorities, SEAI and energy agencies to develop a list of building contractors under the coordination of One-Stop Shops to tender for block retrofits.
- Instruct and fund local authorities and energy agencies to identify council-owned housing estates, with building fabric lending itself to a ‘deep retrofit’, and to work with local SECs, where applicable, to create block applications for ‘deep retrofits’ in areas of geographic concentration. The same process can be followed to create block applications amongst homeowners.

Energy Equality

‘Just Transition’ is the principle that we cannot allow the burden of dealing with the climate emergency to fall disproportionately on those least responsible for the crisis, or least able to react or change.

The Social Democrats believe in the principle of Just Transition. During the 33rd Dáil we tried to legally define a Just Transition as a transition that ensures the economic and social consequences of the climate emergency are managed to maximise opportunities of decent work for all, reducing inequalities, promoting social justice, and supporting industries, workers and communities negatively affected.

Government voted this down.

A just transition must be central to Government’s approach to the climate and biodiversity emergency. A National Just Transition Commission was due to be established before this election. Under a Social Democrat government, it will oversee the bringing together of workers, communities, employers and Government in social dialogue to drive the plans, policies and investments

needed for a fair transformation to a low-carbon economy. It is especially important to include the workers and communities that are impacted by the shift away from fossil fuel production.

One of the clearest opportunities where we can manage this Just Transition, thus increasing the viability of a low carbon lifestyle to all people regardless of income, is through the retrofitting and better insulation of homes, specifically through a 'deep retrofit'. Such 'deep retrofits' offer homeowners the opportunity to make significant energy and financial savings, while improving the quality of their living environment.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Define Just Transition as “a transition that ensures the economic and social consequences of the climate emergency are managed to maximise opportunities for decent work for all, reducing inequalities, promoting social justice, and supporting industries, workers and communities negatively affected”.
- Put the National Just Transition Commission on a statutory footing, and resource it adequately to oversee the bringing together of workers, communities, employers and Government in social dialogue to drive the plans, policies and investments needed for a fair transformation to a low-carbon economy.

Managing Data Centres

Increased energy demand is putting Irish energy security at risk, as well as increasing the risk that Ireland will not meet its renewable energy targets, and a large part of that is being driven by the growth of data centres.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Enact a moratorium on the development of data centres and the issuing of planning decisions as an interim measure until an economic, environmental and energy impact risk analysis has been carried out.

- Enforce higher standards as set out in the European Union Code of Conduct for Energy Efficiency in Data Centres, replacing the code's voluntary nature with statutory obligations to prevent the industry from self-regulating.
- Mandate data centres to supply waste heat to district heating networks.
- Implement the CRU (Commission for the Regulation of Utilities) proposals that would require EirGrid and ESB Networks to prioritise connection applications from data centres in accordance with a series of factors, including whether data centres:
 - Generate enough energy on site themselves to support their demand for electricity.
 - Can be flexible in reducing their consumption at times of system constraint.
 - Have chosen a location that is mindful of grid constraints.
 - Have the ability to provide onsite dispatchable generation and/or storage.

Other Energy Priorities

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Develop a Community Energy Advice Service in every county to give independent and tailored advice to the public.
- Commission research on the potential for green hydrogen for use as an aviation fuel, and other purposes.
- Resource state bodies like An Bord Pleanála, EirGrid and the Commission for the Regulation of Utilities, so that delays on planning decisions related to renewable energy projects are minimised.
- Aim to create greater uniformity of policy across local authorities on renewing permission for old wind farms, to remove uncertainty for windfarm projects.
- Invest and identify opportunities in battery storage and hydroelectricity plant storage that would allow excess energy to be stored in Ireland and be used during peak times.

A Focus on Offshore Wind Energy

Ireland should use a significant portion of the recent (and projected) budget surpluses to invest in a greener future.

In Government, the Social Democrats will establish a Climate Transformation Fund to direct significant investment into areas necessary to transform Ireland's economy and help us on the road to carbon neutrality, investing particularly in the area of renewable energy.

We will capitalise this with an initial €5 billion from the corporation tax windfalls.

The goal would be to ensure secure energy supply and make Ireland a net exporter of energy. Such secure energy supply is an economic necessity, imperative to ensuring certainty for households and businesses alike.

The Climate Transformation Fund would be used to direct significant investment into areas necessary to transform Ireland's economy and help us on the road to carbon neutrality. It should invest particularly in the area of off-shore wind, with the aim of ensuring secure energy supply and making Ireland a net exporter of clean energy in years to come. Ireland currently has three commercial semi-state bodies engaged in developing wind energy projects, and this area in particular should receive significant investment.

As two commercial semi-state companies engaged in energy delivery already exist, capacity within Bord na Móna and the ESB to deliver large renewable energy projects should be scaled up for purpose of exploiting offshore wind energy.

If we fully exploit our natural renewable energy resources, Ireland could become a net exporter of energy within a decade. This move would ensure state involvement in a strategically important and potentially lucrative sector of the economy. The input of capital from the State would also ensure quality employment is created in the supporting enterprises.

Despite having some of the greatest indigenous clean energy resources in Europe, Ireland is one of the most import-dependant countries in the EU. This can and should change.

Government will also need to invest to improve the interconnectivity between Ireland and other countries.

Also required is serious investment to upgrade our port infrastructure, which has a big role to play in developing offshore wind farms, including allowing for the transport of materials to facilitate the maintenance and ongoing operation of offshore infrastructure. At present, Belfast is the only port on the island capable of hosting the construction (and ongoing maintenance) of offshore wind farms.

Now is the time for ambition and fresh thinking.

In Government, the Social Democrats will

- Capitalise a €5 billion Climate Transformation Fund (CTF) from the corporation tax windfalls to invest in state-owned wind energy capacity.
- Direct €200 million from the CTF into an R&D fund so we become world leaders in floating off-shore wind.
- Scale up capacity within Bord na Móna and the ESB to deliver large renewable energy projects to exploit off-shore wind energy.
- Invest to upgrade our port infrastructure to allow for the development of offshore wind farms, and allow for the transport of materials to facilitate maintenance and ongoing operation of offshore infrastructure.
- Invest to improve the interconnectivity between Ireland and other countries. We will need to manage high levels of wind and solar on the grid, which requires optimising a wide range of technologies and solutions, including:
 - battery storage,
 - demand response, and
 - transmission.
- Prioritise the delivery of the Marine Protected Areas Bill to ensure we can expand our offshore wind generation while protecting marine biodiversity.

Phasing Out Fossil Fuels

The solutions to reducing emissions are, for the most part, already here; the delay in implementing these solutions is what is mainly behind our failure to achieve our emissions targets.

Technologies like solar PV, wind energy technology (on- and offshore), heat pumps etc are already in reasonably widespread use. We must focus on further rolling out these, and other technologies, as quickly as possible.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Greatly scale up capacity within semi-state agencies to deliver large renewable energy projects to exploit offshore wind energy.
- Invest to upgrade our port infrastructure to allow for the development of offshore wind farms, and allow for the transport of materials to facilitate maintenance and ongoing operation of offshore infrastructure.
- Install solar panels on 100,000 homes per year as part of a sustained state-led effort to harness the power-generating capability of the technology.
Around one million homes in Ireland are suitable for solar panels but do not have them installed.
We would create an initial €200m fund to provide grants to households to install solar panels, reducing household emissions and cutting electricity bills by an average of up to 40 per cent over the course of a year.
- Scale-up investment in retrofitting and cheap access to financing e.g. prioritising heat pumps in new builds and retrofits.
- Introduce a frontloaded ‘pay as you save’ national retrofitting programme, which would allow people to insulate their homes and pay the cost as they save on their energy bills over time.
- Broaden the scope of the Fossil Fuel Divestment Act 2018 to ensure our national investments are entirely fossil fuel free.
The Act must cover investment in large-scale harmful agribusiness and ‘indirect’ investment in financial instruments funding fossil fuel exploration.
- Endorse the development of an international Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty.
- Uphold the nationwide ban on fracking.
- Ensure greater enforcement of the nationwide ban on smoky coal.

Transport

One of the starkest differences between Ireland and other European countries is our poor public transport system. Under successive Irish Governments, one abandoned or delayed public transport plan has followed another. Transport policy has focussed on moving cars, not moving people.

The result is that we have created severe urban sprawl with poorly planned car-dependent communities. Our rail network is sparse. Cycling is not as safe as it could be. Pedestrians are only rarely considered. Air pollution is unacceptably high. We continue to incentivise the most environmentally damaging forms of transport and leave people with very few options to reduce their carbon footprint.

Every failed public transport project increases the difficulty for our society to make the kind of transition we know we need. A key principle of our Transport policy in government will be to use policy as a Climate Transformer, as a key part of the transition to a carbon-neutral society.

In Government, the Social Democrats' priorities will include:

- A €1 public transport fare, valid at off-peak times, which would incentivise public transport use and help deal with capacity constraints.
- Continuing to improve the affordability of public transport fares, to encourage greater usage.
- Funding TFI to begin expanding the '90 Minute Fare' (increasing the time limit to 120 minutes) and rolling it out for cities away from the capital.
- Providing free public transport for under 18s, to encourage the habit of using public transport early in life.
- The decarbonisation of transport through a significant modal shift from private car use to public transport and active travel and the increased electrification of the fleet.
- Shifting the balance of investment in transport from roads towards public transport.
- A higher investment in rail, public transport and active mobility; and improved co-ordination between land-use and transport planning.

- Ring-fenced funding for the purchase of new buses to expand capacity on Ireland's public transport network, and investment in the transition to a low- or zero-emission public bus fleet.
- Moving towards a proper 24-hour public transport system, including at weekends.
- Doubling funding to the Rural Transport Programme and to Local Link to increase availability, provide further local and circular routes servicing towns and villages, and ensure the fleet is in line with climate commitments.
- Developing major National Development Plan transport projects, including:
 - MetroLink (formerly 'Metro North') between Dublin city centre and Swords.
 - Expansions of the DART and Luas.
 - The Cork Commuter Rail project.
 - Bus Connects in Dublin, Cork, Galway, Waterford and Limerick.
- Supporting the principle that 'the polluter pays'.
Accordingly, we will implement environmentally motivated fiscal measures according to the respective negative externalities of different transport modes, considering things like accidents, congestion, noise, greenhouse emissions and damage to biodiversity.
- Treating public transport as a public good, and opposing the increased privatisation of services. Public bus routes can only be sustained if they provide a reliable service that people can depend on and value.
- Adequately resourcing state and semi-state agencies and local authorities who have responsibilities for governance, planning and environmental protection to monitor compliance among transport providers and operators in the public and private sector.
- Building a Comprehensive School Transport system.
- Increase investment in electric vehicles (EVs), and the EV charging point network, including disability- and gender-proofing charging infrastructure.
- Target EV subsidies to those who have fewer public transport options.
- Reviewing Vehicle Registration Tax (VRT) with a view to promoting smaller greener vehicles.

Further information about our plans for a more integrated and sustainable transport system can be found in our Transport Policy Document on our website.

Cycling

Ireland is far behind much of Europe in terms of cycling infrastructure and approach. The Social Democrats recognise that cycling is a major transport area that can contribute hugely to our environmental sustainability, as well as our health.

Whilst there has been a recent Government effort to improve active travel infrastructure, progress has been slow and has not been sufficiently ambitious.

The benefits of cycling are enormous. And everyone, cyclist or not, gains. With more cycling, we get:

- Less pollution and less congestion.
- Healthier lifestyles and a more active population.
- Better mobility and quicker commuting times.
- Safer streets and more liveable neighbourhoods.
- The possibility of 15 Minute Cities and Communities that residents want to stay and spend time in.

In Government, the Social Democrats' priorities will include:

- Increased Capital Funding for Improved Cycling Infrastructure
- Proper Segregation for Safe Cycling
- Cycling Greenways
- Expanding Cycling Incentive Schemes and Urban Bike Schemes
- Safer School Trips, ensuring every child has a safe route to school.
- Better Enforcement around cycling safety rules.

We will ringfence a minimum of 15 per cent of the total transport capital budget for the development of walking and cycling infrastructure all over Ireland.

Further information about our plans for cycling can be found in our Cycling Policy Document on our website.

Agriculture and Food

Agriculture is critical to the Irish economy and is the lifeblood of rural communities. It must therefore be the focus of agricultural policy to make the sector economically and socially sustainable, ensuring fair prices paid to farmers for their produce, a living income for farming families, the creation of positive economic spill-over benefits for rural communities, and the production of high-quality food in a sustainable manner.

We also know that the sector is the source of a disproportionately large percentage of Ireland's emissions, and is a significant polluter. We need to change several practices to ensure the sector reduces its emissions in line with the Ireland's climate-related obligations.

Ensuring a Just Transition in agriculture is imperative.

The sector is also afflicted by much policy incoherence. Government states that its environmental goals include emissions reduction, yet the policies it has pursued will push emissions from the farming and food production sectors in the opposite direction.

Significant resources are allocated to the agriculture sector every year by both national government and the European Union. Too often, those resources incentivise practices that contradict stated policy goals, and have negative consequences for the environment, society, and farmers themselves.

This must change. Agriculture policy requires a new focus, founded on coherence of purpose, and ensuring that:

- The industry is both economically and socially sustainable.
- The high quality of Irish agricultural produce is maintained.
- The sector meets its environmental targets.
- Farmers and food producers receive a fair price for their produce.
- Money flowing into the sector is structured in a way which incentivises practice in line with our economic, social and environmental goals.
- Rural economies benefit from a sustainable farming sector that provides secure incomes.

A Fair Transition for Farmers

Ireland's goals around emissions reduction in Agriculture have now been set in law. A key part of agriculture policy must now be to reach those targets while ensuring that farmers are adequately assisted to implement, and are compensated for, the changes they must make. Policymakers must ensure that small farmers are not left behind in making the transition.

The current nitrates derogation cannot continue and must be phased out in a controlled manner.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Work with stakeholders, including farmers and their communities, and policy experts in the Department of Agriculture to map out a coherent transition plan so farmers do not disproportionately bear the brunt the transition.
- Work to ensure a fairer price for farmers, fishers, and producers.
- Work to deliver sustainability in agriculture.
- Demand a fairer and simpler Common Agricultural Policy which ensures more farm payments are targeted towards low-income farmers.
- Use recent budget surpluses to ensure the start of a fair transition for farmers through the creation of a multi-billion-euro Fair Transition Fund, with an initial capitalisation of €1.5 billion.
- Use financial incentives, from the Fair Transition Fund, to encourage herd reduction in line with our environmental targets.
Policymakers must find a way for farmers to act in line with national policy goals whilst maintaining living standards.
- Remove the policy incoherency that exists between agricultural practices and policies in areas like environmental and biodiversity protection, ensuring that farmers are financially rewarded for good practice.
- Phase out environmentally harmful subsidies and change the thrust of payments to farmers to ensure good practice is rewarded.
- Bring Ireland's food production in line with our obligations, under the Paris Agreement, Agenda 2030, and our goals of protecting water quality and biodiversity.

- Design a debt forgiveness scheme, and a grant funding scheme or ‘transition fund’, that would allow indebted farms to move away from current models of farming without undue financial loss.
- Devote additional funding to expand ACRES to accommodate an additional 10,000 farmers.
- Ensure that money flowing into the sector remains at current levels, but is reconfigured to make family farms more sustainable, and incentivise good environmental practices.
- Work to diversify income sources, including into energy production, for farmers in sectors that need to be scaled back in line with our climate targets.
- Use financial incentives to encourage farmers to engage in more sustainable horticulture.
- Ringfence funding so that farmers leaving the sector receive funding and support for education and training in other areas with employment prospects.
- Provide funding to encourage diversification by farmers into other income-producing areas, including forestry, and areas of energy production.
- Bring spending on organic farming to the EU average, and ensure the Organic Farming Scheme is backed by a budget that corresponds to our organic farming targets.
- Work to achieve shorter and more local food supply chains.
- Encourage a move away from monoculture and intensive farming.

Further information about our plans for a more economically, socially and environmentally sustainable agricultural sector can be found in our Agriculture & Food Policy Document on our website.

Waste, Recycling and the Circular Economy

Most people want to do their best for the environment and play their part by recycling as much as possible. However, we are not making it easy for them. Our current recycling system is inadequate. There isn't enough basic information for consumers on how and where people can recycle materials and items, and the recycling system in Ireland can't handle many of the goods that are sold in our shops.

Under the current Climate Action Plan, the Government aims to recycle 65 per cent of packaging waste by 2025 and 70 per cent by 2030. However, recent reports suggest that the inadequate provision of segregated recycling infrastructure acts as a serious impediment to meeting Ireland's EU mandated 2025 recycling goals.

Plastics remain the most challenging, with recycling rates far behind other materials. For instance, in 2023, paper and cardboard achieved a recycling rate of 67 per cent whilst plastic obtained 26 per cent. We need national legislation on banning certain single use plastics and micro-plastics, and a new national and EU strategy to tackle unrecyclable packaging.

We must work to move Ireland from a linear economy to a circular one, including by setting more ambitious recycling and composting targets, and developing a stronger recovery industry. In Government, we will pursue tangible and evidence-based schemes to increase recycling, reduce cup waste, and incentivise better behaviour from businesses and individuals to help us achieve our climate goals.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Back initiatives that align with the Circular Economy Action Plan, ensuring all packaging is reusable or recyclable by 2030.
- Regulate waste management systems and support recycling initiatives, such as the development of recycling centres close to every community.
- Expand the number of Civic Amenity Centres, making waste charges affordable, expanding opening hours of 'bring centres', and providing better options for recyclable material that is currently not part of kerbside collection.

- Use the tax code where appropriate to promote better second-hand markets and repair businesses.

We will explore, through the European Institutions, the possibility of reduced VAT rates for the repair of goods and how better regulation could ensure goods are longer-lasting and/or repairable.

- Encourage the setup/creation of further Repair Cafés, and examine the scope for creating apprenticeships in trades focused on the repair of clothing, electrical goods, and other products, in line with circular economy principles.
- Pursue policy that acknowledges that while recycling is essential, reducing waste produced is the real goal through less packaging and less consumption. We will aim to educate on reducing food-, textile-, and other consumption and waste.
- Promote the development of re-fill options in retail to minimise the production of plastic containers and encourage more local authorities to provide refill water dispensers and drinking fountains in their area so that the demand for plastic bottles is reduced.
- Reduce demand and supply of single-use plastics. We will introduce a levy on plastics which cannot be recycled in Ireland and work with producers to reduce plastic packaging.
- Work towards the re-municipalisation of waste collection, beginning with gradually phasing out side-by-side domestic waste competition within municipal areas.
- Allocate funding for the hiring of more litter wardens, and improve the enforcement process.

We favour the doubling of on-the-spot fines for littering and further increasing fines for illegal dumping. It is vital that penalties for illegal dumping are actually applied. Enforcement bodies are too often failing in their duties to apply appropriate penalties.

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