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COMMUNITY & VOLUNTARY PILLAR Priorities for Ireland's Presidency of the EU

COMMUNITY AND VOLUNTARY PILLAR
communityandvoluntarypillar@gmail.com

Executive Summary

A renewed Social Europe is central to the priorities of Community and Voluntary Pillar for Ireland's EU Presidency. A strengthened Social Europe requires an agenda that is focused on a renewal of social cohesion and societal wellbeing; seeking to ensure that all citizens have the opportunity to participate fully in economic, social and cultural life. At this critical juncture, a time of global instability and uncertainty, the Irish Presidency of the Council of the European Union presents a unique opportunity to put social rights, social development and a renewed Social Europe at the heart of EU policymaking. The Community and Voluntary Pillar has identified three areas of priority that will support this goal.

Strengthen the vision of a social Europe, **with increased emphasis on the realisation of social rights for everyone.**

- Ensure greater coherence of European economic, environmental and social policy in support of a social Europe.
- Progress and strengthen implementation of the new Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan.
- Progress implementation of the EU Anti-Poverty Strategy.
- A Multi-Annual Financial Framework which ensures that critical cohesion funding for social initiatives and investment is retained or increased.

Enhancing civil society participation and deepening our democracy.

- A Safe and Enabling Environment for Civil Society.
- Sustainable and improved access for civil society to EU Funding.
- Improve the connection between citizens and the EU at local level, urban and rural.

Renewed emphasis on a Just Transition as we decarbonise our economy.

- Champion the SDGs as an overarching framework for European policymaking.
- Mainstream the SDGs across EU institutions and Council working groups.
- Press for the protection and expansion of EU budget lines dedicated to the Just Transition, climate action and biodiversity.

Introduction

The Community and Voluntary Pillar believe that it is crucial that Ireland use its presidency of the EU in 2026 to promote the renewal of the vision of a Social Europe.

The new Programme for Government pledges to maximise the impact of Ireland's EU Presidency to improve the country's position, influence and reputation in the EU. The programme enumerates the meetings that will be hosted by the Government including 16 to 20 informal council meetings at ministerial level which will create significant opportunities to impact on the EU agenda and priorities.

Europe has experienced massive disruption over the past five years, first with the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and the devastating toll on health and wellbeing together with its social and economic impact, followed by the outbreak of war in Europe, as well as the inflation and cost of living crisis. The unfolding geopolitical fragmentation, increased regional conflicts, and the impact of climate change, the ongoing failure to address poverty, inequality and the denial of human rights, and the resulting increases in inward migration have created growing global instability. To these negatives, we can also add transformations in our world that present both opportunities and challenges, including demographic changes, changes in global trade relations, and ongoing digital and communications revolution which are now entering a stage of greater intensification with the advent of AI.

This rapid change, together with the increased day-to-day struggle in material wellbeing, has understandably brought about a feeling of uncertainty and a sense among many people that they are being left behind. This is especially true among those who were already struggling to make ends meet. This has all contributed to increasing fragmentation of social cohesion across Europe. As well as the material impact this has on community wellbeing, it has also cultivated fertile conditions for the growth of hard-right politics of hostility, exclusion and distrust in our democratic infrastructure. It is in this context that a strengthened vision of Social Europe is urgently needed. This vision is reflected in the values of the EU outlined in the Treaty of the European Union: "The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail." The Irish Presidency of the EU provides the opportunity to put those values at the centre of European policy-making.

Ireland has a long positive history of progressing a social agenda in the European Union. In its Presidency in 2026, Ireland has the opportunity to shape and drive an agenda focused on a renewal of social cohesion and societal wellbeing; seeking to ensure that all citizens have the opportunity to participate fully in economic, social and cultural life. There are significant risks for the EU and its member states in overly focusing on economic growth over social development – including reduced

trust among individuals, institutions and the state, greater fragmentation, and erosion of the social contract. Indeed, while imperfect, Ireland's increased focus on wellbeing is an approach we can promote at EU level. Likewise, Ireland's ongoing practice of social dialogue and civic participation is an approach to good governance that we can promote at EU level. With the current negotiation on the Multi-Annual Financial Framework (MFF) 2028-2034, Ireland's Presidency of the EU can play a key role in the finalisation of the MFF to preserve the financial sustainability of a social and democratic Europe.

To this end, we recommend three overarching areas of focus in the Ireland's Presidency of the EU in 2026:

- Strengthening the vision of a social Europe, with increased emphasis on the realisation of social rights for everyone. This should include an effective anti-poverty strategy that addresses its root causes, ensuring income adequacy and access to social infrastructure and public services.
- Enhancing civil society participation and deepening our democracy.
- Renewed emphasis on a Just Transition as we decarbonise our economy.

Our high-level recommendations include the following:

THEME 1: Strengthening the vision of a social Europe, with increased emphasis on the realisation of social rights for everyone. This should include an effective anti-poverty strategy that addresses its root causes, ensuring income adequacy and access to social infrastructure and public services

The proposals in this section support cross-cutting Article 9 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, otherwise known as the 'social clause' which states that: "*In defining and implementing its policies and activities, the Union shall take into account requirements linked to the promotion of a high level of employment, the guarantee of adequate social protection, the fight against social exclusion, and a high level of education, training and protection of human health*."

1. **Ensure greater coherence of European economic, environmental and social policy in support of a social Europe**

By acting on the von der Leyen Commission's decision to integrate the UN Sustainable Development Goals and the European Pillar of Social Rights into the economic processes of the European Semester.

This could be facilitated by:

- Making the European Pillar of Social Rights enforceable through legislative

initiative, including the Multiannual Financial Framework and turning it into a strategic tool to influence EU macroeconomic governance.

- Taking greater account of social impacts when making Country-specific Recommendations, especially those requiring fiscal consolidation measures, and ensure no return of austerity policy.

- Making Country-specific Recommendations that seek to achieve reductions in poverty, where rates are high or rising.

2. Address inappropriate EU governance structures

Those that prohibit or inhibit legitimate investment by national governments. Large-scale investment programmes are needed to address historical underinvestment and ensure a sustainable and inclusive recovery from the crises of the past five years. Investment is particularly needed in job-intensive areas to assist growth as well as social and infrastructural deficits. The focus would need to be tailored to each individual country / region but might include development of renewable energy sources, health and social care infrastructure, social and affordable housing, education and early childhood education and care infrastructure. As already stated, inappropriate EU rules need to be adjusted to make investment viable.

3. Advance concrete measures to progress and strengthen implementation of the new Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan to be published in early 2026

This includes:

- Advancing proposals for an EU framework directive on adequate minimum income to build on the Directive of Adequate Minimum Wages and the 2023 Recommendation on adequate minimum income ensuring active inclusion.
- This should include access to child care, access to education including lifelong education and healthcare across member states and other measures supportive of the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights.

4. Progress implementation of the EU Anti-Poverty Strategy

Use Ireland's history of progressing concrete initiatives to address poverty at EU and national level to identify and progress measures that ensure the effective implementation of the new EU Anti-Poverty Strategy currently being developed to address the structural causes of poverty. This has to be done through effective collaboration with organisations representing the diversity of experience of poverty and social exclusion. The various instruments being developed to ensure implementation must be evidence-based and implemented in a coordinated and integrated manner to address the most challenging and persistent incidences of poverty. Specific measures

include:

- **Monitor and address poverty amongst sub-groups such as children, young people, minority ethnic groups including Travellers and Roma, lone-parents, disabled people, vulnerable migrants, older people, communities facing socio-economic disadvantage and the working poor.** Child poverty is such a serious issue that it requires further action as does the issue of young people neither employed nor in education (NEETs). Examine intersectionality across marginalised groups such as those based on gender and disability. Monitor implementation of the Child Guarantee through a strengthened process and work with member states with high levels of child poverty to help them access and deploy structural funds to address the issue. The ageing of Europe's population, the fact that there are many more women than men in this group, and the very great differentials between countries make poverty amongst older people (especially in some countries) an issue that requires more attention now and in the future. The situation of those who work and still live in poverty needs to be tackled as a matter of urgency.
- **Housing** has taken on an increased priority of the EU during its current term, with the Commission committing to publishing an Affordable Housing Plan in 2026, and the Parliament's new Special Committee on the Housing Crisis in the European Union debating issues related to housing and homelessness and is due to make its recommendations at the end of 2025. There is also growing momentum towards a Council Recommendation on ending homelessness. Given that Ireland is one of the EU countries in the midst of an ongoing housing and homelessness crisis, it is well placed to continue to prioritise joint EU action on housing and homelessness during its presidency; including introducing a Council Recommendation on ending homelessness and appropriate actions on accessible homes for disabled people and culturally appropriate housing for ethnic minority groups including Travellers and Roma.

5. EU Funding

A critical role of EU funding is to support the improvement of social standards across the EU, through addressing imbalances within and between regions, and building greater social cohesion through supporting the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights.

Many civil society organisations are concerned at the divestment of funding from addressing these critical social issues through changes to the rules governing current EU funding and in the development of the new Multiannual Financial Framework 2028-2034. This approach undermines social cohesion in the EU, and risks further social destabilisation across and within member states.

The Irish Presidency will come at a critical time in the negotiations on the MFF. The Irish

Government should promote an approach to the MMF which ensures that critical cohesion funding for social initiatives and investment is retained or increased in the next round of EU funding, and not diverted towards other priorities.

6. **Structural Funds**

Structural funds must be of a sufficient scale to make an impact and should be given greater priority so as to ensure significant progress is made in bridging the gap between the economic and social dimensions of policy and in promoting a social investment approach to public policies where this is absent or insufficient.

7. **Focus on Youth Unemployment**

Youth unemployment continues to be a serious problem despite Youth Guarantee schemes and there is a need to recognise that young people experiencing multiple disadvantages are likely to need support over a lengthy period.

8. **Support Developments in the Social Economy**

Leadership and support from the EU for social initiatives would benefit both people in need of support (through health and social care programmes) and societies generally. This would be consistent with the Social Investment Package and could provide valuable employment opportunities for people who are long-term unemployed.

9. Use the Presidency to move to **Reintroduce the "EU Equality Directive 2008"**

which proposed to establish a minimum level of protection against discrimination based on age, disability, religion or belief, and sexual orientation in areas outside of the workplace. Also add the ground of socio-economic status to the covered grounds. In a regressive step the European Commission work programme for 2025 has stated that this proposal has been withdrawn. This would be an opportunity for Ireland to show leadership in the area of equality.

THEME 2: Enhancing democratic values and partnership with civil society

Europe is at a crossroads. Despite the vital role of civil society organisations (CSOs) in sustaining open and vibrant democracies, civic space in some Member States is shrinking, making it increasingly difficult for CSOs, human rights defenders (HRDs) and smaller grassroots and community organisations to operate. Civil society plays a fundamental role in upholding the democratic foundations of the EU. This is achieved by holding policymakers to account, monitoring and advocating for human rights, ensuring citizens' voices are represented in policymaking and oftentimes, filling gaps across society which are not met by public services. Civil society also contributes to public debate and actively engages in information sharing, knowledge building and awareness raising so as to support citizen participation in democratic life in addition to providing expertise and critical analysis to inform policymaking. Community organisations play a particularly

crucial role connecting the most marginalised communities and groups to this democratic life, and working to ensure that they have a say in the policies that impact on their lives. Fulfilling these roles often means civil society must be robust and challenging in its relationship with authorities, but this too is fundamental to the maintenance of a healthy and vibrant democracy.

At a time when human rights are increasingly undermined, civil society across Europe is at the vanguard of upholding the EU's core and legally binding values of human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, and respect for human rights, including the rights of minorities both at national and EU levels. In contrast to the fear-based narratives of anti-rights actors in Europe, civil society offers a hopeful vision for the future.

1. A Safe and Enabling Environment for Civil Society

EU policy-making must engage meaningfully with stakeholders representing vulnerable groups and those most at risk of exclusion. Ireland can:

- Promote Council Conclusions on protecting civil society and safeguarding democratic participation in EU policymaking.
- Ireland can model good practice through inclusive stakeholder engagement, drawing on domestic models of dialogue and collaborative governance with the community and voluntary sector and the communities and groups they represent.
- Call for the inclusion of a chapter on civic space in the annual Rule of Law report to track democratic dialogue.
- Promote initiatives that promote and protect civil society such as the EU Civil Society Strategy, Democracy shield and Civil Society Platform.
- Civil society and parliamentarians should work together to counter disinformation campaigns targeting the social justice agenda, climate action, and biodiversity renewal. In this regard, particular attention should be paid to promoting Democracy Shield which is under development by Commissioner McGrath.

2. Sustainable and improved access for civil society to EU Funding

Access to public funding is crucial to maintaining the independence of organisations, and ensuring they can contribute effectively to policy but also ensuring that levels of EU funding for civil society and the social economy are preserved from the uncertain global context. Ireland can:

- Use the Presidency to influence the negotiations on the Multi Annual Financial Framework (MFF) and ensure strong ring fenced support for civil society in different regulations in the upcoming MFF, and across the negotiation period.

- Develop specific initiatives that resource autonomous community development, organisations that promote democratic values and in particular the values of participation, community empowerment, social justice, sustainable development, human rights, equality, anti-discrimination and collectivism.

- Promote the need of access to public funding for civil society organisations in order to preserve their independence.

- Organise events to connect civil society organisations and social enterprise across Ireland and EU funding agencies to raise awareness about EU funding and facilitate access.

3. Improve the connection between citizens and the EU

The Programme for Government points out the need to "bring some of the high-level meetings of our Presidency to cities and counties across Ireland, ensuring the entire country benefits from the profile the Presidency brings." It is therefore crucial that the Irish Presidency promotes the need for an accessible Europe that can be experienced at local level in both rural and urban areas. It is also essential that all groups, including those most at risk of exclusion, have access to the opportunities to engage with EU institutions and decision-makers during the Presidency.

4. Adopt a Human Rights Strategy

To prevent the violation of human rights of Europe's population, adopt a human rights strategy. This is particularly pressing given the reality of conflict and humanitarian crisis has returned to the continent of Europe with the war in Ukraine.

5. Ensure Inclusive Governance

Engage with key stakeholders to ensure that groups at risk of poverty and social exclusion, and unemployed people can influence policy-direction and implementation, and that their experiences become part of the dialogue with European institutions to try and repair social cohesion and political legitimacy.

THEME 3: Renewed emphasis on a Just Transition as we decarbonise our economy

1. Promote Sustainability & the SDGs

Ireland's Presidency offers a unique opportunity to champion the SDGs as an overarching framework for European policymaking. The Irish Presidency could adopt a strong SDG theme, building on Denmark's focus on SDGs 14 and 15. This would not only build on the focus on SDGs 14 and 15, but also strengthen policy coherence across all Council formations. A possible Presidency theme could be: **"Delivering the SDGs: A Sustainable Europe for Future Generations."**

2. **Integrate SDGs**

Into the work of all Council working groups. Ireland's role as chair provides an opportunity to:

- Mainstream the SDGs across EU institutions and Council working groups.
- Ensure strong EU contributions to the UN High-Level Political Forum and the 2027 SDG Summit.
- Push for renewed EU commitments on financing, reporting, and implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

3. The European Commission's current **"omnibus simplification"** process and deregulatory agenda pose risks to flagship Green Deal instruments, including the LIFE programme and environmental and social elements of the CAP. **Ireland can:**

- Press for the protection and expansion of EU budget lines dedicated to the Just Transition, climate action and biodiversity.
- Build alliances with like-minded member states to prevent cuts that would disproportionately harm rural communities, civil society and future generations.