

Harnessing resources and capacity to build a fairer future for all



Making the Most of Opportunities

It is acknowledged that Ireland's outlook has improved, both economically and socially, recently. Overall employment has increased and we are facing a balanced Budget this coming October. However, while all of this is to be welcomed, Ireland is still experiencing a number of significant crises – particularly in the areas of housing and healthcare – and expects to be levied with severe penalties for missing our emissions reduction targets under Europe 2020. The next Budget presents an opportunity for Government to make serious inroads into fixing these problems. Investment in one-off infrastructural projects now will pay dividends in the long run by redressing some of the damage caused during the years of austerity, providing a base for the provision of decent services and infrastructure development that will not only benefit society, but our economic position both at home and internationally.

Consecutive Country Reports from the European Commission have recommended that Government take action to broaden the tax base, invest in housing, healthcare and childcare, and address the malignant non-performing loan problem¹. The recently published draft National Risk Assessment² identifies a series of risks for Ireland in the coming months, and it is dispiriting to see that many of these are legacies from previous iterations. Housing, healthcare, education, demographic changes, employment patterns and climate change are all continuous features.

Brexit, and particularly the lack of any real vision for the form it is intended to take and glacial rate of progress on any plan towards the March 2019 deadline, is already having negative economic and social effects on Ireland, something that is sure to worsen once the UK leaves the European Union. Notwithstanding this lack of vision and the ongoing negotiations between the EU and the UK, it should be possible for Government to develop a range of likely scenarios and to prepare strategies to mitigate the worst possible impacts. We know, for example, that trade will be a significant issue, employment and migration will be affected, particularly in the early years post-Brexit, and this will have broader implications for the economy as a whole. It is imperative that Government use the economic opportunities available to it in the coming year to safeguard our stability.

Infrastructure Development

Ireland requires a multi-faceted, inter-Departmental strategy to address the many interconnected infrastructural and societal deficits for all inhabitants of the State:

- A **housing** system that provides for all affordability levels, family types and age groups (including the ability to age in place through the adoption of a lifecycle approach to housing development), both in urban and rural areas;
- A progressive universal **healthcare** system that incorporates primary healthcare teams embedded within communities and provides a 'spectrum of care' to cater for the needs of a growing and ageing society, with particular supports for vulnerable groups, persons with disabilities (including the full implementation of the UN Charter for Persons with a Disability), people experiencing mental health issues and the elderly;
- A properly funded **public transport** system that connects the whole of the country and ensures that the problems experienced by those living in remote areas are not further compounded by inability to access basic services and community supports;

¹ https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/2018-european-semester-country-report-ireland-en_1.pdf

² https://merrionstreet.ie/en/ImageLibrary/20180523_DraftNationalRiskAssessment.pdf

- A professional, well-regulated, accessible and quality **early childhood care and education** sector that provides equality of opportunity for parents on low incomes, particularly women and lone parents, to access the labour force;
- A properly funded **education** system that takes a lifecycle approach to learning, from early years to adult education, training, community, and non-formal learning, to allow for the upskilling and reskilling of people in the labour force whose jobs are most at risk of obsolescence in the era of disruptive technologies;
- A functioning, country-wide **broadband** system that meets the targets set in the Digital Strategy for Europe; and
- The development of sustainable, renewable **energy** sources to reduce Ireland's reliance on energy imports and fossil-based fuels.

Implementing such a strategy of course comes with a cost – both financial and social – but so does not implementing it. Government has scope in Budget 2019 to begin this implementation. Supplemented by broadening the tax base, as recommended by the European Commission, and increasing the tax take, the Community and Voluntary Pillar believes that this is achievable while being economically prudent.

The Community and Voluntary Pillar are disappointed that the revised National Action Plan for Social Inclusion (NAPSI) will not be made available until later this year, as this would help set the vision for Ireland's ambition to reduce poverty and increase equality. The National Planning Framework³, Ireland 2040, provided a roadmap of sorts in respect of infrastructural development. However much of this development, particularly in the area of public transport, concentrated on the main urban centres and did little to address rural development. Add to that the numerical difficulties with the delivery of 40,000 social housing units for a total cost of €4.2 billion, and the credibility of the plan as a whole of Ireland spatial strategy becomes questionable. In term of Ireland's commitments under the UN Sustainable Development Goals, for which Ireland was a key driver of their initial development, the Community and Voluntary Pillar welcomed the recently published National Implementation Plan for the SDGs⁴ and, in particular, the Annexes including the Matrix of Lead and Stakeholder Departments responsible for implementing each of the 17 SDGs, and the SDG Policy Map which identifies the SDG to which each Government policy relates. This is just the groundwork, more is needed to integrate the SDGs, particularly the principles of no poverty (SDG 1), reduced inequalities (SDG 10) and sustainable cities and communities (SDG 11), as a framework for development – infrastructural, economic and societal.

Programme for Government Commitments

The Community and Voluntary Pillar previously welcomed the commitment in the Programme for Government to creating a fair and compassionate society supported by a strong economy which will support people at all stages of the lifecycle (Programme for Government, 2016:p.9). The Pillar can play an important and ongoing role in assisting Government in the development of budget and policy proofing as a means of advancing equality, reducing poverty and strengthening economic and social rights.

³ <http://npf.ie/about/>

⁴ <https://www.dccae.gov.ie/en-ie/environment/topics/sustainable-development/sustainable-development-goals/Pages/National-Implementation-Plan-2018---2020.aspx>

The Programme for Government further acknowledges the contribution of the Community and Voluntary sector (a) to building a more just and prosperous society and (b) to the economy⁵. It also commits to developing a multi-annual funding model and to increase funding to support the sector. This was also welcomed by the Community and Voluntary Pillar. However, the review of the sector which appears to be moving away from the community model towards that of ‘social enterprise’, based on entrepreneurship and business principles, is a grave cause for concern. We believe that the sector can and does play a crucial role in ensuring Ireland’s services and social infrastructure can support the changing needs of our population and provide an immediate ‘on the ground’ response in times of crisis. This was never more evident than during the recent storms where the sector was instrumental in supporting those who were most at risk. The support of Government in this work is gratefully acknowledged, but there must be a reciprocal acknowledgement of the commitment of those engaged in the sector – the returns on investment are significant, particularly at a time when demands on the sector are growing while funding has been reduced. We would welcome the opportunity to engage in meaningful dialogue on both these commitments, and the sector review, in the context of Government plans and priorities for Ireland’s future.

The Programme for Government also makes reference to commissioning. It is important to state that commissioning is distinct from procurement. Commissioning is not an appropriate model to be used in relation to the delivery of community development supports to communities and it is not an appropriate model for interventions in those communities which are most vulnerable. Done well, commissioning could ensure high-quality public services that deliver real value for money in the delivery of certain appropriate services. It could maximise social, economic and environmental outcomes, prevent harm and help to achieve well-being for all. Done poorly, commissioning risks providing services that alienate and disempower, that elevate short-term cost efficiencies over long-term public benefit, that are inflexible and overly departmentalised, and that ultimately offer poor value for money. Unfortunately the latter, in our experience, is what has been delivered as a result of commissioning, ultimately resulting in greater costs to the Exchequer due to the direct and indirect consequences of poor service provision to vulnerable people.

Regulation of the Sector

Community and Voluntary organisations have a long history of providing services and infrastructure at local and national level. They are engaged in most if not all areas of Irish society. The sector has put great resources and effort into promoting and securing community engagement and ownership as well as empowerment of individuals and communities. It provides huge resources in energy, personnel, finance and commitment that can never be replicated by the State. It has developed flexible approaches and collaborative practices that are responsive and effective. These are strengths that must be nurtured and supported. It is acknowledged, however, that improvements are possible in each of these areas.

Such improvements will be challenging for the sector and will require adjustments in varying ways for individual organisations, depending on size, structure, staffing levels, demand, front-line provision etc. The sector has consistently proven to be capable of implementing necessary change, particularly with regard to increased governance and oversight. The transitions to implement the requirements of the Charities Regulatory Authority, the Governance Code, the Lobbying Act and, most recently, the

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http://www.taoiseach.gov.ie/DOT/eng/Work_Of_The_Department/Programme_for_Government/Programme_for_Government.html

General Data Protection Regulations are proof of this. However, it is essential that the regulatory requirements are proportional to the size and scope of organisations, and do not create an unmanageable administrative burden which detracts from the core work. It was therefore encouraging to hear suggestions by the Charities Regulator at the launch of the Authority's annual report that the regulation may be revised to provide a more tailored approach that takes account of the variety of organisations and structures within the sector.

Role of the State

When it comes to prioritising limited resources it is crucial that Government make decisions that are equitable, fair and just, that protect the vulnerable, address structural inequality and promote the wellbeing of this and future generations. It is important in this context to remind ourselves that Ireland is not a poor country – the Central Bank recently reported that average household wealth had peaked pre-recession levels - and that we do have choices. The choices made, and outcomes produced, will impact some cohorts of society more than others. Previous choices to cut public expenditure, particularly capital expenditure, had a disproportionate effect on poorer areas who relied on the provision of essential public services. Consequently, a two-tiered system has emerged where private interests are bid against public responsibilities. This is evident in housing where private rents and house market prices continue to experience inflation, while the need for social housing and homeless services increase; in healthcare where lengthy waiting times affect the lives of poorer populations and those without private health insurance, while those who can afford to be treated privately are seen immediately; in education where private fees continue to increase while schools in underprivileged areas struggle for funding; and in childcare where subsidies are subsumed into private rate increases and those who cannot access sparse community childcare schemes or family care have no alternative but to remain outside the labour force, denied opportunities for economic advancement that might stop, or at least slow the pace of, the cycle of poverty for their family.

When determining what choices to make, Government must focus on the kind of society it wants to achieve, shifting the focus from the balance sheet to securing a viable, sustainable, just and fair future for all. To reach such a future will require decisions on the levels of taxation, investment and services, how these are to be structured, paid for and delivered – you cannot have European levels of services without European levels of tax. The Community and Voluntary Pillar recognises that all sectors of society have a responsibility in shaping the future. The Pillar is glad and willing to play its role in both shaping and delivering such a future. The vision of a fair and just society, where all are cherished equally, can be implemented by a collaboration between all sectors with appropriate checks and balances in place to ensure that no one is left behind.

A key question that needs to be addressed concerns the role of the State in moving society towards a future that is economically sound and socially fair. Is it merely an observer of market forces, reliant on the private sector to drive social and economic growth, or should it be a more active participant in shaping the society we live in, ensuring the provision of a floor of basic essential services for all? The reality is that every sector has a part to play in shaping this country's future. The Community and Voluntary sector is willing and able to contribute substantially towards this process.

Checks and balances should be reflected in Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) on important social issues. The Community and Voluntary Pillar is best placed to lead the development of these KPIs which would include the number of people living in poverty, the employment and poverty rates of people with a disability, social exclusion, participation, long-term unemployment and low-paid employment, and the accessibility of essential services to marginalised demographics. These KPIs should also

encompass the poverty targets and sub-targets that will form part of the new National Action Plan for Social Inclusion. The social scoreboard which is part of the new European Pillar of Social Rights should form part of these KPIs and enable comparability across the European Union.

The need for Social Dialogue

Social dialogue, which has largely been absent in recent years, would greatly enhance the development of these KPIs and secure their broad implementation. Social dialogue is a critically important component of any effective decision making in a modern democracy and, if engaged in effectively, would enhance the work of both Government and the Community and Voluntary sector by fostering a sense of inclusion and common purpose, a shared goal and an understanding of divergences which can only strengthen decision-making through robust debate.

The Community and Voluntary Pillar seeks real, effective, on-going engagement with Government on the key economic, social and sustainability challenges currently facing Irish society – an engagement that reflects the value of social dialogue and its role in ensuring that resources are used more effectively to realise justice, equality and social inclusion. Integral to such development is the need for good governance which must be characterised by transparency and accountability in all its aspects. We believe governance along these lines can be developed in Ireland.

Brexit and the rise of Populism

The draft National Risk Assessment (p.8) states:

In particular, Brexit is an overarching risk which amplifies many of the individual risks listed. All risks should therefore be considered as part of the same multi-faceted environment and taken in the round, rather than in isolation.

However, while the overarching impact of Brexit is alluded to in the above statement, it is only discussed in detail in respect of economic risks. Not to underplay the impact on the economy of our nearest neighbour's departure from the EU, Brexit has far-reaching consequences that go beyond the fiscal. Part of the driver behind Brexit was the rise of populism in the UK. Populism is also a feature of the political landscape in other European countries and is most evident in the US which has recently withdrawn from the UN Council on Human Rights.

The Programme for Partnership Government⁶ (page 12) states:

*There are policy challenges where long-term political planning and thinking are as important as a structured approach to delivery. They required the development of **a broad based consensus at political and public level** before a settled action plan can be developed.*
(emphasis added)

We agree with the Government on the need to build a broad-based national consensus on strategic national issues, and that the implementation of the resultant political action will need a broad-based approach and mobilisation of Irish society. Combating populism requires evidence-based policy making, accessible to and capable of adoption by a broad audience.

Ireland is in a unique position to ensure that the social protection aspects of the European Union are to the fore in Brexit negotiations. In order to do that, however, Government needs to place sufficient

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http://www.taoiseach.gov.ie/DOT/eng/Work_Of_The_Department/Programme_for_Government/Programme_for_Government.html

value on these aspects to safeguard their inclusion. Specific reference to the ‘paramount importance’ attached to the Good Friday (Belfast) Agreement in the negotiating guidelines⁷, adopted by the European Council in April 2017, was welcomed previously by the Pillar. While the Good Friday (Belfast) Agreement does not specifically mention the issue of poverty, it clearly reaffirms the commitment of both Governments to protect economic, social and cultural rights which includes the right to an adequate standard of living. This important right addresses issues of food poverty, housing and material deprivation. By confining the risks associated with Brexit to the economic, Government is avoiding its responsibilities in respect of social and cultural protections.

The OECD recently published a report on social mobility⁸ concluding (p.332):

New social risks are emerging. Against this backdrop, addressing social mobility and offering equal opportunities to individuals requires public action in order to prevent the occurrence and the impact of social risks, and to level the playing fields for all. Such a roadmap requires interventions in a broad range of areas, encompassing health and family policies, education, the labour market, and tax transfer policies, as well as urban planning and housing policies.

If these risks are to be addressed effectively then the pursuit of social cohesion must be underpinned by a strong and demonstrated commitment to social inclusion, equality and human rights. A commitment to economic inclusion is also required to ensure people who are vulnerable in the labour market, whose skills are not a match for existing and emerging employment opportunities, do not find themselves even more marginalised from the impact and fallout of Brexit.

Taxation and Expenditure

Government decisions on taxation need to be linked to the demands on its resources. Ireland is facing new expenditure demands to address current infrastructure and service deficits in areas such as housing, healthcare, public transport, broadband, poverty, disability, water and climate. There are also growing requirements to ensure an appropriate response is put in place to the country’s growing older population especially in the areas of pensions and healthcare. Government will also be facing additional costs in the years ahead to pay EU contributions and to fund any pollution-reducing environmental initiatives that are required by European and International agreements.

The Community and Voluntary Pillar believes that Ireland’s overall level of taxation will have to rise significantly in the years to come in order to address the challenges Ireland currently faces in terms of infrastructure and services deficits, and to ensure Ireland has the infrastructure and services required to meet the needs of the population into the future. As noted already, you cannot have European levels of services without European levels of taxation. Ireland needs to move in that direction by broadening the tax-base as recommended by the European Commission and others and should do so in a just and fair manner.

Community and Voluntary Pillar’s proposals for National Economic Dialogue

The 17 members of the Community and Voluntary Pillar fully recognise and appreciate the need to address the challenges that Ireland currently faces and believes the sector can make a key contribution to providing solutions.

⁷ <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2017/04/29-euco-brexit-guidelines/>

⁸ https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/social-issues-migration-health/broken-elevator-how-to-promote-social-mobility_9789264301085-en#page1

There is a substantial role for civil society in the huge task that Ireland currently faces. Social dialogue is a critically important component of any effective decision-making in a modern democracy. The Community and Voluntary Pillar seeks real, effective, on-going engagement with Government on the key economic, social and sustainability challenges currently facing Irish society – an engagement that reflects the value of social dialogue and its role in ensuring that resources are used more effectively to realise justice, equality and social inclusion.

The Community and Voluntary Pillar welcome engagement in the National Economic Dialogue as an important and constructive approach to policy making. The CV Pillar is committed to playing a major part in building a fair, equal and just society. The Pillar proposes that this deliberative forum should be convened on a regular basis and be used to address the wide range of challenges that Ireland faces, which are social, environmental and economic.

As Ireland faces the challenges outlined it is important to realise that:

- Ireland is not a poor country.
- Ireland's total tax-take is one of the lowest in the European Union.
- It is both essential and possible to protect the vulnerable in the choices Government makes.
- An integrated approach to meeting our country's challenges, national and international commitments on social and environmental issues and developing a coherent framework for Ireland in 2040 is essential.
- Investment on a sufficient scale is essential if Ireland's services and infrastructure are to reach EU-average levels that most Irish people would expect and that are sustainable in the face of increasing demand due to population increase and ageing.
- A guiding vision of where Ireland could be in a ten to fifteen-year timeframe is also essential.
- How policy decisions, especially in a Budget context, are linked to achieving this guiding vision should be clearly outlined by Government at all times.
- A long-term socio-economic strategy to move Ireland towards meeting its commitments under the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) would ensure sustainable development for all for the long-term.
- the European Pillar of Social Rights delivers results that improve people's lives and builds support for a more social, inclusive and fairer European Union, characterised by less socio-economic inequalities.

The Community and Voluntary Pillar proposes that the National Economic Dialogue be extended to address both the social and economic challenges Ireland faces and that cross sectoral engagement and dialogue on these issues should take place on a regular basis. We propose the sectoral issues be guided by the headline commitments in the Programme for Government. The Community and Voluntary Pillar proposes that the dialogue is guided by the principles outlined below.

1. Ensure protection of the vulnerable, the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living and promotion of equality are at the core of all decisions made. To this end all relevant policies and strategies should be subjected to a transparent social impact assessment at design and planning stage.
2. Bring Ireland's total tax-take up to European average levels.
3. Prioritise investment in infrastructure and services to meet the needs of Ireland's growing and ageing population now and into the future.
4. Ensure long-term goals and policy coherence guide prioritisation of resources when addressing the major deficits in economic and social infrastructure.

5. Conduct in-depth analysis on the likely impact of policy decisions and identify the consequences of choices made and the resources required to ensure service delivery into the future.
6. Protect and invest in social infrastructure that has been under severe pressure for some time. This is crucial for services across the life-cycle from children to people of working age to older people to people with disabilities.
7. All policies should reflect the commitments made to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030.

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ABOUT THE COMMUNITY AND VOLUNTARY PILLAR

The Community and Voluntary Pillar consists of seventeen organisations who provide voice and representation for vulnerable people and communities in developing Ireland's social and economic policies.

The members of the Pillar are:

Age Action Ireland
Children's Rights Alliance
Congress Centres Network
Cooperative Housing Ireland
Disability Federation of Ireland
Family Carers Ireland
Irish Council for Social Housing
Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed
Irish Rural Link
National Women's Council of Ireland
National Youth Council of Ireland
Protestant Aid
Social Justice Ireland
The Community Platform
The Irish Senior Citizens Parliament
The Society of St. Vincent De Paul
The Wheel