

Foreword

This general election falls at a time of already significant political change, both here in Ireland and abroad. In June, we elected new Councillors to Cork City and County Councils, and new MEPs for Ireland South to the European Parliament in Brussels, with a new College of Commissioners also appointed to the European Commission.

This is also a time of considerable change for Cork City and County. The Cork region is growing at an unprecedented rate and offers huge potential for further economic growth and development. What is crucial is that this growth happens in a sustainable manner, supported by enabling policies at national level.

Cork's development as a regional economic hub must be prioritised by central government to encourage balanced socio-economic growth across Ireland.

With Cork's population expected to grow by 50% in the coming decades as set out in Project Ireland 2040, the necessary strategic infrastructure projects, such as the Cork Light Rail, must be prioritised over the next five-year government term. An estimated 10,000 completed housing units are needed each year in Cork to keep pace with growing demand in the City and County and the new government must make a concerted effort to enable their delivery.

At Cork Chamber, we ask the 20 new TDs elected to represent the people of Cork across the county's five constituencies to be ambitious for the region's development and to commit to supporting sustainable growth across Cork City and County as they take up their seats in the 34th Dáil.

We ask that each party and candidate standing for election across Cork engage with this manifesto and commit to advancing the priorities outlined within.

Cork Chamber represents 1,200 members, employing 130,000 people throughout the city, metropolitan area and county. Cork Chamber is ambitious for Cork, and we are ambitious for Ireland. We call on elected members of the next Dáil to work with Cork Chamber's membership and the business community in the region, and to match the ambitions of that business community over the next five years.

CONOR HEALYCEO, Cork Chamber

ROB HORGAN
President, Cork Chamber

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

At Cork Chamber, our direction is guided by our formal pledge to uphold the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, five of which have been identified as priority areas by the Chambers Ireland network.

As a 2024-2025 SDG Champion, all of our policy outputs, including our general election priorities, aim to work in support of:

GOAL 11 Sustainable Cities and Communities:

- Housing
- Urban Evolution

GOAL 8 Decent Work and Economic Growth:

 Supporting SMEs, Local Businesses and Start-Ups

GOAL 9 Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure:

- Infrastructure and Connectivity
- Planning Reform and Speed of Delivery

GOAL 5 Gender Equality:

Talent and Skills

GOAL 13 Climate Action:

- Renewables and Energy System Integration
- Sustainability and Climate Neutral City













Priorities for the next Government

Cork Chamber's priorities, as outlined in this manifesto, are grounded in our members' needs and priorities.

Through our Thought Leaders Council, the work of our Board, our quarterly Economic Trends surveys and our constant engagement with our members, we have a unique understanding of the economic and social needs of businesses in Cork City and County and further afield. This manifesto reflects their collective concerns and key priorities for the five years ahead and charts a course for the broader future of Cork, alongside our social, economic and environmental security and prosperity.

There are eight key priority areas included in the manifesto, with a number of key asks outlined in each section:

- 1 Housing
- **2** Urban Evolution
- 3 Talent and Skills
- 4 Renewables and Energy System Integration
- 5 Sustainability and Climate Neutral City
- 6 Infrastructure and Connectivity
- 7 Supporting SMEs, Local Businesses and Start-Ups
- 8 Planning Reform and Speed of Delivery



1. Housing

Housing supply in Cork remains a pressing concern for Cork Chamber and our members, particularly as Cork's population is projected to grow considerably in the coming decades. It is imperative that housing delivery keeps pace with existing and projected demand; the Housing Commission has estimated that, as of the 2022 Census, there was a housing deficit of between 212,500 and 256,000 homes in Ireland and somewhere between 24,000 and 29,000 homes in Cork.

A number of positive policy initiatives in recent years have boosted housing delivery in Cork. The next government must continue to pursue policies that will attract investment in housing and secure supply for the future, like Croí Cónaithe and Project Tosaigh

The alignment, or in fact the non-alignment, of stakeholders is a significant barrier to the delivery of homes. It is crucial that all stakeholders align their development plans and delivery plans to the National Planning Framework (NPF) to ensure the required infrastructure is in place on zoned land that is ready to be developed into residential housing.

- Target the delivery of between 7,500 10,000 housing units per year in the Cork region to keep pace with demand, as well as setting ambitious and timebound targets for future housing delivery in Cork.
- Ensure greater alignment between the providers of necessary infrastructure, such as electricity, water and wastewater, local councils, state and semi-state bodies, and developers to accelerate housing development. The non-alignment of delivery plans for residential sites with the necessary infrastructure has been highlighted by stakeholders as a restricting factor to development at present.
- Introduce a new funding mechanism for state bodies charged with the delivery of key strategic infrastructure, guaranteeing multi-year funding or funding on a major project basis. This would enable key projects to be delivered with greater efficiency and cost effectiveness.

- Increase the viability of innovative housing solutions by providing supports and reliefs for developments on brownfield sites, aboveshop housing units in urban centres, and apartment developments, including enhanced tax reliefs and supports for local and international developers. Examples of such tax reliefs include:
 - Timebound Tax-Based Measures for Apartment Development: Accelerated capital allowances were key to delivering high density apartments in Cork City centre, which would never have been built without them. A short-term introduction of capital allowances for less than five years would deliver a significant number of apartment units and is needed to move the dial and deliver a step change in housing delivery.
 - Apartment Viability: Increase apartment viability by reducing the rate of VAT on residential construction activity to 5% for the period up to 2030, providing tax depreciation of 4% per annum for apartment developments and exploring accelerated capital allowances over seven years for Build to Rent (BTR) and Private Rental Sector (PRS).

- Accelerated Reliefs for Brownfield Sites: City centre brownfield sites, such as those at the docklands in Cork, should be designated for accelerated tax reliefs over a time-limited period to unlock development. Construction levies and duties should have targeted reductions for high-density development on these sites. CGT rollover relief should also be available to businesses when they dispose of real estate and re-invest the proceeds in replacement business property.
- Reduce obstacles to developing dwellings on the sites of existing homes, such as in the form of granny flats. Encouraging dwellings of this type has delivered affordable homes at scale across many countries. Modelling shows there is space and financial incentive for granny flats in hundreds of thousands of homes in Ireland. Approximately 35% of Irish houses could accommodate a granny flat of at least 25m².
- Support private investment. Government intervention has helped ignite the market over the past year, but international investment must be encouraged and welcomed to stimulate the private market and open up opportunities for those who want to purchase apartments in cities.

2. Urban Evolution

Creating safe, welcoming and thriving public realm spaces ensures that our urban centres remain attractive to those wishing to live, work, visit or invest in Ireland. The country's urban centres have undergone significant changes in recent years, presenting a number of challenges for businesses and residents alike. Safety in our cities is critical to maintain the reputation of Cork and Ireland's other urban areas as welcoming destinations for talent and FDI.

Cork has evolved into a thriving, multicultural city and the harmonious nature of this transformation must continue into the future, supported by policies that encourage integration. It is crucial that the new government sets in motion a policy framework that will reinvigorate our urban centres for the long term, promoting city-centre living, social cohesion and economic growth.

$^{f Z}$ KEY ASKS FOR THE NEW GOVERNMENT

- Introduce Urban Evolution Deals, delivering funding for local authorities to implement bespoke development plans for their regions and enabling them to leverage local strengths to drive sustainable development.
- Convene a taskforce to explore solutions to the current barriers that prevent the conversion of vacant and derelict buildings into housing units, with a focus on above-shop spaces in particular.
- Increase Garda numbers in Cork City by 40% to keep pace with ongoing and projected population growth. Increased incidents of anti-social behaviour and more serious crime in the centres of towns and cities like Cork has a considerable negative impact on footfall, and a lack of Gardaí on our streets leads to a rise in safety concerns for residents and visitors alike.
- Prioritise the delivery of the Cork Events
 Centre, which will unlock considerable social
 and economic benefits for Cork City and
 County and attract visitors to and investment
 in Cork.

Combat harmful narratives around immigration and ensure that the positive impacts for businesses, the economy, and society, are recognised, and that initiatives that support integration are prioritised.

Expand access to ETB Further Education and Training courses and increase resourcing for English language classes and other supports for migrants.

Introduce additional supports and policy measures for hospitality businesses to address ongoing concerns around the cost of doing business that are particularly acute among restaurants, cafés and bars. Hospitality establishments play a vital role in attracting residents and visitors into urban areas and bring life to our towns and cities. It is crucial that such businesses remain viable in the face of increasing external pressures.

Progress 'Meanwhile Use' legislation for vacant buildings in urban centres in order to mitigate issues related to vacancy and dereliction. By creating a simple system for the temporary utilisation of vacant properties, 'Meanwhile Use' can contribute to the regeneration of Irish towns and cities, mitigating current challenges in many urban areas.

Increase funding for universal youth work in Cork and other urban centres to mitigate the detrimental impact of lockdowns and other issues on young people.



3. Talent and Skills

Ireland's ongoing competitiveness hinges on its ability to strike the right balance between leveraging FDI and supporting domestic enterprises to realise their full potential. Cork City and County already punches well above its weight in terms of economic output, yet its ability to maintain and enhance its global competitiveness is dependent on the region's capacity to ensure the provision of a highly-skilled and talented workforce through nurture, attraction and retention.

To meet the region's current and future needs, the new government must take measures to address skills gaps and support the existing workforce. Initiatives like enhanced educational offerings and the provision of affordable, accessible childcare are essential to meet the needs of the region's diverse business community and ensure sustainable economic growth.

People benefit from having access to different paths to employment and education, and it is important to recognise that not every person or profession is the best fit for traditional higher and further education. Alternative training programmes and routes to employment should therefore be prioritised by the new government.

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- Budget 2025 increased funding for higher education but a €150 million gap still exists and must be filled. Multi-annual funding structures should be introduced to provide certainty for higher education institutions. Projects of strategic importance for higher education, such as Cork's business and dental schools, should be prioritised for support.
- In Budget 2025, the Government made a welcome commitment to leveraging part of the surplus in the National Training Fund (NTF), which currently stands at between €1.5 and €2 billion. The new government must continue to deploy the growing NTF to bolster funding for further and higher education, and to support businesses via upskilling programmes, such as those provided by Skillnet.
- Expand funding and resources for apprenticeships and other training programmes to support varied routes to employment and enhance Ireland's talent pool.

Review the proposed increase in the base pay requirement for critical skills visas with a degree, and resolve issues associated with travel between Ireland and the Schengen area for visa holders to make Ireland a more attractive destination for talent.

Expand mentoring programmes, like 'Better Start', that focus on improving the quality of childcare and early childhood education.

Enhance measures aimed at attracting and retaining talent, such as employee share option programmes like the Key Employee Engagement Programme (KEEP).

Provide high-quality, accessible and affordable childcare services and conduct a thorough review of current parental leave supports to identify obstacles to achieving greater parenting equality.

Improve access to and increase investment in early learning schemes, such as continued investment in the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme and the expansion of breakfast clubs and after-school childcare programmes across all regions.



4. Renewables and Energy System Integration

Ireland has immense potential to grow its domestic renewable energy sector, an opportunity which presents significant economic opportunities for the country. Cork is well-positioned to become the first of the national hubs to support the sector, helping to build a thriving offshore renewable industry in Ireland.

Enabling infrastructure and supporting policy is needed now to unlock this considerable economic opportunity. Growing Cork's offshore renewables capacity will secure future social and economic benefits for Ireland as a whole, attracting talent and creating new jobs, as well as encouraging FDI and a broadening of our tax base. Developing Cork as an offshore renewable hub will also play a key role in supporting the achievement of our climate targets in the years ahead.

While funding has been unlocked to enable the Port of Cork to begin developing supporting infrastructure for the offshore renewables sector, sustained collaboration among stakeholders and ongoing financing is needed for the region to realise its full potential in the sector.

Input from members of Cork Chamber's Cork Offshore Renewable Industry Forum (CORIF) forms the basis for our asks of the new government in the context of offshore renewable energy.

- Designate the Cork Harbour region as an energy park, supporting the delivery of enabling infrastructure for the offshore renewables sector and developing a skills hub for the sector within the National Maritime College of Ireland (NMCI). Cork has a long and distinguished history in the energy sector with many of the key industry players established in the region, and should be designated a renewable energy hub on a national scale. Support must be provided to deliver the enabling infrastructure needed to make this happen, including prioritising funding for the Port of Cork's further development through the Shared Island Fund and other mechanisms, as well as the delivery of supporting infrastructure in the region, such as the upgrade of the R624 Cobh Road.
- Reinforce and build out Ireland's electricity grid as a national priority to support a growing supply from renewables and meet increasing electricity demand. Currently, the grid suffers from capacity constraints, which impedes housing and infrastructure developments that might lead to increased

electricity demand and prevents us from harnessing the full potential of renewable energy sources.

- Engage with the renewable energy industry to identify funding requirements and opportunities for development.
- Develop a framework of enabling policies that will provide certainty for investors, building on the Climate Action Plan and the Designated Maritime Area Plan (DMAP), setting out clear timelines, measurable targets and a route to market.
- Support Ireland's energy transition by providing operational supports for biomethane production.
- Provide government support to initiatives like Gas Networks Ireland's Pathway to a Net Zero Carbon Network plan by developing energy transportation infrastructure and upgrading the grid, as well as repurposing existing infrastructure for new uses, such as green hydrogen.
- Prioritise the development of domestic renewable energy sources to reduce Ireland's dependence on imported fuels and electricity, future-proofing energy supply against geopolitical risks and encouraging the stability needed to continue to attract FDI and further economic growth.

- Introduce enhanced support and resourcing for key energy regulatory bodies, such as the Maritime Area Regulatory Authority (MARA), An Bord Pleanála (ABP), the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS), the Commission for Regulation of Utilities (CRU), EirGrid, and the Electricity Supply Board (ESB).
- Review Capital Acquisition Tax on utility-scale solar projects to facilitate Ireland's decarbonisation strategy goal of 8GW of solar energy by 2030.



5. Sustainability and Climate Neutral City

Cork has been designated an EU mission city for climate neutrality to 2030, along with Dublin. The transition to a more sustainable and climateresilient city and region will lay the foundations for sustainable economic development and improved quality of life. Cork, its citizens, community groups and businesses already embody many of the qualities that define a sustainable city, yet funding and supports from central government will be needed to ensure that Cork can complete the transition to climate neutrality by 2030.

The next government must ensure that sustainability is integrated into every aspect of planning for Cork's future development and growth, from the region's infrastructure to the social initiatives and corporate practices in the city, setting an example that can be followed by more of Ireland's urban centres into the future.

- Drive sustainable regional growth and foster economic resilience at local level by supporting domestic industries to innovate and transition to sustainable practices.
- Establish a dedicated fund to support Cork and Dublin to achieve the targets set out under their designation as EU mission cities for climate neutrality to 2030.
- Incentivise the retrofit and decarbonisation of existing commercial buildings.
- Provide supports for businesses, particularly SMEs, to implement sustainable practices and reduce energy consumption.
- Accelerate the delivery of key infrastructure projects that will promote active and sustainable travel, as well as sustainable regional growth, including the prioritisation of the Cork Light Rail project.
- Prioritise investment in renewable energy and upgrade grid infrastructure to facilitate the growth of sustainable industries and attract FDI.



6. Infrastructure and Connectivity

Improvements to infrastructure, connectivity and accessibility are critical to enhancing Ireland's competitiveness and sustainable economic development. Cork currently has an opportunity to integrate economic growth and environmental responsibility, with a number of major infrastructure projects that will promote sustainable transport choices planned for the coming years, including the Cork Light Rail, commuter rail upgrades and BusConnects.

Cork Airport and the Port of Cork play vital roles in the Irish economy as international gateways. Enhancing Cork's regional and international connectivity is a key economic enabler for the southern region as a whole. Social infrastructure - infrastructure that ties communities together such as health, education, culture and community - must also be properly funded to promote social cohesion and enhance Cork's reputation as a great place to live.

The new government must consider the increased costs and impact associated with delaying decisions on necessary infrastructure projects. Accelerating decision-making and implementation processes should be a priority for Government, ensuring the timely delivery of critical infrastructure across Ireland, and particularly in the country's fastest-growing region, Cork.

KEY ASKS FOR THE NEW GOVERNMENT

- Unlock strategic sites for IDA and other developments, providing serviced greenfield sites needed for industrial growth, expansion and FDI.
- Prioritise the delivery of much-needed flood defence schemes for Cork City and towns across County Cork.
- State bodies that have responsibility for delivering critical infrastructure should have multi-annual funding plans in place to guarantee the delivery of large-scale capital projects of strategic importance, such as those outlined below, and to reduce uncertainty around timelines and needless delays.

PUBLIC TRANSPORT INFRASTRUCTURE

- Introduce representation for Cork stakeholders on the Board of the National Transport Authority, as is the case for the Chief Executive of Dublin City Council at present.
- Prioritise active travel in the development of public transport and other transport infrastructure, in line with the goals of the Cork Metropolitan Area Transport Strategy

(CMATS). Promoting active and sustainable modes of travel within Cork City and County will help to reduce car dependency and alleviate congestion in the city region.

- Cork Light Rail: Include a commitment in the Programme for Government to accelerate the development of a light rail network in Cork, enhancing Cork's efforts to fulfil the ambitions of the Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities Mission and catering for the region's growing population.
- Suburban Rail: Deliver enabling infrastructure and funding for the upgrade of Cork's suburban rail network. Recent improvements to commuter rail in Cork have already led to a significant increase in passenger numbers; continued momentum is needed with regard to suburban rail expansion and the delivery of the rail services outlined in CMATS. The electrification of the suburban rail line is essential to move towards a more sustainable future for Cork, and new stations and improved frequencies will further increase Cork's attractiveness as a place to live and work.
- Cork Dublin Belfast Rail: Target a reduction in rail travel times between Cork and Dublin to 90 minutes, with efficient onward connections to Belfast. larnród Éireann needs to establish a higher-speed,

- seamless rail connection between Cork, Dublin and Belfast in order to enhance connectivity, reduce travel times, and foster economic growth across the island of Ireland.
- BusConnects: Commuter confidence will improve when the reliability of bus services improves, something which requires agility on the part of service providers to deploy services on high-demand routes at peak times. The BusConnects scheme will greatly enhance bus services throughout Cork City and the surrounding area, improving frequency, ticketing, timetables and the fleet in the city. Public representatives must give their full backing to this project so that its many health, environmental and public realm benefits can be realised as quickly as possible.

ROAD INFRASTRUCTURE

- Northern Distributor Road: The Northern Distributor Road is vital to the north of Cork City and will cater for access to planned development lands, provide walking and cycling linkages, as well as access to orbital public transport routes, and allow for the removal of certain traffic from the city centre.
- M28 Cork Ringaskiddy: The M28 must be delivered by the end of 2026 to facilitate the opening up of the Docklands and the Port of Cork's ambition to expand and move all operations to the lower harbour.

- N25 Carrigtwohill Midleton: Providing funding for the N25 route will unlock the Ballyadam site for investment and port relocation. The surrounding area is home to much of Cork's large-scale indigenous enterprise and FDI in advanced manufacturing sectors such as biopharmaceutical, medical technologies, ICT and food technology. Enhancing the infrastructure in the area will ensure that these sectors remain a cornerstone of the Cork regional economy, providing high-quality jobs and sustaining a large network of supporting businesses.
- R624 (Cobh Road): The R624, including the provision of an enhanced bridge crossing at Belvelly, must be progressed at pace to allow the Port of Cork to fulfil the ambitions set out in its 2050 Master Plan and move its activities to the lower harbour.
- M20 Cork Limerick: Recent progress on the M20 Cork to Limerick motorway is encouraging but momentum needs to be maintained to ensure its timely delivery. Reduced travel times between Ireland's second and third largest cities will greatly enhance the southern region's economic competitiveness. The project will also deliver improvements to quality of life and safety for those living along the route and using it on a regular basis thanks to the sustainable transport corridors proposed as part of the project.

INTERNATIONAL CONNECTIVITY

- Cork Airport is crucial for the southern region. Its Masterplan must be fully resourced to enable Cork Airport to build connectivity with routes to more European capitals, particularly business destinations, alongside a Cork to Belfast connection to drive all-island trade.
- Provide support for the Port of Cork's ongoing expansion and transformation in line with its 2050 Masterplan. The Port's importance as a cruise destination and ferry terminal continues to grow, and this should be supported with enabling infrastructure to accommodate additional ships, passengers and tourists.

SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE

- Increase funding for social infrastructure such as health, education, culture and other infrastructure that ties communities together, promoting social cohesion.
- Deliver the Cork Events Centre to unlock the many economic and social benefits it will bring for Cork City and County. By attracting investment and drawing visitors to the region, and creating and sustaining thousands of jobs, the Events Centre will be game-changing for Cork and the surrounding region, with a capacity of 6,000 seats and the ability to attract an annual audience of around 500,000 people; its delivery must be prioritised to unlock the associated economic advantages.

7. Supporting SMEs, Local Businesses and Start-Ups

Supporting domestic enterprises to realise their full potential is crucial to securing Ireland's competitiveness into the future. While investment in key infrastructure projects will drive Ireland's long-term competitiveness in an international context, domestic enterprises must also be supported in their growth and development, particularly in key indigenous sectors like tourism.

Cork boasts a world-class research and development offering, with the capacity to support indigenous firms through collaboration with local institutions. Connecting businesses in Cork with local R&D institutions will encourage Cork's development as a hub for scaling SMEs who wish to enhance their competitiveness. In the current climate, SMEs are struggling with increased overheads and an ever-growing legislative compliance burden – the next government must pursue pro-business policies that encourage scaling, job creation and innovation.

- Streamline regulatory burdens impacting indigenous enterprises. When implementing new regulations, Government must account for the amplified impact on SMEs through appropriate supports and communications.
- Increase supports for key domestic industries like tourism, and promote regional tourism in less-visited areas by improving tourism and transportation infrastructure.
- Provide supports for SMEs in the hospitality, retail and tourism sectors to invest in sustainable practices, such as energy efficiency upgrades.
- Promote collaboration and partnerships between SMEs and R&D institutions to drive innovation.
- Support Local Authorities to grow regional innovation hubs and support domestic enterprises locally.
- Expand the provision of upskilling grants for SMEs, enabling small businesses to support continued workforce development, particularly at regional level where further training may be less accessible.



8. Planning Reform and Speed of Delivery

Delays in the planning system continue to be the key limiting factor affecting the pace of delivery across key housing, infrastructure and energy projects needed to support economic growth. We need planning reform that reduces delays, provides certainty on timelines for decisions and makes the broader system fit for purpose.

Concerns around the pace at which infrastructure is delivered are cutting across all industry and society from housing, renewable energy and water infrastructure, to public transport and social and cultural infrastructure.

The Planning and Development Act has the potential to be a significant step towards the reform and streamlining of the planning system that is so urgently needed. The next government must ensure that this new Act is implemented in a timely, efficient manner, and that planning authorities have sufficient resources at their disposal to deliver real reform of the planning system, particularly with regard to strategic infrastructure projects.

- Fully resource planning authorities at a local level to ensure applications are seen to without delay.
- Introduce a triage system for projects entering the planning system to ensure strategic infrastructure projects of national and regional importance are prioritised for processing.
- Identify and target the individual elements of infrastructure delivery that cause delays in the system and target shorter turnaround times at every stage of processing.
- Reduce uncertainty around funding and timelines for major projects of strategic importance by introducing funding on a multi-annual basis for providers of critical infrastructure in the state, as well as guaranteed funding for major capital projects.
- Appoint extra judges for Judicial Review cases related to planning. Ensure all cases are resolved within six weeks
- Resource An Bord Pleanála properly. Ensure all cases of national strategic importance are solved within six weeks.



PLEASE USE YOUR VOTE IN THIS ELECTION CAREFULLY.
ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES WILL BE ENTRUSTED
WITH DELIVERING SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC GROWTH
OVER THE NEXT FIVE YEARS FOR YOU, YOUR BUSINESS,
YOUR COMMUNITY AND YOUR FAMILY.

CorkChamber.ie









