



Guiding Questions for Stakeholder Consultations

Through these consultations the Government is seeking to gather observations, suggestions, and reflections on how Ireland can best fulfil its Presidency role; ensure the Presidency policy programme is informed by diverse perspectives from across Irish society; and identify EU-wide issues, themes, and policy areas that should be given particular attention during Ireland's Presidency.

It is proposed that Ireland's overall policy approach for the 2026 Presidency will be expressed at a high level in the form of a single overarching phrase or slogan setting out a people-centred and future-oriented vision for the EU, accompanied by three priority themes.

Respondents are asked to consider the following guiding questions and to limit their responses to each question to a maximum of 500 words. Please note that you do not have to respond to all questions.

Respondents are welcome to submit additional information alongside Submission Form. However, in such cases, respondents must provide a summary of the additional information under the 'Any other comments' question. This response should also be limited to a maximum of 500 words.

Question 1 – What should Ireland choose as the high-level thematic priorities for its Presidency of the Council in 2026?

Please limit response to a maximum of 500 words.

- **Competitiveness:** Both Ireland and the EU as a whole have entered a period of increased uncertainty in recent times, with geopolitical developments giving rise to challenges in many Member States. In this context, an ongoing focus on maintaining and enhancing competitiveness to support continued economic growth must be a key priority for Ireland's Presidency. Cork Chamber members emphasise the importance of a horizontal approach to competitiveness, strengthening factors within domestic and European control to mitigate the impact of external developments.
- **Regulatory Simplification:** In line with the recommendations made in the Draghi Report and other policy documents, progressing the simplification of EU regulation and legislative burdens will be critical in 2026. The simplification of overarching legislative and regulatory frameworks must be accompanied by enhanced supports for and investments in key policy areas that serve as a foundation for European businesses and communities to grow and thrive, such as innovation and research, and sustainability.
- **The Single Market and Trade:** Charting a course for a thriving Single Market and an environment in which European business can scale and grow is imperative, but must be accompanied by a recognition of the importance of balanced, regional economic development. In an era of geopolitical uncertainties, supporting market diversification and enhanced trade links with third countries is critical to the success of European business, as is managing EU relations with key partners such as the US.

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- **Supports for SMEs:** Supporting SMEs to remain competitive is critical, and ensuring that regulatory frameworks are not overly burdensome for smaller enterprises must be a priority. This is particularly important as regulatory requirements in areas like sustainability continue to evolve, resulting in increased administrative and financial pressures on smaller organisations.
- **Green and Digital Transitions:** Key to Europe's economic and population growth is a continued emphasis on both the green and digital transitions. Prioritisation of sustainability at all levels and a just transition for businesses and communities should be a core focus of Ireland's Presidency. Ensuring that sustainability and climate goals are embedded in policymaking and practical actions at all levels is critical. Supporting businesses with clear, proportionate sustainability requirements is vital to ensure the continued competitiveness of Europe's economy. This must be accompanied by bold action to accelerate the decarbonisation of Europe's energy system, supporting a future of energy security and independence based on renewable sources. Deeper interconnection and collaboration in the European energy market is critical, alongside progress towards institutional decarbonisation, leveraging initiatives like the EU Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities Mission of which both Cork and Dublin are participants.

Harnessing the progress already made in the digital transition to support increased digitalisation across sectors should be prioritised. New and innovative technologies have the potential to support areas like sustainability reporting, for example, and this potential should be explored and leveraged where appropriate. Ensuring that businesses, particularly SMEs, can access digital tools and digitalise their operations is also critical. In parallel, support for innovation must continue, enabling the European tech sector to grow and develop.

Question 2 – Which particular policy areas and legislative proposals should be a focus of work for the Irish Presidency of the Council in 2026? What should the Irish Presidency aim to achieve in these areas?

Please limit response to a maximum of 500 words.

Advancing the EU's ongoing competitiveness drive through appropriate regulatory simplification measures and Omnibus proposals should be a key focus of work for the Irish Presidency. In areas like sustainability reporting, simplification efforts must continue apace to reduce disproportionate administrative burdens affecting SMEs in particular. Progress on simplification, standardisation and the streamlining of regulatory requirements across policy areas will play an important role in enhancing competitiveness across Europe.

The Irish Presidency should also seek to progress key national aims in this regard, such as the simplification of public procurement guidelines in line with the recommendations made by the recent Accelerating Infrastructure Taskforce Report, in order to enable more efficient infrastructure and housing delivery at a national level. Plans for Omnibus proposals in areas like taxation should also be progressed, supporting the national measures to simplify taxation policy announced in Budget 2026.

In addition, proposals to deepen Single Market integration, as well as proposals regarding particular sectors, should continue to be a key focus of legislative progress, building on the recommendations of the Letta Report and advancements already made to improve market access and trade potential.

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Proposals to develop strategies for certain key sectors such as tourism are also important in the context of strengthening Europe's domestic economy and should be a key focus.

Policy areas like research and innovation, supporting research capacity, skills development and talent mobility should be another core focus area for Ireland's Presidency term. Strengthening EU support for these critical policy areas will also contribute to Europe's ongoing competitiveness. Proposals in the area of gender equality, fair labour, talent mobility and digitalisation are also crucial in this regard and should be progressed.

Continued progress on key legislative files in the area of climate and sustainability should also be maintained. Areas like energy security and independence, as well as energy market integration and infrastructural improvements, are already the subject of a number of legislative proposals. Maintaining momentum in these areas is key to the future of the green transition. With a revision of climate targets planned for the coming months, it is vital that the journey to climate neutrality is accelerated where possible, with due regard for the potential impacts on citizens. In parallel, continued progress on legislation that will support businesses and communities in their sustainability and decarbonisation journeys is crucial. Ensuring that legislative requirements are fair and proportionate will be critical in this regard.

Question 3 – How can the work of the Council during the term of the Irish Presidency make the most substantial positive impact for people, businesses and communities across the EU?

Please limit response to a maximum of 500 words.

Ensuring engagement with Europe's regions is vital to the success of any Presidency term. As an island nation on the outermost edge of Europe, Ireland's regional development serves as an important success story when it comes to economic growth and regional investment; surveys indicating continued high support for Ireland's EU membership are testament to this. Ireland's Presidency presents an important opportunity to showcase Ireland's regions on the European stage, demonstrating the transformative impact of EU membership. Hosting both high-level and citizen engagement events in regions across Ireland during the Presidency term should be prioritised, promoting continued engagement with regions and ensuring that the benefits of EU membership and possibilities for engagement with EU legislative developments are better understood. As Ireland's second city and the key economic driver of the southern region, Cork should be considered as a potential location for events during the Presidency, both high-level and citizen-focused.

Similarly, the Presidency presents an opportunity to encourage engagement with the Single Market. Supporting Irish businesses in accessing the Single Market and cross-border trade opportunities should be prioritised, as well as the promotion of Irish business in other Member States. Showcasing opportunities for talent mobility, cross-border research and innovation initiatives, and other collaborative programmes should form part of planned activities to accompany the Presidency term. Clear communications and guidelines regarding EU funding and programmes would support greater uptake, particularly among SMEs and smaller organisations who may not otherwise have the resources required to participate in EU-funded programmes.

Question 4 – How can we best communicate the values and benefits of EU membership to its citizens and create a sense of ownership, amongst citizens, over Ireland's Presidency of the Council of the EU?

Please limit response to a maximum of 500 words.

Each quarter, Cork Chamber conducts an Economic Trends survey among members, assessing business confidence and economic outlook. In Q4 2025, members were also asked about potential policy priorities for Ireland's Presidency, as well as their views on the benefits of EU membership and their awareness of plans for the upcoming Presidency term. While the majority of those surveyed were aware

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that Ireland would take on the Presidency of the Council of the EU in the second half of 2026, most were not aware of related events and activities. Ensuring that there is a higher level of awareness among both businesses and the wider population of European activities and initiatives during the Presidency term should therefore be a key focus of planning for the Presidency.

Engaging with local and regional organisations to support regional events and citizen engagement initiatives, particularly youth engagement, should be explored in this regard. Alongside the high-level goals of the Presidency with regard to legislative developments and progress, there should be a focus on promoting social inclusion insofar as possible, through effective communication campaigns targeted regional, rural and disadvantaged communities who may typically feel excluded from European initiatives.

The promotion of EU-funded programmes and initiatives to organisations should also be explored, ensuring that effective communications and guidelines are supplied to those who may be interested in participating. Equipping smaller organisations and SMEs with the necessary tools to avail of EU initiatives is crucial to encourage participation and demonstrate the tangible benefits of EU membership for organisations of all sizes, in all regions.

Question 5 – Any other comments

Respondents are welcome to submit additional information alongside Submission Form. However, in such cases, respondents must provide a summary of the additional information under the 'Any other comments' question. This summary should also be limited to a maximum of 500 words.

The Enterprise Europe Network (EEN) and REEValue are examples of European Commission-funded projects that deliver tangible value to businesses across the EU. Hosted within Cork Chamber, these projects ensure that local businesses can directly benefit from European expertise.

The EEN is the world's largest business support network for SMEs, operating in over 50 countries. Through EEN, Cork Chamber members can gain access to international trade and partnering opportunities, innovation supports and expert advice on EU regulations, funding and market entry. This is particularly valuable for companies seeking to expand internationally. EEN helps de-risk growth by providing expert advice, one-to-one support and access to a vast European business ecosystem.

REEValue complements this by focusing on enhancing energy efficiency and promoting renewable energy investments for businesses in the food, drink & transport value chains. Through REEValue, Cork Chamber members are supported in reducing costs and improving environmental performance.

For Cork Chamber members, the benefit lies in having direct access to European-funded expertise through a trusted local organisation. These projects enhance competitiveness, support sustainable growth and open international doors. Enhancing awareness and uptake of such initiatives, many of which are already available in Ireland, should also form part of planned Presidency activities.