

SDGs Team,
EU and International Environment and Circular Economy Section,
Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment,
Tom Johnson House,
Haddington Road,
Dublin 4,
D04 K7X4.

15th January 2026

Re: Public Consultation on the development of Ireland's third Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) National Implementation Plan

To whom it concerns,

Cork Chamber welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the public consultation on the development of Ireland's third Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) National Implementation Plan.

Cork Chamber represents 1,200 members together employing 130,000 people throughout the city, metropolitan area and county. Our vision is to lead a transforming and ambitious Cork city and county, and our purpose is to unite, represent and support our members and community. Our advocacy is shaped by the views and priorities of our partners, and is informed by our continuous engagement with members, our Board and key stakeholders in Cork city and county.

As an SDG Ambassador, all of our policy outputs and activities are guided by our formal pledge to uphold the UN SDGs, five of which have been identified as priority areas by the Chambers Ireland network. Cork Chamber has also recently been appointed to the SDG National Stakeholder Forum Committee.

In December 2025, Cork Chamber published its first Sustainability Strategy and Report¹, setting out key sustainability targets, both environmental and social, for the period to 2028 across all of Cork Chamber's areas of work. This reflects our ongoing commitment to embedding sustainable practices into our activities, both internal and external, and supporting the wider Cork business community in achieving their own sustainability targets.

As part of this work, we are committed to collaborating with local stakeholders across Cork city and county to develop projects and initiatives that support the achievement of sustainable goals in an accessible manner and the localisation of the SDGs. With Cork's achievement of the EU Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities Mission Label in 2025, the appetite for sustainable development and decarbonisation among businesses and the wider community is clear, and

¹Cork Chamber, [Our Dedication to Sustainability: Cork Chamber's Sustainability Strategy and Report](#)

there is immense potential to advance greater partnerships for the SDGs across sectors and groups.

The importance of such collaboration is exemplified by initiatives like the Local Green Deals². Led by Cork Chamber and Cork City Council, this initiative supports organisations to partner with Cork City in developing tailored sustainability action plans, embedding sustainable action at local level.

Business and industry groups have an important role to play in driving awareness of and progress towards the SDGs as a distinct category of stakeholder in the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. We trust that the views set out in this submission will contribute constructively to the development of Ireland's Third National Implementation Plan, and support a more coherent, delivery-focused approach to advancing the SDGs. Cork Chamber remains committed to working collaboratively with Government and stakeholders at national and local level to support effective implementation and tangible progress towards Agenda 2030.

Yours sincerely,



Conor Healy

CEO

² Cork City Council, '[Local Green Deals](#)'

Public Consultation on the development of Ireland's third Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) National Implementation Plan

Consultation Questions

1. What are the key areas of progress in achieving the objectives and actions of the current NIP and how can these be built upon?

Ireland's Second SDG National Implementation Plan (NIP) 2022–2024 sets out five strategic objectives: (1) embedding the SDG framework across Government, (2) integrating the SDGs into local authorities, (3) fostering greater partnerships, (4) incorporating the Leave No One Behind principle and (5) strengthening reporting mechanisms. We have seen notable progress under these objectives both at a national and local level. Nationally, each SDG target is assigned to a lead Department and there are cross-department structures in place. The delivery of the second Voluntary National Review (VNR) in 2023 introduced stronger reporting mechanisms. At the local level, progress has been made in SDG localisation with the latest in person event focussing on this topic and held in Cork in December 2025. Such engagement events would benefit from taking place more frequently to maintain momentum and deepen understanding. Future events should also ensure a broader mix of speakers, with stronger representation beyond Government Departments and State bodies to include businesses or business representatives and community organisations delivering action locally. In particular, **greater emphasis should be placed on engaging the business community as key delivery partners, reflecting our role as one of the nine Major Groups under Agenda 2030**. While the SDG Champion & Ambassador programmes provide a valuable mechanism for business engagement, its reach remains limited and greater effort should be made to showcase and learn from best practice already taking place across many exceptional businesses locally. Partnerships and stakeholder engagement have also advanced under the current NIP (see Q10).

While the current NIP has laid an important foundation, future progress will depend on **a stronger focus on embedding the SDGs into everyday Government decision-making and delivery**. Greater alignment is needed between the NIP and Ireland's most high-profile policy and fiscal documents that receive significant political and media attention such as the annual Budget and the National Development Plan.

Equally important is **clearer and more consistent communication of this work to the general public and to the private sector, particularly SMEs**, as key delivery partners. Improving visibility and understanding of how the SDGs are being applied in practice is essential to support implementation, build ownership and ensure the SDGs are used as a practical framework for decision-making across the economy and society (so that SDG-aligned investments can be tracked and incentivised, see Q3 and Q7)

2. What are some of the key challenges in achieving the objectives and actions of the existing NIP and how can these be addressed?

Despite the progress achieved to date, significant challenges remain in delivering the objectives and actions of the current NIP. These **challenges are primarily structural and implementation-focused**, rather than a lack of political intent. In terms of governance, **the current structures while well-intentioned may be lacking in enforceability** (see Q4). Policy coherence demands

that all government departments see the SDGs as core to their mission, not an adjunct responsibility and without strong project management, the SDG effort can lose focus.

From a business perspective, particularly SMEs, are willing to engage in sustainability action but they are facing challenges in integrating the SDGs into their strategies. Research conducted by Cork Chamber in collaboration with University College Cork in 2025 showed that although 84% of the participants reported awareness of the SDGs, just 40% of them had taking initial actions to align with them and only 12% of them claimed to have fully incorporated the SDGs into their company strategy and/or operations³. Skills shortages can have a particularly significant impact on SMEs, many of whom may be time-poor and might lack the resources to integrate the SDGs fully. Ensuring that the development of green and digital skills, in particular, is supported with accessible and affordable opportunities for upskilling and reskilling.

As mentioned before, a key challenge is the limited alignment between the SDGs and Ireland's core fiscal and investment frameworks, including the national budget and the National Development Plan (NDP). **While the SDGs are referenced in other national and local policy development, they are not yet systematically embedded in budgetary decision-making or public investment prioritisation.** This limits the State's ability to track, incentivise and scale SDG-aligned outcomes. Addressing this will ensure that public expenditure is demonstrably contributing to Ireland's Agenda 2030 targets, while raising awareness on the importance of integrating the SDGs into core objectives.

Ireland also continues to face persistent deficits in key outcome areas directly linked to the five SDGs that we have formally pledged to uphold:



- **Gender Equality (SDG5)**

In the Chamber network we are advocating for sound policies and enforceable legislation that promotes gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls at all levels in the workplace⁴.

One of the most significant barriers to achieving gender equality within the workforce at present is the systemic childcare deficit in Ireland. As a result of the considerable costs associated with childcare in Ireland, as well as the persistent shortage of available childcare places, a 'participation penalty' is created, disproportionately affecting women in the workforce. Data from a recent focus group held by Cork Chamber revealed that

³ Rivera Salguero, *Integrating Sustainability in Cork SMEs* (MSc thesis, University College Cork, 2025), in collaboration with Cork Chamber.

⁴ [Cork Chamber, Building Economic Resilience report](#)

childcare challenges impede female career progression, with many women opting out of senior leadership roles or promotional opportunities due to the insecurity of care infrastructure. European peers like Sweden leverage affordable childcare to sustain female workforce participation at 85%, however the current Irish model continues to widen the gender pay gap and stifle women's professional progression, which has a significant negative impact on economic development and competitiveness. The inability to support women's workforce participation can also have a detrimental impact on companies' capacity to achieve their diversity commitments. Ireland's progress on SDG 5 is further hampered by a significant imbalance in unpaid care work and a persistent leadership ceiling that sees female CEO representation stall at below 20%⁵. Furthermore, with a gender pension gap of 36%⁶ and rising demand for domestic violence supports⁷, gender equality in Ireland is not merely an issue of workforce participation, but one of long-term economic security and physical safety.

- **Decent Work and Economic Growth (SDG8) and Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure (SDG9)** are central to Cork's economic resilience. Maintaining competitiveness while transitioning to more sustainable practices remain a challenge for businesses. Cork Chamber members consistently highlight rising costs of doing business, skills shortages⁸ and increasing regulatory complexity, they require clear guidance, predictable policy signals and targeted financial support. In parallel, ensuring inclusive access to decent work is critical to addressing skills gaps and supporting long-term economic growth. Initiatives such as Working Connections, developed in partnership with Cork ETB, and WorkAbility Cork, delivered with SECAD, demonstrate how targeted, employer-led programmes can remove barriers to employment for young people and people with disabilities, while supporting businesses to access and develop local talent. In addition to this, vulnerable micro-enterprises play a vital role in sustaining urban and rural communities but often lack the financial capacity and administrative resources to invest in decarbonisation measures. Ensuring accessible, well-communicated supports is essential to deliver a just transition that protects jobs, enterprise viability and regional economic resilience⁹.
- **Sustainable Cities and Communities (SDG11)**. Ongoing housing supply constraints, retrofit costs, infrastructure delivery delays, and car dependency and congestion continue to undermine progress towards sustainable, inclusive communities. Delivery challenges at scale highlight the need for better coordination between housing, transport, planning and climate policy, as well as faster implementation of coordinated, sustainable metropolitan transport strategies and compact growth objectives, at both local and national level. Sustainable mobility and active travel options are increasingly prioritised in policymaking and development plans, however such ambitions are often slow to translate to tangible progress on the ground in urban areas. Funding and support for sustainable construction and the retrofitting of existing buildings, particularly older

⁵ [CSO, Gender Balance in Business Survey 2025](#)

⁶ [The Case for Gender Pension Parity in Ireland, Irish Life](#)

⁷ [Annual Impact Report 2024](#)

⁸ Cork Chamber, [Economic Trends](#)

⁹ Cork Chamber, Submission to the consultation on the development of Ireland's Social Climate Plan

buildings in urban areas, must be prioritised further to deliver a more energy efficient, future-proof building stock. All of these challenges must be addressed at scale to deliver real progress towards more sustainable urban environments, particularly in regions like Cork, which has been awarded the EU Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities Mission label and is continuing to work towards a climate neutral city region.

- **Climate Action (SDG13).** According to the Minister for Climate, Energy and the Environment, Ireland is not on track to meet its 2030 emission reduction targets and is projected to miss them by approximately half. The European Commission's latest assessment indicates that, under existing measures, Ireland may achieve only a 25.4% reduction in emissions by 2030, significantly below the legally binding target of 42%, which may lead to a possible climate fine of €28bn. This underscores the urgency of accelerating implementation across all sectors. While policy frameworks such as the Carbon Budgets and sectoral ceilings are in place, delivery remains uneven. Regional initiatives, including industry-led collaboration through forums such as the Cork Offshore Renewable Energy Industry Forum (CORIF), which is coordinated by Cork Chamber, demonstrate the potential of key infrastructure delivery projects, but require clearer national alignment, resourcing and grid and planning delivery to achieve impact at scale¹⁰. Ireland has immense potential in the area of offshore renewable energy, with ambitious targets set out in key policy documents such as 'Powering Prosperity.' However, progress in the sector has been slow to date, particularly as government moves to development of a National Designated Maritime Area Plan (DMAP), which is unlikely to be adopted until late 2027. In the interim, it is critical that progress continues on the South Coast DMAP to ensure that momentum towards the achievement of impending climate targets is not lost.

Addressing these challenges will require **a shift from policy alignment towards proactive delivery-focused integration.**

3. Do you agree with the NIP's current key objectives? In your view, are there further or alternative objectives that should be included?

We support retaining the five core objectives set out in the 2022–2024 NIP. However, we believe **the Third NIP should place greater emphasis on delivery, coordination and implementation capacity** to ensure these objectives translate into timely and measurable outcomes.

In particular, consideration should be given to:

- **Strengthening integration of the SDGs across Government** through clearer timelines and delivery mechanisms, ensuring SDG-related actions are supported by robust project management and reporting structures.
- **Enhancing public awareness and private sector engagement, including targeted communication to SMEs.** A coordinated national communications approach would

¹⁰ Cork Chamber, [Submission to Carbon Budgets Consultation \(2025\)](#)

support greater understanding of the SDGs and amplify local and regional engagement, helping to mobilise businesses as an active delivery partner.

4. Are you satisfied that the Governance structures in place are sufficient to ensure increased policy coherence for sustainable development across all levels of government?

Governance structures for SDG implementation in Ireland have improved since 2018, but in our view, they are not yet fully sufficient to guarantee the level of policy coherence and integration that the SDGs demand across all levels of government. There is room to strengthen and refine these structures in the Third NIP.

While each Department has been assigned SDG targets, it is not always clear how progress against these targets is monitored or how Departments are held accountable for delivery. A stronger focus is also needed on adherence to agreed timelines, with clearer milestones and reporting mechanisms to ensure sustained momentum and transparency.

In addition, greater resourcing and visible leadership are required at the centre of Government, particularly within the SDGs team, to effectively coordinate implementation, support Departments and drive coherence across policy, budgeting and initiatives.

The recently published Accelerating Infrastructure Report and Action Plan¹¹ sets out a novel approach to accountability across Government Departments and state agencies, with each key action identified in the report assigned a clear timeline and responsible body. Such an approach encourages greater accountability among state agencies, while also enhancing transparency for external organisations, and a similar approach should be considered for the revised NIP.

5. Stakeholder Engagement - what is working well and what needs to be further developed e.g. better reaching the furthest behind first?

What's working well

The **SDG Champions and Ambassadors Programme** has been an effective mechanism for stakeholder engagement and mobilisation. Cork Chamber's designation as an SDG Champion, and subsequent transition to SDG Ambassador status, has provided valuable recognition and momentum, helping to embed the SDGs within our organisation and strengthen engagement with our members. The programme has supported peer learning, credibility and visibility, and has enabled us to actively promote SDG alignment across a wide range of business-facing activities and partnerships. More broadly, structured engagement mechanisms such as the **SDG National Stakeholder Forum** and **SDG Week** have created important platforms for dialogue and collaboration across sectors.

What needs to be further developed

The **SDG Champions and Ambassadors Programme** would benefit from enhanced support and greater public visibility, including clearer communication on participating organisations, follow-up on actions undertaken, and more consistent demonstration of impact. Additional engagement mechanisms such as sharing feedback could also support organisations that are interested in

¹¹ Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation, [‘Accelerating Infrastructure Report and Action Plan’](#)

participating but have not yet been successful, helping to maintain momentum and broaden participation.

To ensure that **those furthest behind are reached first**, improved outreach and clearer, more accessible communication on the SDGs is required. This should be complemented by stronger partnerships with community development organisations and business representatives working closely with charities and social enterprises that work directly with marginalised and vulnerable communities, enabling more inclusive and locally grounded implementation of the SDGs. However, this focus should not become the sole or dominant approach to SDG implementation, as an overly narrow emphasis risks disengaging wider society and limiting overall impact.

Also, greater emphasis should be placed **on recognising and mobilising businesses and industry as key delivery partners**, reflecting our role as one of the nine Major Groups under Agenda 2030. Businesses play a central role in economic growth and innovation, and the SDGs provide a practical framework to support enterprises in integrating sustainability into their operations and directing their impact in a structured and measurable way. Many organisations are already undertaking actions that contribute to sustainability outcomes, even if this are not yet explicitly framed in SDG terms. Clearer, more practical communication is therefore needed to help businesses understand how their existing activities already align with the SDGs, and how this alignment can be strengthened over time. By making these connections more practical and integrable, the SDGs can serve as a relatable and accessible framework to support businesses in embedding sustainability into their operations, communications and strategies.

6. How can youth voices and the voices of groups identified as being in danger of being left behind best be included?

Youth voices and the voices of groups identified as being in danger of being left behind can be better included through stronger engagement with the UN Youth Delegate and youth-led organisations and Green Schools, alongside more effective use of social media channels and collaborations between education and business organisations to demonstrate the importance of the SDGs. This approach is further strengthened by existing collaborative models such as the Cork Access Network (CAN). Cork Access Network (CAN) is a collaborative initiative under Cork UNESCO Learning City focused on widening participation in education, training, and lifelong learning (SDG 4). Bringing together educators, community partners, local government, business and trade unions, CAN reflects the strength of Cork's collective approach to tackling educational disadvantage and promoting inclusion.

7. Are there specific actions that should be considered for inclusion? If so, please specify.

In particular, the Third NIP should:

- **Strengthen integration, communication and awareness**, through clearer, more consistent all-year round communications of SDG-related actions and supports to the general public and the private sector. Improving visibility of how the SDGs are being implemented in practice is essential to support uptake, build confidence and enable businesses and communities to act as delivery partners.
- **Embed the SDGs across all stages of policy-making and budgeting**, including Departmental strategy statements, annual work programmes, performance frameworks

and the national budget and spending review process, to ensure policy coherence and measurable delivery

- **Introduce a dedicated SDG Local Implementation Fund**, to support businesses, workers and regions in the transition.

8. Are there new topics or areas which need to be considered for inclusion (e.g. AI and Digitalisation, Pact for the Future, etc.)?

Cork Chamber believes the Third NIP would benefit from the inclusion of several cross-cutting priority areas, which reflect emerging challenges and practical delivery gaps as identified through engagement with businesses and stakeholders.

- **SDG 3. Good Health and Wellbeing**
Greater emphasis should be placed on workplace wellbeing and mental health, particularly within SMEs. Initiatives such as Chambers Ireland's SME WellBusiness Charter demonstrate the value of practical, employer-led approaches to supporting employee wellbeing and should be more recognised within SDG implementation efforts in the private sector.
- **SDG 7. Affordable and Clean Energy Value Chains**
While significant progress has been made in supporting individual energy efficiency (EE) and renewable energy (RE) measures, there is a clear gap in addressing energy transition at value chain level. Through EU-funded programmes such as REEVValue, Cork Chamber has seen demand from businesses for more holistic, coordinated approaches that support sustainable supply chains.
- **SDG 12. Responsible Consumption and Production**
Integration of Circular Economy principles within business operations should be further prioritised. Engagement with businesses through our Sustainable Cork Programme highlighted growing interest in circular business models, and more targeted financial supports to implement these.

9. How can the monitoring and reporting framework be improved, particularly in preparation for Ireland's next Voluntary National Review?

Businesses and investors are increasingly interested in sustainability metrics, a transparent national SDG dashboard could even help attract responsible investment to Ireland. We also value that better data can highlight our region's needs: for example, having local data can show that specific regions like Cork might need more transport investment to meet SDG targets relative to another region, strengthening the case for balanced regional development.

10. What role can partnerships play in furthering the implementation of the SDGs in Ireland?

Partnerships play a critical role in advancing the implementation of the SDGs and are central to delivering a whole-of-society-approach to sustainable development, as reflected in SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals). As stated by the OECD in their Policy Coherence Scan of Ireland¹², complex sustainability challenges are best addressed through coordinated, cross-sector

¹² [OECD Policy Coherence Scan of Ireland, Strengthening Institutional Mechanisms for Sustainable Development](#)

collaboration, bringing together Government, local authorities, business, civil society and community organisations. Public-private partnerships provide an effective mechanism to mobilise non-state actors as active contributors to SDG implementation and local action. Successful Cork Chamber initiatives such as Local Green Deals¹³, developed in collaboration with Cork City Council, demonstrate how formal collaboration between local authorities and a wide range of business, non-for-profit and community organisations can support the delivery of measurable climate and sustainability actions within local economies. Ensuring that partnerships are underpinned by clear governance, defined roles and ongoing support would further enhance their contribution to national sustainable development objectives.

¹³ Cork City Council, [‘Local Green Deals’](#)