

NESC



Ireland at a Pivotal Moment



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Message from the Taoiseach



Reaching 50 is a significant milestone in the life of any individual or institution. It can be a time to reflect on past achievements and assess challenges to come. NESC has always provided a space in which the bedrock organisations of Irish society could think about how Ireland can prosper in a sustainable way.

Having such a forum is increasingly important as Ireland and the world face pivotal challenges whether it is demographics, digitalisation, or decarbonisation, we have big questions to answer. And these issues are arising at a time when the terrain of geo-politics is shifting.

Our starting point is a good one. The collection notes that according to a broad array of indicators, Ireland is thriving. The overall proportion of adults rating their life satisfaction as high was the largest in the EU and Ireland ranks high on many other 'well-being' indicators, which display progress beyond economic measures.

The question then is how do we build on this sound foundation to ensure that Ireland enjoys future success and prosperity?

No one has all the answers. If policy-making is defined as a 'problem-solving activity', as one contributor notes, of the great economic and social issues of our times, then the State needs to be open to solutions from all sources. Every member of society has a part to play, and their participation is essential to solve these knotty issues. The involvement of the kinds of groups deliberating through NESC is one of the ways in which this process of broad co-operation and problem-solving can unfold.

Articulating this narrative can help government by setting out a long-term vision which is considered and legitimate but also by highlighting where implementation efforts need to be directed.

NESC and its member organisations have, throughout its history, deliberated on how Ireland collectively can meet the challenges of the moment and the future. This has often been done by all accepting that no single organisation has a monopoly on truth. This unique approach to reframing issues has demonstrated time and again that accommodating a wide range of views can lead to better outcomes for all.

I commend this pragmatic way of working and am sure it will help our country navigate its way successfully into the future.

I wish to congratulate NESC on its 50th anniversary and look forward to receiving many more NESC reports into the future.

Simon Harris T.D.
Taoiseach



Council Foreword

NESC@50: Ireland at a Pivotal Moment paints a positive picture of Ireland in late 2023 across a range of measures. Life expectancy is 83 years of age, which is above the OECD average of 81 years. The proportion of adults who rate overall life satisfaction as high is among the best in the EU. Household net income was the fourth highest in the region in 2022. Within the knowledge, skills and innovation dimension, Ireland figures strongly, with reading and maths skills for 15-year-olds above the OECD average, and the lifelong learning rate now at the EU average. Ireland is relatively safe, with, for example, a murder rate below the European average. The employment rate and net earnings are both increasing and are above the EU average. Satisfaction with time use is also relatively high in Ireland, at joint second alongside Denmark. The share of people who are satisfied with the way that democracy works is among the highest in the EU and well above the average of 58 per cent.

However, the research, and the views of many participants at the November conference, also show the need to improve. There are many households which continue to have great difficulty making ends meet. There remains too large a cohort of children who experience poverty and deprivation. There are specific challenges in accessing services and supports in some areas (disability, mental health and health services) as well as concerns in respect of housing and homelessness. There are infrastructural deficits – particularly in housing but also transport. Ireland declared both a climate and biodiversity emergency in 2019. Per capita greenhouse-gas emissions remain too high; there is a biodiversity crisis across a range of species and habitats; and Ireland is projected to exceed its climate targets. These challenges affect everyone but are felt most acutely by specific groups within society.

Chapter 3 highlights how over the five decades of its existence NESC has helped shape economic, social and environmental policy, in particular at key moments of crisis such as in the 1980s and during the Great Financial Crisis. But times are changing, and the pace of change continues to accelerate.

Citizens and policymakers are operating in an unprecedented era of uncertainty, including in relation to the veracity and trustworthiness of so much information. There is relentless pressure to respond to the issues of 'today' with a focus on policy and delivery responses which are most immediate. Public expectations are higher than ever before as to what Government can and should deliver. The shorter-term pressures are often valid, but they can detract and distract from the equally valid project of thinking carefully about medium- and long-term challenges or the consequences of taking short-term actions which are not aligned with the longer-term objectives or ambition.

There are more and more voices in the public policy debate often focusing on policy concerns specific to one sector or group. While this is enriching in many ways, it can be increasingly difficult to distil key issues and have deeper debates about challenges, potential trade-offs and solutions which can build consensus around choices and priorities. It is therefore critical to nurture spaces in which people can step back and consider, from a variety of perspectives, options, alternatives and their consequences.

This requires honest, sometimes difficult discussion about the challenges and opportunities facing Ireland in the longer term and how to begin embracing them over the medium and shorter term.

Having such a forum can help communicate a fair and inclusive society for all our citizens, current and future.

NESC is such a space. As previous members highlight, in Chapter 4, it is a place where there is long-term thinking, where strategising and shared understandings are crafted. It is a space where we can help Government plan for the longer term, face risks and prepare for challenges wherever they may originate. It is a place where the range of feasible and legitimate options can be expanded and challenged, and where dialogue and consensus-building, on issues of common interest, is underpinned by quality research.

Ireland at A Pivotal Moment: Five NESC Commitments

The Council believes that Ireland is at a pivotal moment in which we need more safe and open spaces that can interrogate and develop our capacity as a society to listen, and to listen to a wider range of people, and plan for a better, more sustainable future.

For its part, the Council will seek to improve its capacity to listen and shape better policy and outcomes for citizens. To do so, it makes five commitments:

- **FIRST**, the Council will continue, through its established processes of social dialogue, to reflect, and work, on how Ireland can navigate forward, particularly in the face of deep forces for change. These include the need to live within planetary boundaries, the changing trajectories of demography and migration, the promise and the challenge of artificial intelligence (AI) and profound geopolitical tensions.

Regarding the last issue, NESC has long contended that European integration is not the antithesis to the nation state and Ireland's involvement in the European Union has helped it to obtain a level of prosperity that would have been beyond the ken of previous generations. This collaborative mindset is also evident in our relationship with Northern Ireland and the UK, epitomised now in the work, supported by NESC, on the Shared Island Initiative. The November conference also brought to the fore opportunities and relationships with more distant continents and countries. So, while Ireland faces profound challenges, we should not forget that solutions often will not be found in isolation. They will emerge from work within the European Union, from engagement with partners on and across these islands, and from co-operation with other nations.

NESC will over the coming months continue to reflect on the nature and importance of an overarching vision and sense of shared direction of travel. The National Wellbeing Framework provides an important basis for a national dialogue about vision and progress which extends beyond economic measures like GDP to capture how well Ireland, in all its facets, is faring. The Wellbeing Seminar hosted by the Department of the Taoiseach, in November 2023, was an opportunity for national stakeholders and experts to discuss the framework. The Council would welcome, and support, efforts by Government to extend and deepen this conversation and bring forward similar types of discussions at regional and local levels, and among specific cohorts such as ethnic groups, religious and faith communities and young people. Given parallel work in Northern Ireland, the diffusion of work on well-being could have a strong Shared Island dimension.

The Council will also consider how, though its working methods and membership, it can engage with more diverse voices, including younger people, recognising that methods of communication and dissemination have changed radically since NESC's founding.

- **SECOND**, the Council will help reframe national discussion of demography and migration by providing a detailed factual account of both issues and looking at how both can be instrumental in helping reduce, rather than magnify, many existing pressures and capacity constraints in Ireland.

The Council believes that there is a growing tendency to view demographic change, in particular the growing proportion of older people in our society, and migration (inward and outward) in a negative way.

The Council considers this view to be short-sighted. It is outdated as regards older people's capacity to participate and to live full, independent lives and misunderstands the reality of the role of migration in the modern world. It misses the opportunities and positive ways that both an ageing population and migration can make our society more productive and resilient and, if managed well, can promote social cohesion.

- **THIRD**, in line with the Developmental Welfare State thinking, the Council believes that we cannot rely on tax and welfare reforms alone to deliver equality of opportunity. The Council will deepen its focus on disconnects between Government's efforts to 'do the right thing' and the lived experience, or what is delivered.

This will entail further work, in social and environmental policy, on what might be termed 'how-to design to deliver'. This would focus on how

services can be designed such that professional and organisational boundaries are respected while also ensuring that there is a sufficient mandate to co-operate and collaborate to deliver services, especially more complex services.

This NESC work would complement ongoing work, in the Civil Service, which is seeking to redefine the policymaking process, focused on three interdependent areas that shape policy development – evidence, implementation and legitimacy.¹ It would also support work in the Civil and Public Service focused on user-centricity, values co-creation and consultation, and testing solutions based on evidence.²

Engaging with people in this way is necessary in order to bring out the extensive behavioural change required in areas such as climate action which require a transformation beyond the capacity of traditional public policy tools of sticks and carrots.

- **FOURTH**, the Council will explore how building up our climate and biodiversity resilience can be a means by which Ireland shows leadership to the world, where on foot of our ambitious laws and statutory commitments, Ireland can demonstrate ‘how-to’ bring about meaningful change in how we support and protect our key natural assets, on land and at sea, and reduce our environmental footprint.

NESC will emphasise and showcase how to build a consensus around achieving the transition to a decarbonised economy and society via widespread social and behavioural change.

- **FIFTH**, the Council will examine issues linked to ongoing digitalisation, including generative AI. Issues thrown up include the appropriate technological and regulatory landscape, the impact of AI on work and services, its adoption and diffusion across key public and private sector activities, and cybersecurity.

The Council believes that there is an enormous opportunity for Ireland to use AI and other digital technologies and scientific breakthroughs to help transform how we work, live and engage. Within Ireland there is an incredible technological base that can be deployed much more pro-actively across cities, regions, households, economic sectors and the public service in a way that allows us leapfrog and bring about transformative change. As technology is only a tool, it requires human agency to use it to instigate change. So there needs to be intensive efforts to encourage people to make the best use of developing digital technology.

¹ Strengthening Policy Development in the Public Sector in Ireland, OECD, 2023.

² Design Principles and Practice, for more details see: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/1e3e2-action/>



Conclusion: Towards a Positive Pathway Forward

The Council is acutely aware of the challenges and the potential for social cohesion to be undermined further, whether because of outside or structural forces for change, a lack of capacity to deliver to people what they want, and/or a lack of planning and foresight.

Taken together, the Council believes that its work around these five commitments can form the basis for a positive pathway forward that helps us, as a society, to navigate at times of high uncertainty.

For its part, the Council is committed, as outlined above, to taking forward a number of critical issues.

The Council hopes that other policy actors will find in the NESC@50 Conference proceedings, material that will help them to see Ireland, its issues and its position in the world in a fresh light. It is hoped that such perspectives will be a stimulus to act and to think in new ways about how Ireland can be resilient, act with agency, in an increasingly fractured world, and collectively shape a better future for everyone, in Ireland and elsewhere.

NESC is uniquely positioned to wrestle with these issues, use social dialogue to build broad platforms of consensus and engage the social dialogue network to deepen debates and involve more voices at every level in society.



Appreciation

The conference in November 2023 depended upon the expert input of almost 40 people and an engaged audience of over 200 people. The Chairs for each session deserve special mention for the ways in which the structured and energised conversations about Ireland and its future:

- **Dr Mark Henry**
Session One: Thriving Ireland: Foundational Elements
- **Professor Sara Burke**
Session Two: A Thriving Ireland: Resilient, Inclusive & Protective
- **Dr Matt Crowe**
Thriving Ireland: Forward and Outward Looking
- **Professor Aoibhinn Ní Shuilleabhain**
Thriving Ireland: Reflections & Next Steps

We are also grateful to the current Council for supporting the NESC@50 programme and for its work in understanding how, what seemed like a very powerful dialogue in November, could be translated into ambitious areas of action.

We are committed to pursuing these commitments outlined by the Council in its foreword to this special NESC publication and look forward to engaging with policy makers, stakeholders and citizens to find answers and practical and innovative ways forward.

Finally, this conference would not have been possible without the support of a huge number of people. We are grateful to colleagues in Department of the Taoiseach, in particular Dr Barry Vaughan; our colleagues in NESC Corporate Affairs, Edna Jordan, Paula Hennelly, Steven Hanrahan, Gaye Malone, Tracy Curran, Sheila Clarke and Ruth McCarthy; and NESC analysts Helen Johnston, Niamh Garvey, Jeanne Moore, Noel Cahill, David Hallinan, Gemma O'Reilly, Damian Thomas, Anne-Marie McGauran and Dáithí Downey (on secondment from DCC).

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Looking Back to Look Forward

The four chapters in this section look at what NESC has achieved over its 50 year history, beginning with a view of its role and impact from within the Irish and European policy system. Some of the key reports in each decade are highlighted, as are the views of a number of former NESC members.

Chapter 1: NESC Shaping Policy for 50 Years

Chapter 2: NESC@50, EU@50

Chapter 3: What has NESC Achieved over 50 Years

Chapter 4: Looking Back Through the Eyes of Previous Members

Chapter 1

NESC Shaping Policy for 50 Years

NESC was established to advise the Taoiseach on strategic economic, social and environmental policy issues. Over its lifetime, it has provided guidance to 11 Taoisigh, beginning with Liam Cosgrave.

To mark its 50th anniversary, the then Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, was asked to offer some reflections on the role and impact of NESC at the NESC@50 conference in November 2023.

Mr Varadkar served as Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (2011–2014), Minister for Health (2014–2016) and Minister for Social Protection (2016–2017). He became Taoiseach for the second time on 17 December 2022 until 20 March 2024.

As the most recent of 11 Taoisigh that the National Economic and Social Council has advised over its long-standing service, I'd like to reflect on its role over the past 50 years.

When NESC was established in 1973, Ireland was facing deep economic and social challenges. Overcoming these challenges required greater research than what we had available at the time, as well as an improved dialogue between government and civil society.

Taoiseach Liam Cosgrave, a man I greatly admire for his quiet, understated determination, courage and fortitude, recognised this need and established NESC to fill that void.

NESC was, and still is, an opportunity for policymakers and representatives of wider society to 'stand back' and consider the most pertinent challenges facing the country in the round and to problem-solve together. In announcing its establishment, the Minister for Finance, Richie Ryan, stated its task as 'advising the Government on the development of the national economy and the achievement of social justice'. He went on to say that the Council would be representative of the 'three great economic interests,

“The country’s population now stands at well over 5 million people, the average life expectancy is 83 and we have full employment, with an economy spread over a diverse range of sectors.”

the employers, organised workers, and farmers’ – what later became known as pillars, unfortunately!

Much has changed since then, not least the expansion of the number of pillars to include the community, voluntary and environmental sectors.

In 1973, the population stood at 3 million people, the average life expectancy was 71, and a quarter of the workforce was engaged in agriculture. Ireland was about to embark on a new journey in its history as it joined the European Economic Community (EEC).

Today, we see the results of that decision and the incredible shift it brought about in our economy and society. The country’s population now stands at well over 5 million people, the average life expectancy is 83 and we have full employment, with an economy spread over a diverse range of sectors.

While we have much to do, the stark differences between the Ireland of 1973 and the Ireland of 2023 highlight how Ireland has ‘thrived’ over the last 50 years. The first NESC report details a net gain of 6,000 jobs in 1973. Its third report a year later documented a



worsening economic situation, with consumer prices rising by 18 per cent year-on-year. Compare that to today, with 88,000 jobs created in the last year alone and a €14bn budgetary package to help with the cost of living amid easing inflation.

Recalling our history is useful not only in helping to appreciate the present, but also in understanding that precarious circumstances can be turned around if diagnosed correctly and appropriate action is undertaken. The approach of NESC, where research and meaningful dialogue are intertwined, has been extremely effective in helping problem-solve complex policy issues. It has allowed for challenges to be reframed, a common understanding of issues to be shared among stakeholders, and alternative policy solutions to be considered. The importance of this approach is as great today as it was in 1973 and, if anything, the need for NESC's unique contribution to the policy landscape has

only grown, as misinformation and polarisation have become more prevalent.

We live in an age where information is abundant, but wisdom is scarce. We are inundated with misinformation, increasingly divisive politics and ever-polarising opinions. Objective analysis and evidence-informed policymaking are essential.

While time constraints prevent me from listing them all, I would like to mention a few major reports that have significantly contributed to our economic, social and environmental policy.

In 1982, NESC undertook the first in-depth assessment of Ireland's enterprise policy. The report highlighted that Ireland was not fully harnessing the potential of foreign direct investment and that domestic Irish enterprises were not receiving adequate assistance.





NESC's report advised the government to introduce a more targeted approach to attracting foreign direct investment and shift the focus towards robust export-orientated businesses. The wisdom of this policy advice is evident across Ireland today.

The economic research, dialogue and advice provided by NESC proved invaluable for subsequent initiatives, including the 1984 White Paper on Industrial Policy and the Industrial Development Act or IDA Act of 1986. Outside of the economic sphere, one of NESC's most important contributions is its ability to merge the economic, social and environmental aspects of policy.

This holistic approach to policy advice is evident in its 2005 The Developmental Welfare State (DWS) report, one of the Council's most influential publications. The DWS report stands out as an exemplar of NESC's unique approach, emphasising the interconnectedness of economic and social policies with positive economic performance bolstering effective social policy and vice versa.

NESC acknowledged that Ireland's social welfare system was primarily focused on income support and advocated for a profound enhancement of services that would include education, childcare and employment services, among others.

This vision laid the groundwork for Ireland's welfare state that we know today. As a former Minister for Social Protection, I had the privilege of witnessing the lasting impact of NESC's recommendations on the social fabric of our country.

Another aspect of NESC's work is its ability to take on the country's most challenging issues and reframe them. A recent example of this is the work on a 'Just Transition' in agriculture. This is a particularly challenging area, at the intersection of environmental sustainability and economic viability, and therefore it was a perfect issue to seek the Council's advice on.

“As a former Minister for Social Protection, I had the privilege of witnessing the lasting impact of NESC’s recommendations on the social fabric of our country.”

Over 18 months, NESC engaged in extensive research and dialogue with a diverse array of stakeholders, including farmers and rural communities. The goal was to explore how Ireland could reduce emissions, meet environmental targets, and simultaneously ensure social inclusivity and economic viability in the agriculture and land-use sector. The government is determined that any transition away from fossil fuels and high emissions must be fair, and we must protect the most vulnerable and secure the livelihoods of our rural communities.

The resulting recommendations outlined how the transition could be opportunities-driven, emphasising the necessity of co-ordinated action, the role of inclusive social dialogue and the importance of equitable sharing to mitigate transition costs.

Today’s conference aligns with NESC’s ambitious vision for Ireland – an Ireland with a sustainable and thriving net-zero economy, environment and society. As part of NESC’s 50th anniversary, the Secretariat recently published a report asking, *Is Ireland Thriving?* Answers from International Assessments with reference to nine well-known systems of measurement. It concluded that:

“Ireland today is thriving, inclusive, and protective in many aspects, with some obvious capacity and distributional challenges; but also that more must be done on environmental sustainability and for the Ireland of tomorrow, to be more forward looking.”

I think that’s a fair assessment. As promised in the Programme for Government, we are committed to making use of the Wellbeing Framework as we improve the quality of life for our citizens. In that regard, we are holding a dedicated Wellbeing Seminar next Monday to see what more we can do to improve take-up and refine the Wellbeing Framework. The work of the new Child Poverty and Wellbeing Unit in my Department will also make a difference, especially for children and their families.

So, allow me to commend NESC for its unwavering dedication over the past 50 years. Its work has shaped Irish policy for decades and helped make Ireland the thriving state we live in today. Thank you for all your work and may the next 50 years of NESC be as transformative as the last.

Chapter 2

NESC@50, EU@50

The establishment of NESC in 1973 coincided with Ireland's accession to the European Union (EU). The Council invited two speakers to provide a reflection on the EU as it has framed and set the agenda for NESC and Ireland over the last five decades.

First, Mairead McGuinness, European Commissioner for Financial Services, Financial Stability and Capital Markets Union. During her time in the European Parliament, Ms McGuinness sat on a range of committees, covering agriculture, environment, public health, budgets, petitions and constitutional affairs. Her legislative work included leading for the EPP Group on the European Climate Law, the revision of medical-devices legislation and CAP reform post-2013.

Second, Noelle O'Connell of European Movement Ireland (EMI), CEO of EM Ireland and Vice President of EM International which encompasses European Movement councils in 34 countries. In addition, in 2022, Noelle was selected as one of the Taoiseach's independent nominees to serve in the National Economic and Social Council.

Mairead McGuinness

NESC@50 is a significant event, and it's important that we mark this occasion. It coincides with Ireland's 50 years of membership of the EU.

Looking at the last 50 years, Ireland has changed absolutely in many different ways. Technology, climate change and geopolitical uncertainties are just some of the more recent challenges – ones that NESC addresses in its work to support a thriving Ireland. Ireland's future will be determined by all of these factors and how they impact the global economy and global politics. Our policy choices will require careful consideration to maintain stability.

Ireland's accession to the EEC took place on 1 January 1973, joining with Denmark and the United Kingdom. We've had an extraordinary modernisation of social norms and our economy has evolved and grown significantly. The lifting of the marriage bar, divorce, access to contraception and later, legalising same-sex marriage were significant social developments, influenced by being part of the EU.

Accession also brought cultural changes around how employers, employees and policymakers interact. The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) provides a space for dialogue between policymakers, employers and trade unions. There is a parallel here with NESC, which brings these actors together at the national level.



In 1989, NESC issued a significant report on Ireland's membership of the European Community. It looked at the positive impact of membership and called for stronger measures on integration. That was a key contribution as Europe prepared for the launch of the single market in 1993, 30 years ago.

The single market cemented the principle that goods, services, capital and people should be free to move across the EU. NESC's report emphasised the social dimension of the single market, that EU citizens should be able to feel its benefits. We now enjoy very tangible benefits of the single market: the abolition of roaming charges, air passenger rights and the European Health Insurance Card, to name just a few.

Looking to the present, Ireland is a very modern economy with strong growth, part of the EU and the single market. The efforts of NESC in bringing us to this place should be acknowledged.

But of course, there are challenges. NESC's recent report outlined five main factors affecting Ireland and indeed the EU: geopolitical change, the rising cost of living, maintaining competitiveness, the climate and biodiversity emergencies, and demographic shifts.

The future presents a mixed picture – full of challenges, but also opportunities. It requires us to continue to get the policy mix right, to build this better and thriving future. NESC, and all the people and organisations who contribute to NESC, have a key role to play to help create these policies for the future.

The opportunity of confronting climate change and building a greener and more sustainable future is one we must grasp. We need to really value nature and biodiversity. But in these policy areas there is huge polarisation of the debate, leading to regrettable stagnation.

The European Green Deal is the EU's plan to reach climate neutrality by 2050. As we move towards implementation, many citizens and businesses become more fearful or hesitant. We need to have stronger and deeper conversations. I've learned from my work in Europe to start early, keep up the pressure and stay in the room. It is vital to have more discussion about how we proceed.

We also want to support innovation and growth because it is compatible with addressing those challenges on climate and sustainability. That includes strengthening

supply chains and supporting a skilled workforce for net-zero industries in the EU. We can, here in Europe, build solar panels, electric cars and wind turbines. It's not happening at the scale required, but it's an opportunity that we can grasp.

We want the European economy to be competitive at a global level and here, we are looking at reducing the administrative burden on EU companies.

The single market is one of the more unique creations of the EU, but we haven't completed the single market in capital. If we harness the full potential of the single market, we can make enormous progress, so there is good work yet to be done.

Overall, Ireland today is thriving in so many respects. But more must be done on environmental sustainability for the Ireland of tomorrow to continue to thrive. Therefore, more has to be done around dialogue, discussion and debate for us to move forward together as a society. NESC has an important role in framing the debate with solid information and reports.

And NESC has delivered for over 50 years across all policy areas. The world is very different today compared to 50 years ago, more complex and interconnected, yet also fragmented. If we could address deepening polarisation across all policy areas, our work would be done. So, our work will never be done, which is why we want NESC to thrive for at least another 50 years.

“NESC's recent report outlined five main factors affecting Ireland and indeed the EU: geopolitical change, the rising cost of living, maintaining competitiveness, the climate and biodiversity emergencies, and demographic shifts.”

Chapter 3



What has NESC Achieved over 50 Years

Since its inception, NESC has published 164 reports. Its first report in 1973 focused on economic performance and prospects, and its most recent in 2024 on the development and use of natural-capital accounts. This chapter highlights work in each of the past five decades, helping illustrate the longevity of the Council and its adaptability over time.

In the policy world, there are few, if any, instances of a straight, unbroken line of causation between a piece of policy advice and a particular outcome. The policy landscape is crowded and the route to impact is long and circuitous.

However, this chapter demonstrates the Council's impact, for example, in redefining national enterprise policy in the 1980s, underpinning economic and societal transformation in the 1990s, reshaping welfare policy in the 2000s, arguing for a focus on sustainable housing and communities in the 2010s, and embedding sustainable development, wellbeing and a just transition in the 2020s.

The content also helps illustrate how NESC's approach has evolved over the years and is increasingly focused on co-creating solutions to address complex policy problems, accepting uncertainty as a starting point for medium-term policy challenges.

1970s

Report on Economy in 1973 and the Prospects for 1974 (1974)

As the first chair of NESC, Professor Loudon Ryan steered the Economic Policy Committee. Very early in its term, the Committee agreed the *Report on Economy in 1973 and the Prospects for 1974*, which was cleared by the Council shortly thereafter and published on 1 April 1974.

Noteworthy aspects of the report include consideration of external shocks, such as the 1973 oil crisis, guidance on fostering investment and output, endorsement of modest expansionary stimulus measures, the rationale behind opposing restrictive financial policies, the value and constraints of forecasting, and the imperative to address persistent data deficiencies.³

Report on Housing Subsidies (1976)

Housing policy has remained a central focus of the Council's work, both historically and in the present day. The publication of the *Report on Housing Subsidies* soon after NESC's inception serves as a prime example of this dedication and focus.

Significantly, this report opens with a reaffirmation of NESC's commitment to placing fairness at the core of social policy. It goes on to underscore the pivotal and extensive role that housing plays in Irish society's overall wellbeing.

These fundamental principles persist in the Council's current analysis, as demonstrated in its recent report examining the economy during a period of upheaval five decades later, *Understanding the Irish Economy in a Time of Turbulence* (NESC, 2023b).

1980s

A Review of Industrial Policy (1982)

The first in-depth assessment of Ireland's enterprise policy was undertaken by NESC and published in 1982. This research is regarded as instrumental in shaping policy for Ireland's subsequent economic development.

The report, *A Review of Industrial Policy*, is often referred to simply as 'the Telesis report', as it was developed with the Telesis consultancy group.

The Council's findings revealed that Ireland was not fully harnessing the potential of FDI, and that the prevailing strategies for nurturing domestic enterprises were insufficient.

Consequently, NESC recommended a more targeted approach to attracting FDI, accompanied by a shift in focus towards the cultivation of robust indigenous export-oriented and sub-supply businesses.

The report served as an influential touchstone for subsequent initiatives, including the 1984 White Paper on Industrial Policy, the Industrial Development Act of 1986 and, ultimately, Ireland's new framework for bolstering enterprise support.

³ Tom Ferris, as Secretary to the Economic Policy Committee, drafted this first NESC report on the Irish economy. Tom was a member of the small Secretariat, a former AO in the Department of Finance, an employee in B&I Shipping Line, and an economics teacher in the old College of Commerce in Rathmines. There were two other Committees, which were Social Policy (Chaired by Professor Helen Burke and Catherine Earley (née Keehan) as Secretary) and Regional Policy (Chaired by Professor Norman Gibson and Gerry Hughes as Secretary). Mr Ferris provided a short reflection on those early years in NESC, which is published on the Council's website.

Strategy for Development 1986–1990 (1987)

During one of the most challenging periods in Ireland's economic history, NESC formulated its **Strategy for Development 1986–1990**. In this report, NESC boldly asserted that persisting with existing policies was an unsustainable path, and called upon society, markets and individuals to embrace a fresh overarching strategy. This report has been characterised as distinctive for providing a comprehensive national blueprint, encompassing macroeconomic, enterprise, taxation and social policies. The report emphasised that a small trading economy could not thrive amid divisive and competing interests. It laid the foundation on which government and social partners engaged in negotiations, leading to the Programme for National Recovery.

NESC's Strategy for Development thus underpinned the first of seven agreements that facilitated Ireland's transformation, starting in the 1990s.

Ireland in the European Community: Performance, Prospects and Strategy (1989)

The then Taoiseach, Charles Haughey, asked NESC to prepare a report prior to the finalisation of the European Single Market. During this period, Ireland's stance on European integration was marked by a lack of consensus.

The Council's report, ***Ireland in the European Community: Performance, Prospects and Strategy***, examined the challenges and opportunities associated with the completion of the internal market. It contended that the advantages of market finalisation were likely to be unevenly distributed.

Nevertheless, NESC strongly endorsed Ireland's continued involvement in the European Community, asserting that 'the Council is resolutely convinced that

Ireland's destiny is intricately linked to full participation in the European Community'.

The report underwent deliberation in the Oireachtas, where, in the Seanad, the then Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach, Máire Geoghegan-Quinn, affirmed that the government considered NESC's efforts to be 'one of the most noteworthy contributions from Ireland to the ongoing European discourse concerning the future trajectory and orientation of further advancements in the Community's integration'.

1990s

New Approaches to Rural Development (1994)

This NESC research on ***New Approaches to Rural Development*** was carried out in the context of mounting pressures on the agricultural sector and a sustained, long-term decline in agricultural employment. Both of these factors underscored the need to explore alternative agricultural ventures and to foster non-agricultural employment opportunities in rural areas.

The Council robustly endorsed the role of region-specific partnerships in the realm of rural development, recognising their potential to provide multiple benefits. It recommended cultivating the capacity of both local organisations and national entities to actively engage and participate effectively in these area-based partnerships.

The research also highlighted that many issues in rural development policy could not be adequately addressed without reference to desirable and feasible national settlement patterns. It advocated for a holistic approach: analysis of settlement patterns, work on rural

development policy and clarification of policy goals.

Strategy into the 21st Century (1996)

Strategy into the 21st Century was an influential strategic report that played a foundational role in guiding Ireland's economic and social development during the early 2000s. In keeping with NESC's established approach, it adopted a long-term perspective in addressing the main challenges, reflecting on the period from 1960 onwards while projecting forward into the 21st century. The analysis articulated a vision for consensus-building and identified pivotal drivers of change. It highlighted that the foremost economic challenges revolved around effectively managing growth and establishing the groundwork for future competitiveness.

In parallel, the report recognised substantial social challenges, including the need to reduce unemployment and initiate a sustained reversal in levels of inequality. The report also offered insights into Irish policy within a global context.

This Council report played a crucial role in shaping the social partnership agreement, Partnership 2000 for Inclusion, Employment and Competitiveness (1997–2000), as well as informing the National Anti-Poverty Strategy (1997).

2000s

Housing in Ireland: Performance and Policy (2004)

The comprehensive *Housing in Ireland: Performance and Policy* report underscored the importance of adopting a systematic approach to examining housing performance and policy in the country. During a period of robust economic expansion and rising housing costs, this pivotal NESC study highlighted vulnerabilities

in Ireland's housing system, particularly concerning disparities in housing opportunities and the sustainability of emerging settlement patterns.

The report pinpointed the main policy challenges, emphasising that it was imperative to establish high-quality, sustainable neighbourhoods and to provide more effective assistance to households struggling with housing affordability.

Crucially, the Council argued that effectively addressing these challenges demanded a sustained, long-term commitment to active land management, urban planning, architectural design, public service provision and infrastructure investment, as opposed to relying solely on tax mechanisms to influence land and housing supply or demand. These systemic challenges and the proposed policy responses remain pertinent two decades on.

The Developmental Welfare State (2005)

The Developmental Welfare State (DWS) report stands out as one of NESC's most influential publications, in that it strongly shaped the approaches to social protection and the provision of social services in Ireland. At its core, the report posits that economic and social policies are interconnected, with positive economic performance supporting effective social policy, and vice versa.

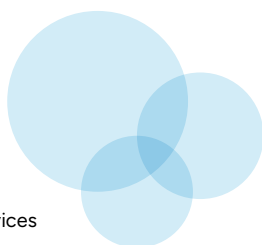
Acknowledging that Ireland's social welfare system was primarily focused on income support, the DWS report advocated for a profound enhancement of services spanning education, healthcare, childcare, eldercare, housing, transportation and employment services.

It stressed the importance of augmenting services and income support with proactive measures, exemplified by innovative approaches such as community and group projects that address emerging societal needs.

These three interwoven domains – services, income support and proactive measures – constitute the foundational framework of Ireland’s welfare state.

Services

- Education
- Health
- Childcare
- Eldercare
- Housing
- Transport
- Employment Services



Income Supports

- Progressive Child Income Supports
- Working Age Transfers for Participation
- Minimum Pension Guarantee
- Capped Tax Expenditure

Activist Measures

- Novel/Contestatory Approaches
- Particular Community/Group Projects
- Emerging New Needs
- Outcome Focussed
- Evaluation and Mainstreaming

Ireland’s Five-Part Crisis: An Integrated National Response (2009)

This Council report on *Ireland’s Five-Part Crisis: An Integrated National Response* focused on the country’s response to the financial crisis and assisted the government in developing an integrated response. NESC provided an accurate characterisation of the position in which Ireland found itself in 2009, facing a crisis with five dimensions tightly tied up with each other: a banking crisis, a public finance crisis, an economic crisis, a social crisis and a reputational crisis. It outlined a persuasive set of arguments that built the widest possible shared understanding of the nature of the crisis. Crucially, the report identified how Ireland might move from partial and sequential reactions to fast-moving events, towards an integrated national response.

2010s

Wind Energy in Ireland: Building Community Engagement and Social Support (2014)

NESC’s report on *Wind Energy in Ireland: Building Community Engagement and Social Support* explored how to enhance societal backing for the transformation of Ireland’s energy landscape, with a specific focus on wind energy. Drawing insights from European practices, the Council pinpointed the essential elements crucial to fostering societal support for national policy initiatives. Both the report and its accompanying materials were welcomed by government and led to extensive policy discussions on the issue.

This work sought to develop a process that could connect communities with wind energy opportunities and set out a process of engagement supported by expert intermediaries to co-develop local solutions. Social acceptance was a key focus, and remains an issue of current and future relevance as Ireland pursues land-use changes such as increasing afforestation and expanding renewable energy development.

During this period, public consultations were underway for the Energy Green Paper, and this NESC report was widely regarded as a valuable resource. The subsequent Energy White Paper, Ireland’s Transition to a Low Carbon Energy Future (2015), duly acknowledged the contributions of NESC.

This recognition translated into noteworthy policy advancements, including potential avenues for citizen participation in the Renewable Electricity Support Scheme and the introduction of a community dividend. The report has had a substantial and lasting positive influence on the evolution of energy policy in Ireland, as

well as on community engagement and involvement in this critical area.

Social Housing at the Crossroads: Possibilities for Investment, Provision and Cost Rental (2014)

Building on previous NESC housing research, this report on *Social Housing at the Crossroads: Possibilities for Investment, Provision and Cost Rental* highlighted substantial disparities in the functionality of rental systems, depending on whether they operated on a 'profit rental' or 'cost rental' basis. It contended that European countries with stable, affordable and socially inclusive housing systems benefited from a prevalent model characterised by modest support for the substantial provision of secure rental accommodation – primarily managed by non-profit entities, with the rental fees structured to cover costs rather than being driven solely by market forces.

This work by NESC initiated extensive dialogue and examination about the potential role of cost-rental housing arrangements in Ireland.

Notably, Dublin City Council hosted an exhibition on the 'Vienna Housing Model' in 2019, further fuelling these discussions. Subsequently, cost rental was officially adopted as government policy and was legislated for through the Affordable Housing Act of 2021.

Urban Development Land, Housing and Infrastructure: Fixing Ireland's Broken System (2018)

The key message from the report on *Urban Development Land, Housing and Infrastructure: Fixing Ireland's Broken System* was that the state must drive the provision of housing and urban development. NESC stated that the Irish housing system is speculative, volatile and expensive, and that the urban land system is dysfunctional. Land is

not available in appropriate locations at a cost that will allow affordable housing to be provided.

The Council recommended, first, that a public institution be established with a strong developmental mandate, political authorisation and executive capacity to drive housing supply and sustainable urban development. The Land Development Agency was subsequently established.

Second, NESC contended that housing affordability must be built into the supply of housing, suggesting that cost rental is the most effective and fiscally sustainable way of achieving permanent affordability. The cost-rental model was later adopted in Ireland's housing strategy. The report contains many other lines of action to be considered by policymakers.

Transport-Orientated Development: Assessing the Opportunity for Ireland (2019)

The report on *Transport-Orientated Development: Assessing the Opportunity for Ireland* vividly demonstrates the Council's strategy of integrating economic, social and environmental factors, while drawing inspiration from international best practice. By examining relevant literature, consulting widely and studying the urban experiences of cities in France, Sweden and Germany, NESC presented the policy system with the essential components needed to foster a more sustainable model of urban development. This Council analysis has been instrumental in shaping national policy and, so far, has spurred the adoption of more sustainable urban development plans in Dublin, Cork, Limerick and Galway.

2020s

Addressing Employment Vulnerability as Part of a Just Transition in Ireland (2020)

The government tasked NESC with identifying measures to address the vulnerability faced by workers, businesses and industries as they navigated the transition to a future characterised by lower carbon emissions and increased digitalisation and automation.

The outcome was a report that President Michael D. Higgins hailed as a seminal and influential document, bearing importance for the economy and society comparable to T.K. Whitaker's 1958 report on economic expansion.

In *Addressing Employment Vulnerability as Part of a Just Transition in Ireland*, the Council seized the opportunity to articulate its vision for Ireland – an Ireland that aspires to be a resilient, sustainable and thriving net-zero economy and society, achieved through innovation and collective preparedness. NESC envisions an Ireland where the state actively participates in fostering mission-oriented actions to cultivate a high-quality job market and proactively addresses employment vulnerability as an integral part of a fair and equitable transition for all.

The Future of the Irish Social Welfare System: Participation and Protection (2020)

Building on NESC's previous work, most notably on The Developmental Welfare State and on jobless households, *The Future of the Irish Social Welfare System: Participation and Protection* examines the fitness of Ireland's social welfare system for the 21st century and proposes several reforms.

It sets out specific proposals on ensuring income adequacy, alleviating poverty, modernising family supports to reflect gender and care needs, and supporting high levels of participation in education and employment. These proposals are considered while also seeking to ensure they are sustainable from a financial perspective.

The report also reflects on measures put in place to mitigate the impact of Covid-19. For example, it makes the case for a stronger social insurance system, better recognition of atypical work and the piloting of a participation income model.

Shared Island: Shared Opportunity (2022)

At the request of the Department of the Taoiseach, the Council produced its first all-island report, Shared Island, *Shared Opportunity: NESC Comprehensive Report*. This represented the culmination of extensive research on the concept of a Shared Island, and the project included the publication of 11 underpinning reports. The research process incorporated extensive dialogue, with over 100 meetings involving a diverse array of stakeholders spanning the entire island. Additionally, focus groups and a public consultation contributed to the comprehensive analysis.

The report conveyed three overarching pieces of advice to the government. First, it underscored the substantial practical support for an all-island approach to addressing economic, social, environmental and wellbeing challenges. Second, it emphasised the pressing need for ambitious collaborative actions and initiatives in response to climate change and biodiversity loss. Last, it identified key factors shaping present and future collaboration, which encompassed a shared agenda, resource allocation, political stability and backing,

legislative and regulatory coherence, and collaborative projects.

Just Transition in Agriculture and Land-Use (2023)

The *Just Transition in Agriculture and Land-Use* report by the Council presents an integrated framework for facilitating a just transition in the realm of agriculture and land-use. This framework places strong emphasis on the co-ordination of actions, inclusive social processes, an opportunities-driven transition, and the equitable sharing and mitigation of transition costs.

The 18-month project involved extensive engagement with a diverse array of stakeholders, with a particular focus on farmers and rural communities. The primary goal was to explore strategies for achieving emission-

reduction targets while ensuring social inclusivity, economic viability and environmental sustainability.

The report provides a well-structured road map for progress in a methodical manner. It tackles the challenging aspects without evading the difficult questions posed by the transition process. It argues that, given the inherent complexity and uncertainty in preparing for the future, governance approaches must combine co-ordination towards a 'direction' as embedded in a vision, along with a greater emphasis on facilitating and enabling experimentation and learning in order to navigate uncertainty and complexity. In practice, the Council suggested that this should involve integrating 'foresight and anticipation with a learn-by-doing, experimental approach'.

Chapter 4

Looking Back Through the Eyes of Previous Members

This chapter includes contributions from four people who were members of NESC in different roles at various times, with each asked to provide a short account of its activities.

The contributors, along with Peter Cassells (former member from 1982–2001 and General Secretary of ICTU), recorded video inputs which were shown at the November conference and are available on www.nesc.ie.

First, Dermot McCarthy writes about NESC's contribution to policymaking, as it develops a shared understanding of the challenges and prepares appropriate solutions. Dermot retired as Secretary General to the Government and Secretary General of the Department of the Taoiseach in July 2011. He served with NESC as Social Policy Analyst from 1978–1980, Director from 1990–1993, Deputy Chair from 1996–2000 and Chair from 2000 until his retirement.

Second, Seán Ó Riain describes NESC's work to provide new problem definitions, expand the range of options available and shift the zero-sum calculus of political bargaining. Seán is Professor of Sociology at the National University of Ireland, Maynooth and a former member of the Council from 2012–2017.

Third, Michelle Norris explains how NESC provides a space for long-term thinking and strategising that is relatively unique within the policy arena, creating dialogue and consensus-building underpinned by quality research. A member of the Council from 2010–2016, Michelle is Professor of Social Policy and Director of the Geary Institute for Public Policy at University College Dublin.

Fourth, Mary P. Murphy focuses on what NESC demonstrates about the theory of change, and the importance of working through institutional strategies and processes. Mary is Head of Department and Professor in the Department of Sociology, National University of Ireland, Maynooth, and served on the Council from 1996–1999.



“In its best work, the Council has provided a fresh understanding of policy problems, opening up new options in the process. Such paradigms often gave governments scope to move beyond current policies and practices without the political hazards that can attend a change of direction.”

NESC, Expert Analysis and Deliberation: Dermot McCarthy

Marking the 50th anniversary of NESC has more than a little personal significance for me. I worked in the Secretariat as a social policy analyst from 1978 to 1980, as Director from 1990 to 1993, Deputy Chair from 1996 until 2000 and then Chair until July 2011. One way or another, my working life was closely involved with the Council and my memories from this engagement are entirely positive.

NESC was founded in 1973 against the backdrop of the tripartite approach to steering Ireland’s outward pivot in development strategy from the 1950s, and the associated voluntarist tradition of industrial relations. Its establishment was an initiative to guide the national effort to secure the greatest possible advantage from membership of the EEC and to reflect a European style of social dialogue. At its inception, the Council was intended to contribute to incomes policy through a general influence on economic understanding and expectations. It was created under the Taoiseach’s Department to give it a measure of authority and independence from departments and agencies directly involved in economic management. In light of its own analysis of the need for a more consistent approach to policies for growth and income distribution, NESC

became centrally involved in the dynamic of social partnership agreements in the late 1980s.

While its composition, focus and working methods have changed over the years, what has been consistent is the Council’s combination of expert analysis and deliberation between its members to produce recommendations that take account of practical questions of implementation, as well as key policy principles.

NESC has also been steadfast in its focus on strategic questions, often considering a longer timeframe than is possible in routine political debate. In the early years, and for the first time in official documents, its reports often addressed policy questions which had long been the subject of debate in other European countries.

In its best work, the Council has provided a fresh understanding of policy problems, opening up new options in the process. Such paradigms often gave governments scope to move beyond current policies and practices without the political hazards that can attend a change of direction.

This was facilitated by the fact that the Council pursues no corporate or institutional interest, or even institutional profile, behind the authority of its own reports.

NESC's contribution to better understanding, and, therefore, innovative policy approaches, begins at the Council table. While eureka moments are rare, it was not uncommon for representatives of the social partners and government departments, as well as independent experts, to develop novel insight and change their approach. Indeed, it was the fact that the Council members were significant actors in public life in their own right that not only gave authority to reports, but also ignited their potential to have impact across the economy and society, as well as on government policy.

The influence of the Council has been profound on issues such as the management of public debt in the 1980s, the strategic priorities for Ireland's membership of the EU, the understanding of the potential for public policy to reflect a developmental welfare state and, more recently, housing strategy and a just transition to a low-carbon economy.

NESC has sometimes been criticised for embodying a cosy consensus that serves vested interests beyond the reach of democratic accountability. In reality, there hasn't always been agreement within the Council. Members have at times found it difficult to hear others' well-informed critiques of their own stated positions. The addition of members from the community, voluntary and, later, environmental sectors brought perspectives that are not easily conscripted to a cosy consensus.

Furthermore, officials representing government departments have not always found it easy to share the policy advisory space with critics of current policy. Yet, respectful listening to contrasting points of view, the stimulus of expert analysis, support from the Secretariat and a willingness to engage in a joint search for policies which serve the common good have enabled NESC to benefit society through a form of policy learning.

NESC has been effective by making connections: between domains of policy that are often kept separate in the siloed world of public administration; between academic research and policy actors; and between civil society and the institutions of government. In doing so, the Council fosters trust between its members.

NESC aims to be evidence-led, while enabling its constituents to understand the constraints on others in acting in line with the evidence. Its members and Secretariat have never had any illusions about their place in the overall architecture of governance. They have trusted, however, that rigorous analysis, clear thinking and respectful deliberation would lead to better policymaking and more-informed public debate.

The true heroes of the NESC story are those members who, at critical moments, were prepared to accept the logic of the analysis and to support policy recommendations which departed from the stated position of their organisations. Their leadership and willingness to look beyond partisan priorities gave real force to the Council's reports and contributed greatly to the Council's place in Irish public life.



**Shifting the Zero-Sum Calculus of Political Bargaining:
*Professor Seán Ó Riain***

NESC is a fascinating organisation. For a period of time during the years of social partnership and the Celtic Tiger, it was reputedly running the country. However, this significantly overstated its role, even at its most influential. More importantly, this misunderstood NESC as an organisation. The Council has a number of different organisational dimensions, which can mean that it takes on diverse shapes and roles under various conditions. And yet, NESC has occupied a distinctive place in the Irish polity and continues to do so, long after the end of formal high-level ‘social partnership’.

In this brief note, I reflect on NESC based on these experiences, its place in the Irish political system, how it has operated in various ways and its unique contribution.

My own engagement with NESC started with reading its research in the form of a long series of valuable reports, but also by getting to know policy-oriented academics and researchers at the ESRI and in the NESC Secretariat through the 1990s. This extended to

fairly regular discussions with the Secretariat during the 2000s and being a member of the Council from 2012 to 2017, between the darkest days of crisis and austerity and the disquieting growth of the ‘Leprechaun Economics’ years. Being involved with NESC has included participation in formal meetings, informal discussions, comments on drafts, policy workshops, research conferences, side conversations with others around these events and more.

This varied set of roles and relationships perhaps reflects how NESC operates between and across the gaps in three primary institutionalised pillars of the Irish polity – the civil service, the party-political system and civil society (including NGOs and social movements, but dominated by the major organised interests of employers, unions and sectoral groups).

Each of these is constrained by their own key characteristics – bureaucracies focused on apparently standardised operational tasks, electoral localism combined with governmental centralism in party politics and ‘political exchange’ and bargaining among organised interests. Public service agencies in general, and NESC in particular, occupy an uncertain but important space between these various major pillars.

NESC is part of the public service and engages with government departments, nudging policy reflections and changes from outside that ultimately depend on government departmental support. This is made all the more tricky because the NESC approach almost inevitably involves ‘joined-up government’.

Similarly, NESC can be a space where novel definitions of problems can emerge to expand the range of options available to government and organised interests, at times

shifting the zero-sum calculus of political bargaining towards new possibilities.

NESC can therefore be disproportionately important for innovation and dialogical problem-solving. Even in my own case as a relatively disinterested academic member of the Council, I learned a lot from informal conversations around the meetings. In other cases, interesting tensions arose when surprising agreements and engagements could emerge – for example, around environmental concerns and rural development. Indeed, the incorporation of environmental issues into NESC after the closing of numerous agencies following the financial crash has gradually enabled an integration of economic, social and environmental issues, particularly through issues of ‘just transition’.

Nonetheless, we shouldn’t be naïve about how this space operated in the shadow of the more powerful established hierarchies. The voice of NGOs, while always heard in the Council, had little muscle behind it compared to the major economic interest groups, a fact that all were obviously aware of. In other cases, significant bodies of policy work, supported by the Council, were marginalised by the broader political system. For example, NESC published a series of housing reports through the 2010s that provided an early road map for tackling that central crisis, but which have been largely ignored. Indeed, during my time on the Council, policymaking was dominated by international bodies such as the IMF and was also highly centralised

nationally, meaning that our deliberations often seemed far from the *realpolitik* of policy decisions.

In these years after the crash, NESC struggled. The Council had useful discussions, but it was marginalised by the collapse of partnership structures and the centralisation of decision-making in the Labour Market Council and government generally. While the Secretariat became crucial, it was looted by other government departments. The cull of so-called *quangos* left it vulnerable.

Over time, NESC reanimated its role. This was possible in part because NESC itself has been a multiheaded organisation, incorporating not just different organisational elements but also various ways of connecting policy and analysis. The Council, composed largely of representatives of different ‘social pillars’, is a forum for discussion and deliberation.

In my experience, the most effective interventions in discussions often were those where a member made a point that you might not have expected, given the group they were representing. Personally, I tried to avoid sitting beside the ‘pillars’ who I might have been expected to identify with!

However, perhaps the permanent motor of NESC is the Secretariat, the staff of researchers who blend this activity with informal discussions and more formalised meetings involving a range of actors inside and outside the policy system. High-quality research and

“Similarly, NESC can be a space where novel definitions of problems can emerge to expand the range of options available to government and organised interests, at times shifting the zero-sum calculus of political bargaining towards new possibilities.”

policy networking are intertwined, in ways that would repay more detailed analysis. My view is that ‘projects’ play a critical organising role, linking research and politics, in driving discussion and innovation and also in mediating political accommodations that go beyond political exchange. A critical element in this is not solely the research, but also how NESC engages with and ‘translates’ academic research into the public policy sphere.

Over time, NESC’s engagement with the policy system has also changed – from the ‘expert inputs’ of the research undertaken before social partnership, through the ‘research and policy dialogues’ of the social partnership era to the current engagements with a diverse array of government departments, policy agencies and the more disparate set of social dialogue institutions. This history suggests that the political context is critical in enabling NESC to be effective. While it might be tempting to suggest NESC should be divorced from politics, it seems to be most effective in shifting policy when the main pillars of the policy and political system engage with it, but do not capture it. The existence of autonomous spaces where policy, research and dialogue can meet is an invaluable resource in a country’s development and needs to be supported.



**Shaping Irish Social Policy:
Professor Michelle Norris**

As demonstrated by the title of its first report on social policy, *Towards a Social Report* (1976), NESC’s initial forays into the social policy field were hesitant. Most of the reports produced by the Council in the years after its establishment in 1973 focused on economic policy. Towards the end of the decade, however, NESC published several important reports on different aspects of social policy, and since then, its influence on this policy field has been enormous.

This influence was particularly evident during the two severe economic crises that Ireland has experienced since the Council’s foundation. NESC’s analyses made a central contribution to planning a route out of the crises of both the early 1980s and late-2000s. The Council’s work on these issues also consistently emphasised the need to protect social services and benefits for the most vulnerable groups when attempting to make this transition. The sophistication of NESC’s analysis in this regard is exemplified by its 2009 report entitled *Ireland’s Five-Part Crisis*. Written just before the country entered an IMF and EU-sponsored ‘bail out’, the report stressed that this was not only an economic crisis. Rather, the crisis had

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five closely related parts – banking, fiscal, economic, social and reputational – which required a multifaceted, integrated response.

NESC has also played a central role in shaping thinking about Ireland’s place in the EU and ensuring that both social and economic challenges should be central to our EU strategy. From the first major report on the EU, Ireland in the European Community: Performance, Prospects and Strategy (1989), NESC was clear that Ireland’s interests lie in full participation in the EU. At this time, there was far less consensus around this view, so the Council’s report played an important role in building support for European integration among Irish policymakers and the general public.

The Council’s reports were equally clear that the benefits of integration were unlikely to be evenly distributed, both between countries and within Ireland, and that government must take action to deal with these inequalities and risks. From the publication of its Strategy for the Nineties in 1990, NESC’s reports highlighted the need for a ‘consistent policy framework’ that would combine a macroeconomic policy designed to enable Ireland to deal with the challenges of European integration and the adoption of the Euro, with a distributional policy aimed at decreasing inequality and supporting those negatively affected by economic change.

Among the social policy reports NESC has published since the 1990s, its 2005 report entitled The Developmental Welfare State deserves special mention. Underpinned by truly innovative thinking, this report plots a course for Ireland’s welfare system that is distinct from the means-tested, strongly targeted models seen in most other English-speaking countries and the more universalist, social-insurance-funded systems used by many of our Western European neighbours. In this report, NESC sets out a vision for a welfare state that is tailored to meet Ireland’s particular needs as a small open economy with a growing and increasingly diverse population, and to achieve better synergy between social and economic policies. This vision has been further elaborated upon in a series of social policy reports published by the Council in subsequent years.

Since 2014, NESC has also published a very influential series of reports on housing which set out a strategy for addressing Ireland’s seemingly intractable housing supply and affordability problems. These reports were one of the factors that prompted the government to reverse the strategy of relying on subsidies for private rents to accommodate low-income households and provide more social housing instead. The Council also proposed that the government should support the provision of housing that is rented at cost-recovery rates – 700 units of this cost-rental housing have been delivered to date (November 2023). In addition, it emphasised the need

for the government to take a more active role in the management of land supply for housing, and this analysis was one of the factors that led to the establishment of the Land Development Agency in 2018.

NESC's enormous influence on Irish social policy reflects several factors. First of all, it acknowledges the impressive rigour and depth of the Council's analyses and decision-making procedures. Its work is underpinned by rigorous research, the results of which are interrogated and debated by social partners, who represent a wide variety of perspectives and sections of Irish society. On this basis, a consensus is reached in terms of a common view on the best way forward. Therefore, when acting on the Council's recommendations, policymakers can be confident that these are robust and will be likely to attract broad support.

NESC's influence also reflects the vast breadth of its analyses. Much of its work is concerned with the long-term impact of policies, big-picture thinking and the interaction and future direction of economic and social policies. In a context where the policymaking system is understandably focused on the here and now, because politicians are subject to the enormous, short-termist pressures from the political cycle, the 24-hour news cycle and social media, the space that NESC provides for this big-picture, long-term thinking about public policies is a truly vital space.



Building Policy Capacity:
Professor Mary Murphy

A sustainable future requires strong, dynamic public institutions to allow agile policymaking with effective foresight and proofing. Strong analytical and policy competencies enable responses to situations and events for which precedent offers little assistance. Legitimacy requires sufficient societal trust in institutions. This requires multilevel governance processes, multiple stakeholders, deep listening and meaningful engagement.

This is not new. All eras have had their own challenges. What Hecló called 'collective puzzlement on society's behalf' in the 1970s is consistent with Howlett and Ramesh's (Howlett & Ramesh, 2003) definition of 'policymaking as a problem-solving activity' and the former NESC Director Rory O'Donnell's contemporary description of NESC processes as facilitating 'common knowledge events' or generating 'network knowledge'. What is new is the acceleration of knowledge production, policy processes and the acute time pressures we work within.

Understanding NESC's achievements and contribution to 50 years of policy analysis in Ireland requires a reflection

on Ireland's historically uneven 'policy capacity' and only recent development of 'policy analytical capacity'. NESC was born into an Ireland of limited policy infrastructure, with a relative dearth of organisational processes and institutions, such as think tanks, that could contribute to the construction and supply of policy ideas and policy analysis.

Irish political culture, centralist but strongly local in favour, shaped a cautious policy orientation with an underdeveloped policy appetite among undifferentiated political parties. NESC, since 1973, filled a large space, opening up deliberative policy processes outside the institutions of government. This facilitated policy momentum as NESC played a strategic role in forging an external consensus on the contentious question of national recovery over the late 1980s.

This political culture had also coloured attitudes towards acceptable insider sources of expert advice. This had effectively excluded the voice and representatives of those experiencing different forms of inequality and social exclusion from policy processes. NESC in the mid-1990s was no exception. I was first invited to the Council in 1995, as a Taoiseach's nominee, but as an outsider, representing the Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed. This was in the context of NGOs campaigning for access to the social partnership process. My involvement attested to the opening-up of the process to wider participation – first through the Community and Voluntary Pillar in 1996 and later, the Environmental Pillar in 2009.

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This huge learning curve was not without challenges for everyone involved. Ireland as a relatively insular and homogenous society was still monocultural and patriarchal in the mid-1990s. Widening participation opened up the presence of new actors in public life and brought their voices and experiences into policy analysis.

For example, a changed gender dynamic in NESC became evident as a critical mass of women, despite their policy differences, supported each other within and across pillars and through engagement with senior female civil servants and NESC staff. The jury is out on whether increased access meant more influence, but the participation of the Community and Voluntary Pillar and Environmental Pillar is now firmly entrenched as part of NESC's model.

How NESC worked shifted over the next decade towards a substantive change in the content and process of its deliberations. Immediate evidence of the widening of participation was seen, for example, in the 1997 Partnership 2000 for Inclusion, Employment and Competitiveness and in social policy themes in the 1993 National Economic and Social Forum. Over time, there was a focus on wider social inclusion, culminating in the flagship 2005 report *The Developmental Welfare State*. This broke new ground in defining the reciprocal relationship between economy and society, yet underappreciated the role of social reproduction and the need for environmental sustainability. Not long after the report was published, the consequences of the 2008 global financial crisis led to the 2010 dissolution of social partnership.

For the following 10 years, as the state pulled back into itself, NESC sought to find a new policy relevance, working through institutional strategies and policy processes to achieve social change. Its theory of change stressed the importance of collective framing and reframing policy questions and potential solutions. The Council survived the period of austerity when many anti-poverty and equality institutions, including the National Economic Social Forum and the systemically important Combat Poverty Agency, were among 41 social-policy-focused institutions extinguished in the ‘Bonfire of the Quangos’. NESC survived but the loss of this rich social and equality infrastructure and capacity for social documentation has left the Council with more to do, then, now and into the future.

The key strength NESC has evolved is less the ‘expert analysis’, which it undoubtedly has and does, and more the process of merging different forms and types of knowledge, what O’Donnell (former Director) calls ‘common knowledge events’, processes of co-production or co-creation needed to resolve societal challenges that are ever more urgent, complex and wicked.

Looking forward, as NESC approaches 55, three challenges seem particularly pertinent:

1. The ‘tail can wag the dog’ when short-term implementation capacity can determine long-term policy design. NESC’s capacity for influencing implementation requires multilevel and multiple stakeholder governance processes. This is challenged by the inherent weaknesses in Irish local government. NESC needs to be institutionally innovative and creative to broker policy learning from such local spaces back into more formal and often central policy processes.
2. NESC has demonstrated creative capacity for deliberation in regional and local spaces, showing leadership, for example, in the Just Transition for Agriculture report (2023a). Integrated analysis requires systemic approaches addressing social inequality and decarbonisation simultaneously, understanding care and public services as climate policy. The Council will increasingly be operating in a more demanding political context with more temporary political coalitions and contested political values. It will be under more pressure, with less time to come up with immediate ‘solutions’. NESC’s ‘careful’ model of working will be severely tested.
3. Contemporary social risks, particularly climate change and the acceleration of AI, require forecasting and scenario planning, and new policy approaches to analysis, data and evidence. Such knowledge and evidence itself will become more contested, as will NESC’s own status as ‘expert’. However, just as what counts as good evidence is delegitimised, the Council’s role as knowledge broker will become more relevant. NESC will need to gain new forms of legitimacy by traversing and engaging with the direct lived experience of the policy under analysis. New forms of capacity for policy fluency will be needed in both directions as more and new forms of collaboration dominate our collective puzzlement. An intersectional lens, including class, gender and equality perspectives, can enable the full range of voices to inform potential analysis and knowledge.

Ireland Today

The four chapters in this section provide an assessment of Ireland at the end of 2023, based on the Wellbeing Framework. It describes the strengths and the prevailing challenges, in particular the continuing inequality experienced by key groups and places, and the pressures on our natural environmental resources.

Chapter 5: Measuring Progress

Chapter 6: A Macroeconomic Perspective on Thriving

Chapter 7: Thriving: Views from Seven Angles

Chapter 8: Reflections on Key Themes

Chapter 5

Measuring Progress

To support the NESC@50 Programme, and particularly the conference focus on a Thriving Ireland, the Secretariat carried out research on nine regularly cited assessments⁴.

This chapter summarises the findings. It shows that Ireland has high ratings across each of the international aggregate measures of economic, social and environmental performance. There are also indicators that point to pressures in areas including housing, the high cost of living, ongoing high unemployment among people with a disability, and the incidence of low pay that exceeds the average for both the OECD and the EU-27. With regard to trust in government, the gap between younger and older people in Ireland is the largest in the OECD. The studies also highlight that, like other rich countries, Ireland is living beyond its fair share of planetary boundaries.

The approaches examined have limitations, yet their consideration is a necessary starting point in any discussion of a country's social, economic and environmental position. They inform us about the challenges and opportunities, and what needs to happen to underpin change.

Broader Understanding of Progress

Standard measures of economic performance that are regularly used and reported, such as gross domestic product (GDP) or income, on their own are insufficient metrics, particularly in Ireland where economic data can be distorted by the nature of activity.

The need for measures broader than commonly used economic indicators to assess national progress, prosperity or success is now widely accepted. NESC's own work in 2009 on the emerging area of wellbeing argued for a multidimensional approach linked to economic resources, work and participation, relationships and care, community, environment, health, democracy and values (NESC, 2009: xiv).



The OECD adopted a framework on wellbeing in 2011, which distinguishes current wellbeing on the one hand, and future wellbeing or sustainability on the other. The How's Life? 2020 report used an extended dashboard of over 80 indicators covering 11 dimensions of current wellbeing, and four aspects of future wellbeing⁵. Four types of capital are used to monitor future wellbeing: natural, economic, human and social.

The OECD also produces a related Better Life Index with associated country reports. This is based on the same 11 dimensions of the wellbeing framework used in the How's Life? Reports, but with a smaller number of indicators and without distinguishing current and future wellbeing. The Better Life Index report for Ireland is used in this special publication, as it provides a recent summary of how Ireland is doing in terms of the OECD wellbeing approach.

The Irish Government has developed a wellbeing framework for Ireland based on the OECD wellbeing framework and informed by a consultation report produced by NESC (2021). The 11 dimensions of Ireland's framework cover the same broad areas as the OECD's framework, including income and wealth, work and job quality, housing, health and the environment.

In some cases, there are variations in the naming of the dimensions and differences in the indicators used. While the current framework for Ireland does treat current and future wellbeing separately, as the OECD does, those indicators that are of particular relevance for future wellbeing across its 11 dimensions are now marked as such.

The wellbeing approach is not the only alternative method for overcoming the limitations of commonly used economic indicators. On the next page it lists eight other approaches.

⁴ A Secretariat paper by Dr Cathal FitzGerald and Noel Cahill was published in 2023 and is available at www.nesc.ie. In addition, Dr Helen Johnston, senior policy analyst with NESC, carried out further research on the social dimensions of Ireland's recent performance. This chapter draws on both pieces of research.

⁵ The 11 dimensions of current wellbeing are: income and wealth; work and job quality; housing; health; work-life balance; knowledge and skills; environmental quality; subjective wellbeing; safety; social connections; and civic engagement. These indicators are measured in terms of averages as well as inequalities between groups and inequalities between top and bottom performers.

Measuring Progress – Eight Approaches

UN Human Development Index (HDI): The HDI has three dimensions: (i) life expectancy at birth; (ii) education as measured by average years of schooling for adults aged 25 years or more and expected years of schooling for children of school entering age; and (iii) standard of living as measured by gross national income (GNI) per capita. The logarithm of income is used to capture the diminishing importance of income as GNI increases. The HDI is a measure of current wellbeing.

Social Progress Index (SPI): This focuses solely on social and environmental measures and seeks to use outcome rather than input indicators as much as possible. One advantage of focusing on outcomes is that it does not require consensus on how inputs translate into outcomes. The SPI does not include economic indicators such as GDP or household incomes (Stern et al., 2022). It is mainly but not exclusively concerned with current wellbeing.

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): These are 17 goals focused on ending poverty and hunger, improving health and education, increasing economic growth, and at the same time, addressing climate change and preserving oceans and forests. The SDGs cover both current wellbeing and sustainability (e.g. sustainable consumption and production).

Transitions Performance Index (TPI): This monitors progress on a broad range of policy priorities to support the implementation of the European Green Deal, foster a Europe fit for the digital age, develop economies that work for people, promote the European way of life, strengthen Europe's role in the world, and give a new push for European democracy (European Commission, 2022: 33).

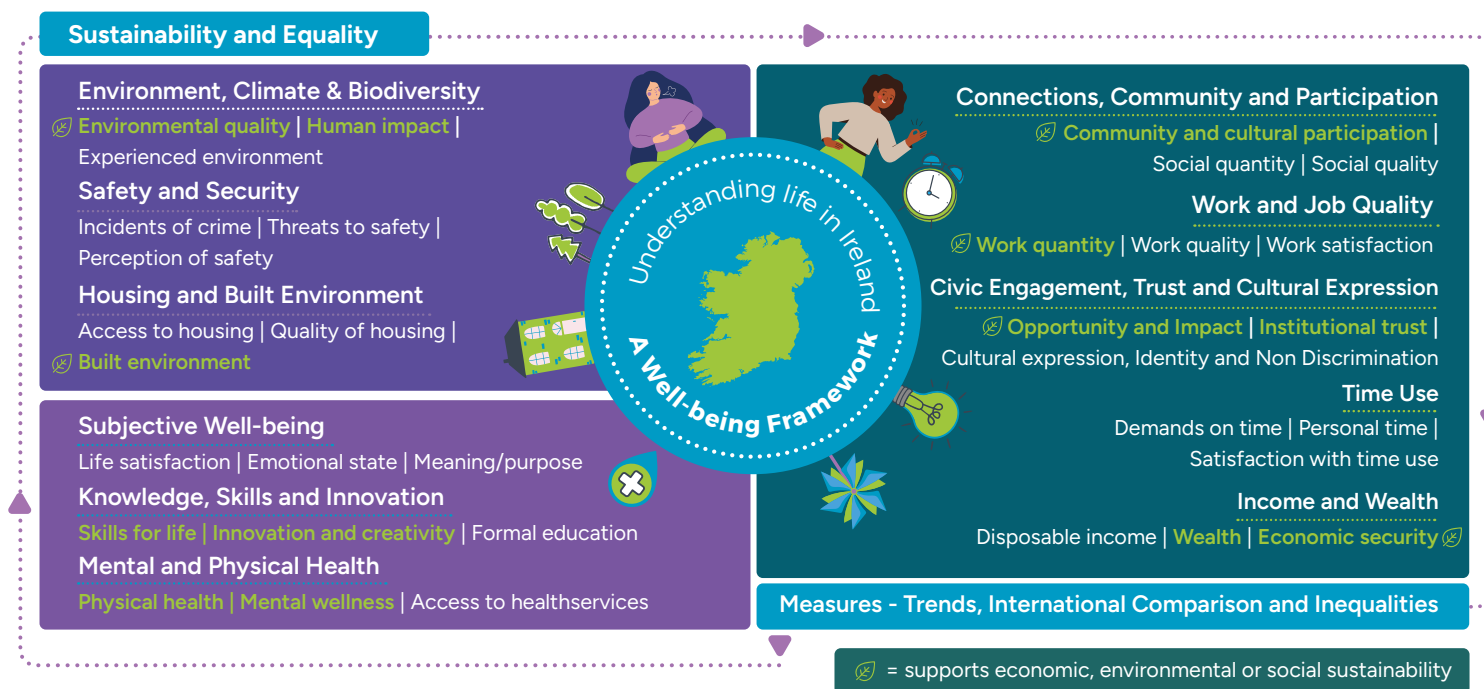
Inclusive wealth index: This is defined as the sum of manufactured capital (machines, buildings, roads, physical infrastructure, etc.), human capital and natural capital. These are all measured in monetary terms.

Competitiveness Scorecard: The National Competitiveness and Productivity Council (NCPC) monitors Ireland's competitiveness performance through its annual Competitiveness Scorecards. It has developed a pyramid framework of the different dimensions of competitiveness to inform assessment.

Biodiversity Intactness Index (BII): This seeks to summarise the change in ecological conditions as a result of human influence. BII is defined as 'an estimated percentage of the original number of species that remain and their abundance in any given area, despite human impacts' (Natural History Museum, no date).

Doughnut: This is a way of presenting economic, social and environmental performance. The inner circle of the doughnut represents a social foundation and the idea is that no-one should fall below certain minimum standards. The social foundation has 12 dimensions derived from the UN SDGs. The outer circle of the doughnut represents an ecological ceiling based on planetary boundaries. The space between these two circles represents a socially secure and safe space for humanity, where the human needs of everyone are met without compromising the earth's planetary boundaries.

Ireland's Wellbeing Framework – Dimensions and Indicators



Source: Government of Ireland, 2023: 3.

Ireland's Performance

The Irish Government has developed a wellbeing framework for Ireland based on the OECD wellbeing framework, with 35 indicators (Figure 5.1).

For each indicator, a measure of performance is calculated as the average of (i) the percentage change over time and (ii) a measure of international comparison. The performance for each dimension is the average of its components. In addition, an equality score is calculated for each dimension.

There is evidence to suggest that Ireland is thriving, inclusive, protective and forward looking, as measured by its own wellbeing framework.

The proportion of adults who rated their overall life satisfaction as high (9 or 10 out of 10) in Ireland in 2018 was the highest in the EU at 45 per cent. The number of healthy life years was 66.2, above the EU level of 64 years.

Income and wealth are positive due to the relatively high and rising level of household income and wealth.

The median-equivalised household net income in Ireland was the fourth highest in the EU in 2022 at €28,130 and median household wealth was fifth highest in the euro area in 2020 at €179,090.

The proportion of households making ends meet with great difficulty in Ireland in 2022 was 6.0 per cent, which was somewhat below the EU average of 6.8 per cent.⁶ Data is also gathered on two other categories: 'households making ends meet with difficulty' and 'households making ends meet with some difficulty'. Ireland had a higher proportion of households in these categories than the EU average and the share of households with some degree of difficulty in making ends meet (i.e. the three categories combined) in 2022 was above the EU average (52.7 per cent versus 45.5 per cent).

Ireland performed strongly on the housing measures. This is potentially surprising, given the fact that the country is experiencing a housing crisis. See the box overleaf which discusses this in more detail.

Within the knowledge, skills and innovation dimension, Ireland figures strongly in reading and maths skills for 15-year-olds. The reading ability of this cohort in 2018 was the fourth highest in the OECD while the maths performance was also above average.

Ireland's lifelong learning rate in 2022 was 11.8 per cent, approximately the same as the EU average. The top performers were Sweden at 36.2 per cent, Denmark at 27.9 per cent and the Netherlands at 26.4 per cent. The score was marginally positive for this indicator.

Ireland had a positive outcome on safety and security. The country's murder rate per 100,000 population (0.68) in 2020 was below the EU average (1.21).⁷

However, this rate increased by over 10 per cent to 0.86 in 2022 compared to 2017. The number of people killed or injured on roads declined by almost 30 per cent between 2015 and 2021. The number of deaths on roads per million population in 2021 was 27.36, the seventh lowest in the EU.

Ireland has a positive performance in terms of work and job-quality indicators. The employment rate and net earnings are both increasing and are above the EU average. The country had the fourth-highest annual net average earnings for a single worker without children in the EU in 2021 at €39,617, well above the EU average (€26,135). Ireland's employment rate in the final quarter of 2022 was 73.2 per cent while the EU average stood at 70.2 per cent (Eurostat). Mean weekly earnings in 2021 were €667.76 while median earnings were €644.55.⁸

Satisfaction with time use is relatively high in Ireland. On a scale of 1 to 10, Ireland's average score was 7.5 in 2018, joint second highest in the EU alongside Denmark. The share of the population who rated their satisfaction either 9 or 10 increased from 29 per cent in 2013 to 34.7 per cent in 2018.

The proportion of the population who had someone they could ask for help was 96.2 per cent in 2015, above the EU average of 94.1 per cent. In 2019, 99 per cent of the population in Ireland had someone they could count on if they had a serious problem. In 2018, 16.6 per cent of the population reported feeling lonely at least some of the time.

Finally, the share of people who are satisfied with the way that democracy works in Ireland was 82 per cent in spring 2023, up from 73 per cent in spring 2017. This was among the highest in the EU and well above the EU average of 58 per cent.



“The proportion of adults who rated their overall life satisfaction as high (9 or 10 out of 10) in Ireland in 2018 was the highest in the EU at 45 per cent. The number of healthy life years was 66.2, above the EU level of 64 years.”

⁶ The comparative data on this measure is taken from the Eurostat database while the trend data is from the CSO database. The current data reported here (as of 30 August 2008) differs slightly from what is reported in Government of Ireland (2023).

⁷ Latest international data.

⁸ Median weekly earnings are not part of Ireland’s wellbeing dashboard, but are included here for comparison.

Ireland's Positive Performance on Housing in the Wellbeing Framework and the Housing Crisis

The indicators used focus on overcrowding, affordability and cost, conditions and internet access. Ireland's rate of overcrowding in 2020 was 3.4 per cent, the fourth lowest among 33 countries in the OECD Wellbeing database. With regard to affordability, the share of household income remaining after housing costs in Ireland in 2020 was 80.6 per cent. This was similar to the unweighted average of 33 countries (80.0 per cent) and the thirteenth lowest among these countries (fourth lowest in the EU). The housing cost overburden rate, a measure of affordability focused on lower-income households, was 10.85 per cent, the seventh lowest among 33 countries. The share of poor households in Ireland lacking an indoor toilet was 0.18 per cent, the seventh lowest in the OECD. The share of households with internet access in Ireland was 91.8 per cent in 2020, the tenth highest among 28 countries.

The indicators on housing in the national wellbeing framework also show a positive performance in terms of housing completions (up 110 per cent over the past five years) and the share of domestic dwellings with a good Building Energy Rating (BER of A or B), which is up from 22 per cent in 2017 to 45 per cent in 2022. The proportion of households spending over 40 per cent of disposable income on housing (net of housing allowances) fell from 4.6 per cent in 2016 to 2.5 per cent in 2021. Ireland had the second-lowest ranking on this measure across the EU.

The international comparisons indicate that housing is generally satisfactory for established households in Ireland. The most acute problems are for the most part encountered by those seeking to secure housing. While existing low-income households enjoy low housing costs, it is very difficult to secure social housing or supported accommodation in the private rental sector. Rental accommodation generally is very scarce and it has become difficult for young households to buy housing. Affordability pressures in the rental market are evident among households not getting state support. In the third and fourth income quintiles, the share of tenants paying more than 30 per cent of their income on rent in Ireland is higher than the European average (16 per cent vs. 9 per cent for the third quintile and 14 per cent vs. 3 per cent for the fourth quintile) (Disch & Slaymaker, 2023).

Housing problems can be more severe for specific cohorts of the population. For example, ESRI research found evidence of affordability pressures for 19 per cent of single-parent households compared to 5 per cent of the general population, while single parents were also more exposed to other housing problems, including damp and a lack of central heating (32 per cent compared to 22 per cent for the total population). Overcrowding was significantly higher among some minorities. While an estimated 6 per cent of the total population were living in overcrowded accommodation in 2016, this was the case for over 35 per cent of Asian/Asian Irish, 39 per cent of Travellers and over 40 per cent of Black/Black Irish (Russell et al., 2021).

Room for Improvement

The OECD's framework shows areas where Ireland has room for improvement in terms of wellbeing.

Perhaps surprisingly, on some measures of household income, Ireland is below the OECD average. The average household net-adjusted disposable income per capita is US\$29,488 per annum in Ireland, while the OECD average is US\$30,490.⁹ This measure of household income adjusts for differences in prices across countries. In addition, it takes into account free or subsidised services provided by governments or non-profit institutions to households, such as health and education. Gross earnings are also more unequal in Ireland. The earnings ratio of the top 10 per cent to the bottom 10 per cent was 3.9, compared to an OECD average of 3.4. Ireland's ratio was the ninth highest in the OECD in 2019 (OECD, 2022).

There is a large difference in overall life satisfaction depending on health status. Only 23 per cent of people who report their health as 'fair', 'bad' or 'very bad' rate their life satisfaction as 'very high', in comparison with 58 per cent who report their health status as 'very good'. Those at risk of poverty were more likely to have felt downhearted (50 per cent) than those not at risk of poverty (65 per cent).

There was a slight reduction in the proportion of school-aged children who report being happy with their life. This indicator fell by just less than two per cent between 2014 and 2018.

At 9.1 per cent, the share of the population working long hours in Ireland was above the EU average of 7.3 per cent in 2022. However, there was a fall in the proportion of people working long hours (more than 49 hours per week) in their main job in the five years to the first quarter of 2023, going from 10.6 per cent to 8.3 per cent. The percentage of people who experienced discrimination in the preceding two years increased from 12 per cent in the third quarter of 2014 to 18 per cent in the first quarter of 2019.

In relation to the environment, notwithstanding generally good air quality, there are localised areas where air quality is of concern. Poor air quality due to fine particulate matter is estimated to result in 1,300 premature deaths in Ireland annually (EPA, 2022a). In addition, satisfaction with water quality in Ireland is below average at 80 per cent, as compared to the OECD average of 84 per cent.¹⁰ Furthermore, the share of households who reported problems with pollution, grime or other environmental issues increased from 4.7 per cent in 2015 to 8.2 per cent in 2020. This was, however, well below the EU average of 13.7 per cent.

“At 9.1 per cent, the share of the population working long hours in Ireland was above the EU average of 7.3 per cent in 2022.”

⁹ Household net-adjusted disposable income is the amount of money that a household earns, or gains, each year after taxes and transfers. It represents the money available to a household for spending on goods or services.

¹⁰ According to the EPA, the quality of water in public water supplies is high and it is safe to drink. However, the EPA also says that the supply is not as resilient as it could be, so that investment is needed to ensure the supply of drinking water from public supplies remains safe (EPA, 2022b). The quality of water in private schemes is of greater concern. According to the EPA, one in 20 private water supplies were contaminated with E. coli in 2020. It is also of concern that over a quarter of small private supplies were not monitored by local authorities (EPA, 2022c).

Focus on Equality

Ireland's wellbeing framework has a particular focus on equality. The analysis identified several groups that are exposed to inequality for a high share of indicators, namely:

Women, single-parent households, people living alone, immigrants/non-Irish, unemployed people, households with lower incomes, households in rented accommodation, and people with long-term illness or disability (Government of Ireland, 2023: 6).

Examples of the findings on inequality include:

- Households in the lowest 20 per cent of the income distribution are much more likely to have great difficulty making ends meet: 11.6 per cent of such households have this problem compared to 1.0 per cent of households in the top 20 per cent;
- Those on lower incomes are also more likely to experience depression: 18 per cent of those in the bottom 20 per cent of the income distribution reported depression compared to 11 per cent in the top 40 per cent;
- The rates of reported depression for women (16 per cent) are higher than men (11 per cent);
- Those in lower-income households are more likely to spend a lot of time on care: the share of people in the lowest 20 per cent of households who provided more than 20 hours of care is 36 per cent, as compared to 23 per cent for those in the top 20 per cent.¹¹ A higher share of women (37 per cent) than men (23 per cent) spend more than 20 hours per week on care; and
- In terms of perceived social inclusion among those unable to work due to permanent sickness or disability and those who are unemployed, these groups rated their level of social inclusion as 6.3 and 6.4 out of 10,

respectively. This is lower than among those at work (7.8) or those who are retired (7.6) (Government of Ireland, 2023).

Income and Wealth Inequality

The distribution of income in Ireland has become more egalitarian since 2000. The Gini coefficient was approximately 0.29 in 2000 and 0.28 in 2022 (Roantree et al., 2021; CSO, 2023b). The CSO Household Budget Surveys from 2000 to 2015 show that disposable household income increased more than average for income deciles 1-6, and increased most for deciles 1-4 (CSO, 2017).

Declining inequality in disposable income in Ireland over the last 35 years is unusual in Europe, and is the result of deliberate tax and welfare policy decisions (Roantree et al., 2021). It is of benefit to individuals with low incomes, but also to the wider economy, as lower-income inequality boosts economic growth (Cingano, 2014). The gender pay gap has also declined, from a 19 per cent gap in average gross hourly earnings in 2002 to an 11 per cent gap in 2020. One factor that influenced this is the introduction of the national Minimum Wage in 2000, which reduced the gender pay gap in the bottom wage decile from 24 per cent to 5 per cent (Doorley, 2018).

However, the distribution of wealth tends to be more unequal than the distribution of income. Low levels of wealth mean low resilience and little or no 'cushion' that can be relied on during periods of economic stress, illness, etc. It also reduces the capacity of those with low levels of wealth to undertake developmental opportunities such as further education, etc., weakening the sense of connection to the economy and overall cohesion (NESC, 2023b).

People with low levels of wealth include lone parents and the unemployed. For example, in 2020, the median net wealth of lone parents was €4,000 and that of unemployed people was €5,000, compared with €193,100 on average (CSO, 2022b).

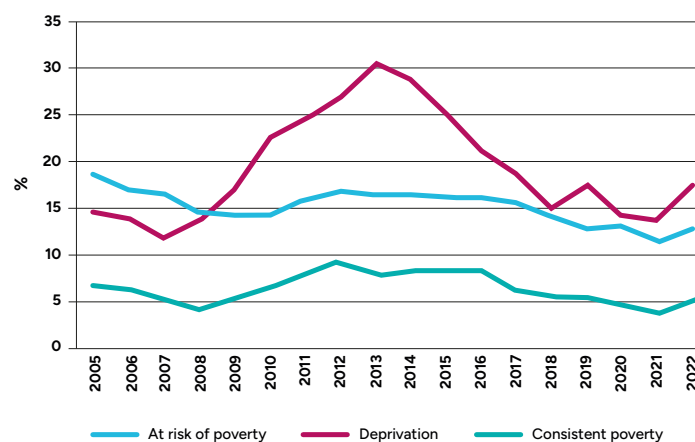
The declining security of housing and pensions affects the confidence of lower-income groups and in the longer term, wealth distribution. Changes to housing affordability and security may also depress birth rates. The future implications of declining security and increased costs for both housing and pensions for some groups in old age need to be planned for.

Poverty

Income and wealth inequality affects the levels of poverty in the population. The at-risk-of-poverty rate in Ireland, after social transfers, declined from 18.5 per cent in 2005 to 13.1 per cent in 2022, showing a slight increase from a low of 11.6 per cent in 2021 (CSO, 2022b). The official Irish consistent-poverty rate (below 60 per cent of median income, which was €303 per week in 2022 and deprived of basic necessities) declined from 7 per cent in 2005 to 5.3 per cent in 2022, also revealing an increase from a low of 4 per cent in 2021.

Enforced deprivation showed more volatility over the period, from 14.8 per cent in 2005, falling to 11.8 in 2007 at the height of the Celtic Tiger era, and then rising to a high of 30.5 per cent in 2013 in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crash. The enforced-deprivation rate stood at 17.7 per cent in 2022, increasing from 13.8 per cent in 2021 (see Figure 5.2).

Poverty Trends in Ireland 2005–2022



Source: Compiled from the CSO Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) statistics. Over the years, some changes have been made to the collection, processing and analysis of the data, plus the statistics were influenced by the impact of Covid-19 and the measures taken to alleviate hardship. Details are available at: <https://www.cso.ie/en/statistics/socialconditions/surveyonincomeandlivingconditionssilc/>.

¹¹ If a person experienced two or more of the eleven basic deprivation items due to an inability to afford them, they are said to be deprived. The eleven items are: (i) without heating at some stage during the year; (ii) unable to afford a morning, afternoon or evening out in the last fortnight; (iii) unable to afford two pairs of strong shoes; (iv) unable to afford a roast or its equivalent once a week; (v) unable to afford a meal with meat, chicken, fish or its equivalent every second day; (vi) unable to afford new (not second-hand) clothes; (vii) unable to afford a warm waterproof coat; (viii) unable to afford to keep the house adequately warm; (ix) unable to replace any worn-out furniture; (x) unable to afford to have family or friends for a drink or meal once a month; and (xi) unable to afford to buy presents for family and friends at least once a year.

It is notable that 20.5 per cent of people would have been at risk of poverty without Covid-19 income supports in 2022 (and 19.9 per cent in 2021).¹² The increases in the poverty rates from 2021 and 2022 are attributed to the removal of Covid-19 supports and increases in the cost of living as a result of the war in Ukraine. In the CSO Survey of Income and Living Conditions 2021, if all social transfers were excluded from income, the at-risk-of-poverty rate would have been 38.6 per cent, i.e. almost double, highlighting the important role of the social welfare system (CSO, 2022c).

Ireland has had a National Anti-Poverty Strategy since 1997, where targets have been set for poverty reduction. The current anti-poverty strategy in the Road map for Social Inclusion 2020-2025 (Government of Ireland, 2020) has the following poverty-reduction target:

To reduce consistent poverty to two per cent or less and to make Ireland one of the most socially inclusive countries in the EU.

Despite positive progress over the 17 years since 2005, there is still some way to go to reach the target. Some population groups have fared better than others over this period. Particularly positive outcomes were apparent for older people between 2002 and 2020, as a result of a range of policy decisions. However, since the recent increase in the cost of living, poverty and deprivation rates have grown especially strongly for those aged over 65 years, showing the importance of focusing on those on fixed incomes and not in employment, in order to maintain the policy gains of the past two decades.

¹² The Covid-19 supports are the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP), the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) and the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS).

Groups Being Left Behind

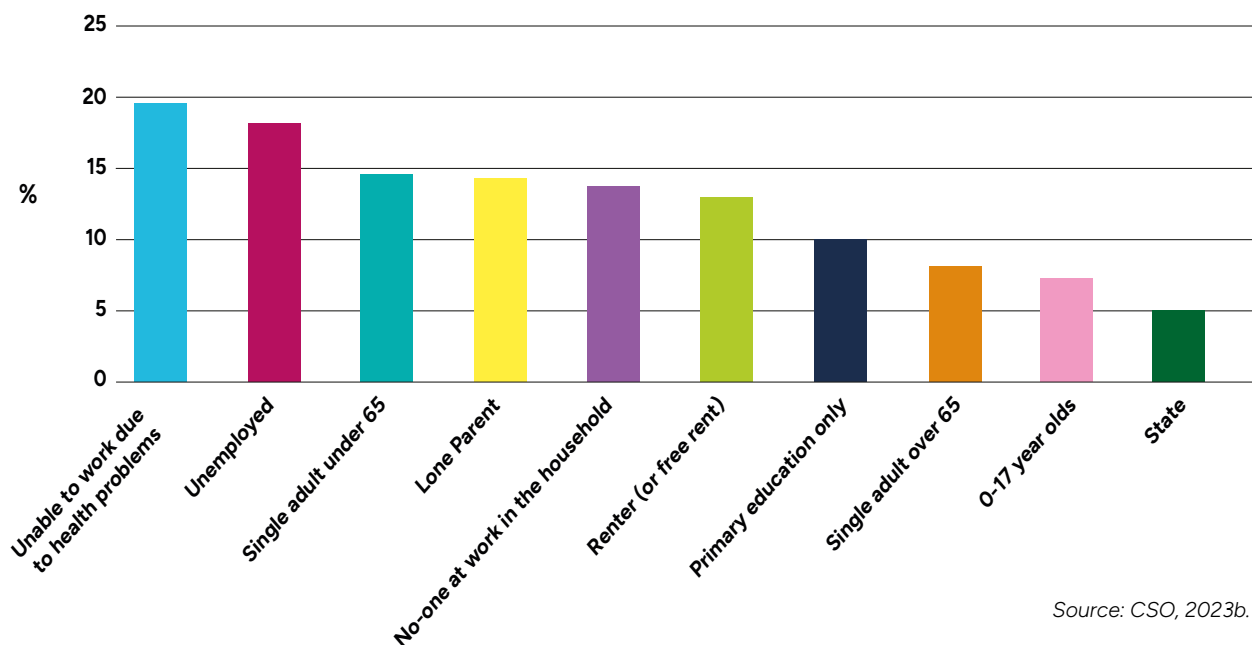
There remains a risk for groups and places where people are being 'left behind', plus other areas where there are inclusion challenges. Figure 5.3 shows consistent-poverty rates among various population groups where the risk of poverty is relatively high.

People with a long-standing health problem or disability have a comparatively high risk of poverty due to two overriding factors – the extra costs of disability or health problems and difficulties accessing employment. Lone parents have a high poverty risk related to a number of factors – often managing on a single income; caring for their child/children, limiting work opportunities; or, if working, paying for expensive childcare. Lone parents with a low level of education have limited employment options.

Children are more likely than any other age group to experience poverty and deprivation. In April 2022, there were 1.22 million children in this bracket in Ireland, making up 24 per cent of the population. Some 92,000 children (7.5 per cent) lived in households that were consistently poor, i.e. with low income and experiencing enforced deprivation.

The proportion of adults living in very low work intensity households in Ireland, at 13 per cent in 2019, is the third highest in the European Union. The proportion of women and lone parents in such households is over twice the EU average; for low-educated women, it is 2.5 times the EU average. Approximately 42 per cent of single parents (mostly mothers) were in a very low work intensity household in 2019 (Nugent, 2021).

Selected Population Groups at Risk of Consistent Poverty, 2022



Single people aged under 65 have a relatively high risk of consistent poverty at 14.5 per cent. This is a diverse group, but many are known to be unemployed, have an illness or disability, or to be in low-paid work. Coupled with fewer available social welfare supports, and high rental costs, this can put single people aged under 65 at risk of poverty (SJI, 2019).

Renters have a relatively high risk of consistent poverty at 12.9 per cent, comparatively higher than owner-occupiers at 2.2 per cent.

There is a substantial subgroup of the population who are in paid jobs but do not earn enough to lift them out of poverty, the so-called working poor. Some 2.3 per cent of the employed population were in consistent poverty in 2022, amounting to more than 90,000 people, up from under 40,000 in 2021. More than 520,000 people who were working (12.7 per cent of the population aged 16 and over) experienced enforced deprivation in 2022.

While not included in the official poverty statistics, because they are numerically small, Travellers and Roma are some of the most disadvantaged people in Ireland. In addition to poverty, they experience discrimination, inequality and exclusion.

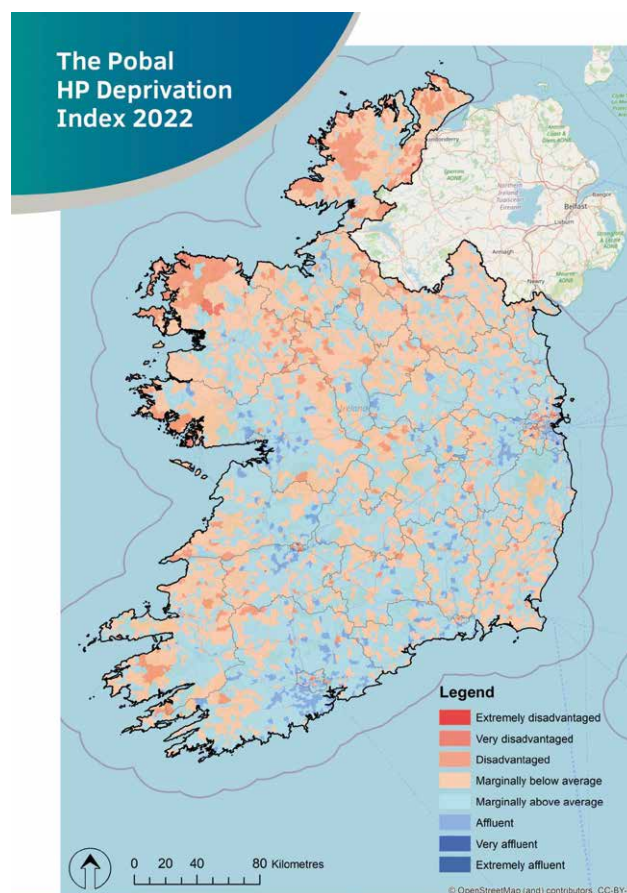
Geography of Poverty

There are areas throughout the country with concentrations of poverty. A recent analysis by Pobal of the 2022 Census results reported that 195,992 people now live in areas classified as very or extremely disadvantaged, an increase of 52,486 from when the last analysis was undertaken in 2016. Since then, the gap between Ireland's most disadvantaged areas and the national average has grown. Overall, while there has been a nationwide improvement in measures such as employment and population growth, with levels returning to those observed in 2006, persistent disadvantage remains for many communities.

Urban areas contain more extremes of both highly disadvantaged and highly affluent locations than rural areas, which tend to see less variation. Disadvantage is disproportionately experienced in small pockets in Dublin city centre, the north and west suburbs, the outskirts of Cork, Waterford and Limerick and a small number of rural towns. Relative affluence continues to be seen in South Dublin and in the commuter belts surrounding Dublin, Cork and Galway. New housing developments outside cities are also leading to fresh areas of affluence being recorded beyond the traditional suburban locales. The distribution of disadvantage and affluence across the country is shown in Figure 5.4.

The Pobal HP Deprivation Index uses data from the 2022 Census, analysing 10 measures of an area's levels of disadvantage. These measures include educational attainment, employment status, population change and numbers living in individual households. Disadvantaged communities experience significantly higher levels of unemployment and low educational attainment, with larger numbers of lone parents.

In general, the analysis indicates that the distribution of disadvantage is a long-term and entrenched issue. However, analysis at this level of detail (19,000 small areas of 50 to 200 households across the country) enables targeting of measures to tackle disadvantage. For further information, see www.pobal.ie/pobal-hp-deprivation-index.



Focus on Sustainability

Sustainability of wellbeing is not separately assessed in Ireland's wellbeing framework in the way in which it is in the OECD framework, but 14 indicators across the different dimensions are marked as being of importance for sustainability.

Some of these also relate to current wellbeing and have been included above, for example, healthy life years and the reading and maths skills of 15-year-olds. Examples of positively performing sustainability indicators are the growth of household wealth, healthy life years and the share of dwellings with good BER ratings (A or B).

The majority of the sustainability indicators showed positive performance, but there were exceptions in greenhouse-gas emissions, waste generated, river water quality, and research and development personnel:¹³

- Ireland's greenhouse-gas emissions on a production basis in 2021 were 14.1 tonnes per capita, the second highest in the EU and almost double the EU average of 7.4 tonnes;
- Waste generated per capita was also above the EU average in 2020 (644 tonnes per capita compared to 521 tonnes) and increased by almost 10 per cent from 2018 to 2020;
- There was a decline in the share of river waters assessed as being 'high' or 'good', from 57 per cent in the 2010–2015 period to 50 per cent from 2016–2021. Ireland was just below the EU average on this indicator assessed for a different period (2018–2021); and

- Research and development personnel (marginally negative): while the number of these personnel in Ireland increased from 31,396 in 2018 to 34,721 in 2021, the share of such staff in employment in Ireland at 1.52 per cent was slightly below the EU average of 1.61 per cent.

The remainder of this section draws on the OECD's 'How's Life?' database to consider Ireland's performance on the four capitals: natural, economic, human and social.

Natural Capital

In terms of natural capital, Ireland's performance under the OECD framework is above average on a limited number of indicators. In 2019, 88 per cent of the country was covered by natural or semi-natural vegetated land, and this was the second highest share in the OECD. Coverage of this type of land has been stable in Ireland over the period 2004 to 2019, with gains and losses of 0.2 per cent, both of which are low relative to other OECD countries (gains of 0.6 per cent and losses of 0.7 per cent) over the same period.¹⁴

The Red List Index is an indicator of the combined extinction risk for birds, mammals, amphibians, cycads and corals. It ranges from 1.0 (least concern, all species not expected to become extinct in the near future) to 0 (all species having gone extinct). For Ireland, this indicator was 0.92 in 2022 and this was above the unweighted OECD average of 0.88.

¹³ The environment indicator on the share of people reporting problems with pollution etc. also showed a negative performance but is not classified as a sustainability indicator. In the case of research and development personnel, performance was marginally negative.

¹⁴ Change in land-use cover is taken from the OECD environment database.

Using the OECD's framework to assess the sustainability of our wellbeing also highlights challenges to Ireland's status as thriving, inclusive, protective and forward looking. On climate change, the framework presents emissions both in terms of domestic production (the standard approach) and final domestic demand. Ireland's greenhouse-gas emissions on a production basis (excluding land-use, land-use change and forestry) in 2020 were 11.6 tonnes per capita, the seventh highest in the OECD. Carbon dioxide emissions embodied in final demand (the carbon footprint) were 10.7 tonnes per capita in 2018, the eleventh highest and the same as Finland.

On recovery of municipal waste, Ireland had been above the OECD average, but in 2019, the country was below the unweighted average (38.0 compared to 42.0).¹⁵

Excess nitrogen use is a significant source of pollution. Ireland has gone from being below the OECD average in terms of the soil nitrogen balance in 2015 (42 compared to 65kg/ha) to above the unweighted average in 2018 (70 compared to 58kg/ha).¹⁶

Ireland's share of renewable energy in the total energy supply in 2021 (11.5 per cent) was approximately the same as the OECD average (11.6 per cent). In some small countries, renewables provide around 40 per cent or more of total energy (Iceland, Norway, Latvia and New Zealand) (OECD, Undated).

'Intact forest landscapes' are a type of land with particularly high value in terms of ecosystems. There are only 11 countries in which these landscapes remain, and Ireland is not among them (OECD, 2020).

'Protected land and marine areas' are a way of conserving biodiversity. Across the OECD, 16 per cent of land areas and 25 per cent of marine areas were protected in 2019, both up from 13.5 per cent in 2010. The share of protected marine areas doubled in 10 countries over the period from 2010 to 2019 (OECD, 2020). Ireland has relatively low rankings for both of these indicators. Only a respective 2.4 and 14.2 per cent of marine and land areas were protected in 2021, the fifth lowest in the OECD in each case.

Finally, Ireland's material footprint in 2019 was 49.3 tonnes per capita, the second highest in the OECD and well above the unweighted average of 26.2 tonnes per capita. The country's material footprint increased by over 90 per cent from 2010 to 2019.

Economic Capital

Ireland has a high ranking in regard to the level of produced fixed assets (all types of physical capital) relative to the size of the population. In 2020, Ireland was the highest for this measure among 25 OECD countries, including foreign direct investment as well as domestic investment.

In addition, household debt has fallen sharply from 228.7 per cent of disposable income in 2010 to 111.4 per cent in 2021, and Ireland now has a mid-level ranking on this indicator within the OECD (15th out of 29).¹⁷

"...premature mortality (potential years lost per 100,000 population) in Ireland in 2015 was 3,656, well below the OECD average of 4,625."

The OECD's wellbeing framework also suggests that there is room for improvement. In the majority of OECD countries, government net worth is negative, i.e. government liabilities exceed government assets. The level of government net worth (assets less liabilities) in Ireland in 2021 was -US\$40.8 per capita in purchasing power parity (PPP) terms. This was the thirteenth most negative out of 38 OECD countries. Countries with more negative net worth included France (-US\$86.6 per capita, PPP), UK (-US\$106.0 per capita, PPP) and the US (-US\$96.8 per capita, PPP).

Human Capital

Ireland's status as thriving, inclusive, protective and forward looking is bolstered when measured in terms of human capital under the OECD framework. For example, of the five indicators of human capital, the country outperforms the OECD average on four of these. This is particularly the case for the educational attainment of the population. In Ireland, 94.7 per cent of those aged 25 to 34 had at least upper secondary education in 2021, and this was the fourth highest among OECD countries for which data is available.

Ireland also now performs strongly on labour underutilisation, which includes unemployed, discouraged or underemployed workers. In the final

quarter of 2022, the rate of labour underutilisation was 8.3 per cent, the ninth lowest in the OECD and similar to Denmark. Until recently, this indicator was much higher at 15.1 per cent in 2021.¹⁸

Further, premature mortality (potential years lost per 100,000 population) in Ireland in 2015 was 3,656, well below the OECD average of 4,625 (OECD, 2020; varying years used in computation of the OECD average).

Finally, smoking prevalence (share of population aged 15 and over who say they smoke daily) in the country was 17.0 per cent in 2018, below the OECD average of 18.8 per cent (OECD, 2020; varying years used for the OECD average).

However, obesity was the one human capital indicator for which Ireland's performance was weaker than average. One in five of the population in the OECD is considered to be obese (20.8 per cent, varying years used), while in Ireland, the share in 2017 was 23.0 per cent (OECD, 2020).

Social Capital

Social capital in the OECD's approach is about 'the social norms, shared values and institutional arrangements that foster co-operation among population groups' (OECD, 2022: Chapter 16). Using this yardstick, Ireland could be deemed to be doing well.

¹⁵ Waste recycled or composted as a percentage of all waste treated.

¹⁶ The OECD averages are unweighted averages of countries for which data is available. There are several OECD countries for which data is not available. The 2015 data is from OECD (2020). The 2018 data for Ireland is from OECD (Undated) and the OECD average is calculated from the OECD wellbeing database.

¹⁷ Minimising household debt is not always appropriate. An improved availability of housing to purchase in Ireland would lead to an increase in household debt. The highest level of household debt within the OECD is in Denmark (254.6 per cent). It is reported in the OECD framework that net worth for Ireland across all sectors of the economy is the most negative in the OECD. The meaning of this is not clear given an above average level of household wealth and may arise from accounting practices.

¹⁸ This indicator is available from the OECD databank, National Accounts, https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=HH_DASH&ga=2.148725950.804359542.1690804834-1688500501.1686584878 [accessed 02.08.2023].

For example, fewer than half the population on average trusts their government in OECD countries (OECD, 2020). This share is substantially higher in Ireland at 62.3 per cent in 2021, ranking eighth in the OECD.¹⁹ There has been a large increase since 2010, when just 33.3 per cent of the population expressed trust in government. Another measure of trust is monitored in the OECD Trust survey. This also showed an above-average level of trust in national government in Ireland, with 51 per cent indicating a response of 6 to 10 on an 11-point scale compared to an OECD average of 41 per cent. However, there is a large gap in trust in government between younger and older people in Ireland. According to the survey, 59 per cent of people aged 50 or more expressed trust in government in 2021 compared to just 28 per cent of those aged 18 to 34, and this gap was the largest in the OECD (González, 2022).

Trust in other people in Ireland is also above the OECD average. On a scale from 0 (not at all) to 10 (completely), this was 6.83 in 2021, and Ireland was the second highest of the 26 countries for which data is available.

Corruption as perceived by experts and business people is reported on in the OECD framework on a scale of 0 (highly corrupt) to 100 (total absence of corruption). Corruption in Ireland in 2021 was 74.0, ranked as 15 out of 38 countries. Nevertheless, the framework also suggests certain weaknesses in Ireland's performance. For example, the proportion of parliamentary seats held by women was 22.5 per cent in 2021, which placed Ireland 32nd out of 38 countries.

Finally, stakeholder engagement with government when developing laws or regulations is measured in the framework on a scale from 0 (no engagement) to 4 (maximum engagement). Stakeholder engagement in Ireland in 2021 was put at just 1.1, the lowest in the OECD.

Conclusion: Thriving But Challenges Remain

In seeking to explore Ireland as a thriving, inclusive, protective and forward-looking country, this chapter examines how it performs under the wellbeing framework.

It shows the many and varied ways, economically, socially and environmentally, in which Ireland is thriving and performing very strongly. The chapter also highlights that there is room for improvement, to protect current and future wellbeing.

This helps frame the sense that Ireland, as an island subject to wider and deeper economic, geo-political, climate and technological changes, is at a pivotal moment. It sets the scene for the conversations reported in the chapters which follow.

“59 per cent of people aged 50 or more expressed trust in government in 2021 compared to just 28 per cent of those aged 18 to 34, and this gap was the largest in the OECD”

¹⁹ This figure is from the OECD's How's Life? wellbeing database. The original source of the data comes from a Gallup survey in which respondents are asked whether they have confidence in the national government.

Chapter 6

A Macroeconomic Perspective on Thriving

John McHale is Professor of Economics at the J.E. Cairnes School of Business and Economics, University of Galway. He was Chair of the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council from its inception in 2011 to 2016 and an independent member of the National Economic and Social Council and the Pensions Authority.

John provides a reflection on his time in NESC and on Ireland's performance from a macroeconomic perspective. This complements the analysis in the preceding chapter and helps enrich the debate among stakeholders about Ireland's future. He argues that the last half century has seen dramatic changes to Ireland's economy and society. In his remarks at the conference, Professor McHale highlighted that NESC has been at the centre of the policy debate over this entire period and has made hugely valuable contributions to the thinking behind the economic, social and environmental dimensions of Ireland's development model. He stated that during his years as an independent member of the Council, he got to see first-hand how it produced ideas and helped form a consensus around those ideas.



Noting, of course, that it would be wrong to expect anything like complete convergence in the views of a diverse set of stakeholders. But, in addition to its strategic thinking about the country's development challenges, he stated that NESC and its Secretariat have been instrumental in avoiding the kind of polarisation around policy ideas that we have seen is so damaging elsewhere. This chapter reflects on Ireland's long run macroeconomic performance. It highlights Ireland's historical underperformance compared to European peers in terms of population growth and standard of living. Recent data shows a dramatic shift, with the country experiencing substantial population growth and improved economic performance, indicating a thriving economy.

The chapter argues that Ireland's development model, including outward orientation, investment in human capital and commitment to social justice, laid the foundation for its success. It identifies future challenges to the country's economic thriving, including deglobalisation, demographics, digitalisation and decarbonisation, areas which require creative thinking and consensus building.

A Macroeconomic View on Thriving

There are many ways to think about what it means for a society to thrive, and some may see the very idea as minimising the remaining problems.

From a macroeconomic perspective, one candidate approach is to compare an economy's development performance with an assessment of its potential. Coming as it did before the emergence of Ireland's Celtic Tiger economy, an influential – and undeniably pessimistic – assessment of the performance-potential gap was provided in Joseph Lee's path-breaking 1989 book, *Ireland 1912–1985: Politics and Society*. Taking the performance of other (mostly smaller) European states as an indicator of potential, the book contains a remarkable analysis of how economic performance compared with potential over the seven decades since independence.

How well has independent Ireland performed? Opinions naturally differ on the quality of the cultural, intellectual and spiritual performance, where the criteria are highly subjective. Opinions differ too on the quality of social and economic performance. But here it should be possible to focus the discussion on more impersonal issues. Two criteria for assessing a country's material performance are the number of citizens it can support, and the standard of living at which it can support them. (Lee, 1990: 511.)

It is fair to say that the picture Lee paints is one of the Irish State's 'failure to thrive'. On population, he compares Ireland's population growth performance (which rose by just 12 per cent from independence to the mid-1980s) to 15 comparator European countries (which had an average population growth of 55 per cent). Using data from the Penn World Table, Table 6.1

updates Lee's data, showing both the population growth rate for the periods 1950–1985 and 1985–2019.

Table 6.1: Comparison of Total Population Growth for Selected Periods

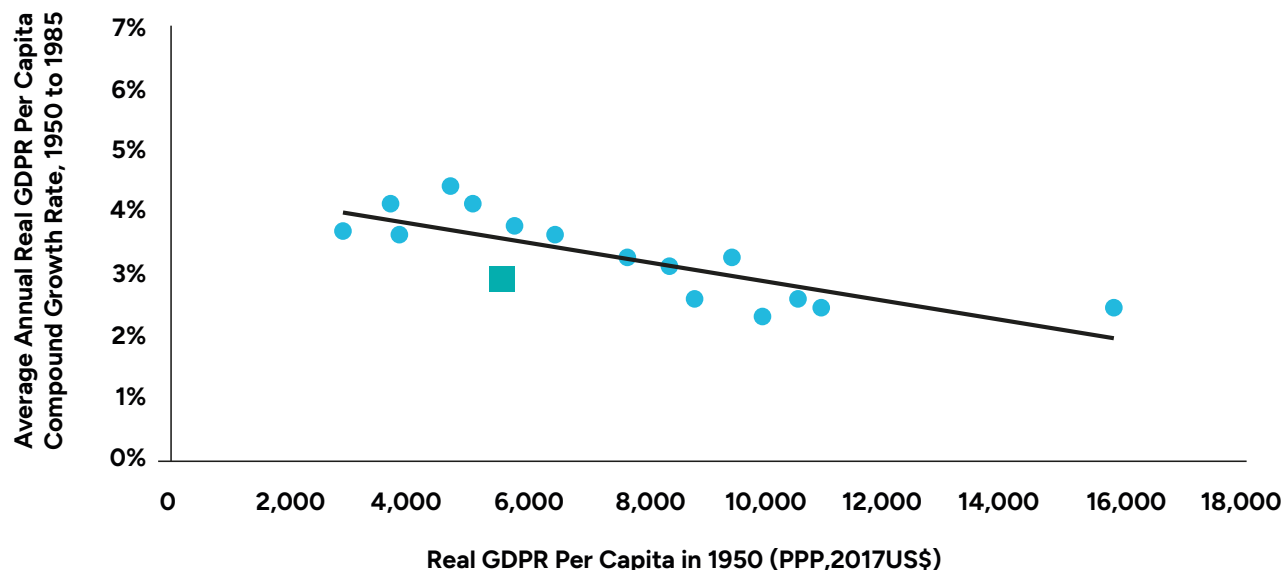
	1950–1985	1985–2019
Austria	9.1%	17.6%
Belgium	14.9%	16.4%
Switzerland	39.7%	33.5%
Germany	13.0%	7.5%
Denmark	19.7%	12.9%
Spain	38.0%	20.7%
Finland	22.3%	12.6%
France	33.1%	18.9%
United Kingdom	12.7%	19.7%
Greece	32.3%	5.1%
Ireland	20.2%	39.1%
Italy	21.2%	6.3%
Netherlands	43.8%	17.8%
Norway	27.2%	29.5%
Portugal	22.9%	3.0%
Sweden	19.0%	20.1%
Average	24.3%	17.5%

Source: (Feenstra et al., 2015) Penn World Table 10.01.

Although Ireland achieved reasonably fast population growth from the mid-1950s to the mid-1980s, the rate of population increase continued to lag many

Figure 6.1: Failure to Thrive – 1950 to 1985

1950 Real GDP Per Capita Versus Subsequent Average Annual Growth Rate, 1950–1985



Source: Penn World Table 10.01 and author's calculations; countries included are as listed in Table 1.

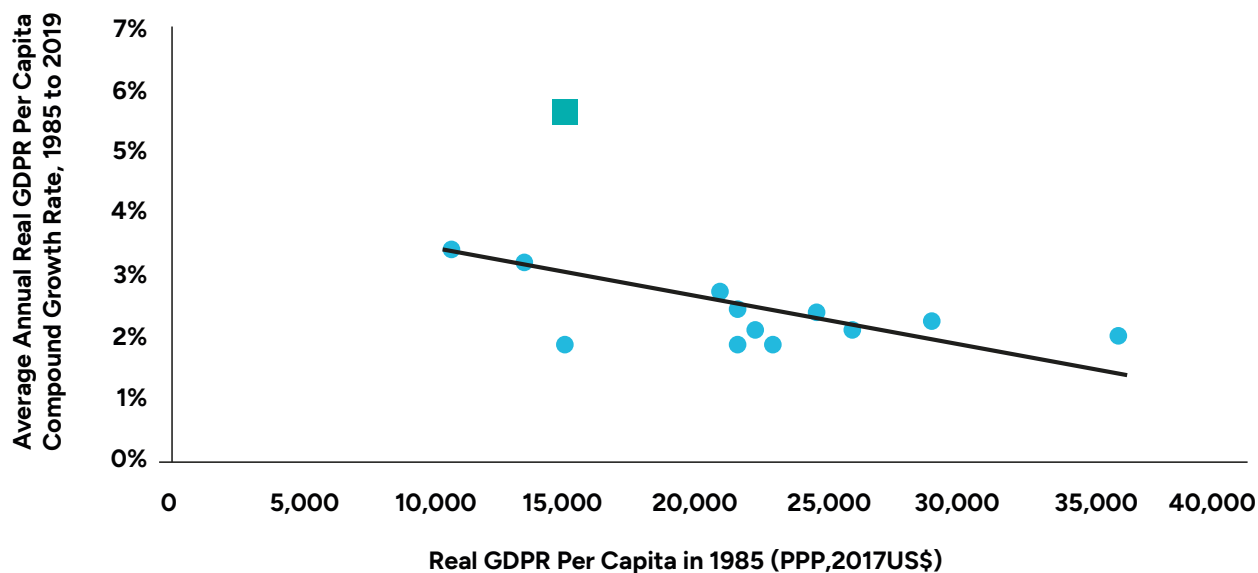
of our comparator countries. However, the picture is dramatically different in the decades that follow the publication of Lee's book, with Ireland achieving the highest overall growth in population – close to 40 per cent – of the countries Lee compared.

Figures 6.1 and 6.2 provide a perspective on the growth in living standards, using the growth rate of real GDP per capita adjusted for differences in the cost of living across countries. As is well known, countries that begin further behind the international technological frontier have a greater potential to grow. Standard comparisons of growth performance therefore consider performance controlling for the starting living standard. I again compare performance over both the periods from

1950 to 1985 and 1985 to 2019 using internationally comparable data.

For the earlier period, after taking account of Ireland's catch-up potential, it is evident that the growth performance lagged the country's potential, consistent with Lee's conclusions.

However, the performance-potential gap for the latter period is dramatically different. While real GDP has become an increasingly biased measure of the underlying strength of the economy in recent years, the overall picture is undeniably one of a strong growth performance, even after we take account of the catch-up potential (see also Honohan and Walsh, 2002; and

Figure 6.2: Catch-Up Growth – 1985 to 2019**1985 Real GDP Per Capita Versus Subsequent Average Annual Growth Rate, 1985–2019**

Source: Penn World Table 10.01 and author's calculations; countries included are as listed in Table 1.

Ó Gráda and O'Rourke, 2021). This broad improvement in performance is also visible when more comprehensive development measures that take into account environmental as well as standard economic measures are used (McGrath et al., 2022).

What would you have said if you had a glimpse of what would unfold over the following decades from the vantage point of the mid-1980s? At least from a macroeconomic perspective, I think it would be hard not to see this as thriving, notwithstanding the major reoccurrence of our long-standing tendency to make procyclical policy mistakes in the run-up to the financial crisis of 2008 to 2013.

Ireland's Development Model

Of course, many of the main features of the development model were already in place by the 1980s, even if they were not yet evident in performance. These included:

- A strong outward orientation, including openness to multinational investment and a commitment to European integration;
- An emphasis on investment in human capital, which was especially potent given the youthful age profile of the population; and
- A commitment to social justice, including a progressive tax and social protection system designed to offset high levels of inequality in market incomes.

Although not focused on Ireland, Richard Baldwin's book on *The Great Convergence*, which recounts how a small group of emerging markets took advantage of information-technology-enabled FDI to achieve rapid catch-up growth, provides a good lens to see how this turnaround in Ireland's macroeconomic performance was achieved.

The offshoring of production stages ... changed globalization, but not just because it shifted jobs overseas. To ensure that the offshored stages meshed seamlessly with those left onshore, rich-nation firms sent their marketing, managerial, and technical know-how along with the production stages that had been moved offshore. As a consequence, the second unbundling – sometimes called the “global value chain revolution” – redrew the international boundaries of knowledge. (Baldwin, 2016: 6.)

Practically without parallel among the western developed economies, Ireland positioned itself to take advantage of international trends in globalisation and digitalisation, contributing significantly to the outsized performance we see in Figure 6.2.

Ireland's Development Model in a Changing World: Can we Continue to Thrive?

Baldwin's framework also provides a good starting point for assessing the future challenges that we face in sustaining this performance as the contours of the global economy shift once again. In recent publications, the government has adopted the complementary framework of the '4Ds' for thinking about four of the main challenges to our continued economic thriving: deglobalisation, demographics, digitalisation and decarbonisation. Some brief comments on each:

- **Deglobalisation:** After decades of rising international integration, the process of globalisation has gone into reverse. With the possible exception of Brexit, this has not severely impeded Ireland's development model yet, but trends such as the US-China Chip Wars, the on-shoring of supply chains and multinational tax reform pose threats for the future;
- **Demographics:** After decades of economically favourable demographics, Ireland is set to experience rapid population ageing. This will impact economic growth and make our present fiscal system – even with the large current surpluses – unsustainable;
- **Digitalisation:** Ireland has been a huge beneficiary of the first wave of digitalisation, especially given its role in facilitating FDI. The era of digitalisation has not been so positive for other advanced economies, associated as it has been with disappointing growth and rising inequality. The next wave is likely to be driven by AI, and it remains an open question as to whether this will be 'the old digitalisation on steroids' or something different in kind that could pose a greater threat to our development model; and
- **Decarbonisation:** We achieved our rapid growth without significant constraints on our carbon emissions. The new world will be much more carbon constrained. Time will tell whether this will restrict economic growth or technological solutions will arrive to make a low-carbon future consistent with ongoing growth.

I have no doubt that the creative thinking and consensus-building roles of NESCC will remain central as we find a path through these and other challenges to Ireland's continued thriving.

Chapter 7

Thriving: Views from Seven Angles

Seven people were asked to consider the foundations and actions needed to underpin Ireland's ability to thrive.

First, Dr Mark Henry, an Irish academic in TU Dublin and author of *In Fact: An Optimist's Guide to Ireland at 100*, explores Ireland's progress relative to other countries. He argues that it can be hard to 'put your head above the parapet' of negativity. He outlines that Ireland's thriving status is objectively confirmed by various international rankings, including the UN's Human Development Index and the Social Progress Index. He suggests that the development of a Wellbeing Framework is welcome, but there is a need for wider public awareness and alignment across the political spectrum and policy system.

Second, Stefanie Stantcheva, Harvard Professor of Political Economy, provides an outside view and advocates for a focus on inclusive prosperity in a thriving economy and society. In particular, she believes that the lack of good jobs leads to labour-market polarisation, regional inequality and declining middle-class incomes. It contributes to social issues like family breakdowns and increased

crime rates and has political ramifications, which include the rise of authoritarian governments, as well as causing economic inefficiency.

Third, Kevin O'Connor, Director of BiOrbic SFI Bioeconomy Research Centre and Professor at University College Dublin, examines the importance of emerging green and bioeconomy opportunities. He contends that the transition to net-zero or sustainable production is crucial for thriving, while also highlighting significant challenges due to uncertainty and negative associations (e.g. job losses).

Fourth, Jack O'Meara, CEO of Ochre Bio (a biotechnology company developing a portfolio of liver medicines), gives his views on some of the changes needed to enhance the operating environment for enterprise and promote economic growth.

Fifth, Dr Eburn Joesph, Director and Founder of the Institute of Antiracism and Black Studies, reveals the structures and systems that need to change to ensure individuals and different generations thrive. She focuses on Europe's ageing population and



the contrast with Africa's youthful demographic. She advises that education is the key to long-term societal change, as it shapes attitudes and values, and that addressing racism requires systemic reform, starting with education.

Sixth, Professor Deirdre Heenan, Ulster University, has carried out extensive research and published widely on healthcare, education policy, social care and devolution. She concentrates on the role of a shared-island mindset in enabling both parts of the island to thrive. In particular, she emphasises how the absence of overarching strategies, political support and collaboration hinders progress in many areas. With reference to healthcare across the island, leadership and a shared vision are needed.

Finally, Dara Turnbull, Housing Europe, is working to improve the uptake of good practices by public, cooperative and social housing providers

in Europe. He asserts that housing remains the central issue for Ireland's thriving status. He focuses on improving data and coherence across aspects of housing policy.

Putting Progress in Context: Dr Mark Henry

Objectively, comparatively, Ireland is thriving. Yet, it seems brave for the NESC Secretariat to say so. It is putting its head above the parapet of negativity and naysaying that can weigh down Irish public opinion. Some will not admit that the country is doing well for fear of being judged as getting ahead of themselves, or being criticised because it is not true in every respect for everyone.

But how are we to effectively manage the country if we have no idea how well we are doing? And shouldn't we be obliged to share our insight if others can learn from our success? To effectively inform policy to improve population wellbeing – here and elsewhere – we need to recognise what we are doing well just as much as acknowledging what more needs to be done.

Comparatively, Ireland is thriving as the NESC's Secretariat's paper on the topic confirms. The country is ranked eighth in the world in the UN's Human Development Index, and twelfth in the Social Progress Index. We are the fourth freest country in the world according to the Human Freedom Index, we have the sixth freest media according to Reporters Without Borders, and we're the eleventh least corrupt country according to Transparency International.

Of course, Ireland has its challenges. There is an inequality of wellbeing just as there is economic inequality. But in what utopian nation is this not the case? Ireland's progress exceeds many, and our challenges are comparatively fewer. The negative lived experience of some does not negate the positive experience of the many.

In the most recent Eurobarometer survey, 96 per cent of Irish people said that they were fairly or very satisfied with their lives – one of the very highest figures in Europe.

These remarkable achievements are worth acknowledging – even celebrating – and our performance demands to be considered. What do these rankings really mean? What policy actions have got us to this point? How much further do we want go? What can we learn from those ranked above us?

Thanks to emerging research in the social sciences, the blueprint for improving national wellbeing is increasingly evident. I highlighted the emerging contributory factors in my book *In Fact: An Optimist's Guide to Ireland at 100*. Economic development provides the financial means for citizens to look after themselves and for the state to step in to provide adequate income security if they

cannot. A good healthcare system and a healthy natural environment help us live healthier and longer-lasting lives.

A solid rule of law, an absence of corruption, good quality governance and political stability have a role. High interpersonal trust and strong community bonds too. Personal and political freedoms enable individuals to express themselves and to make choices. A high level of democracy ensures that they can influence how the country is run. Globalisation contributes as free trade delivers financial benefits that help people meet their physiological needs, and an open, internationally engaged society allows its citizens to contribute to and be recognised on the world stage.

Greater education brings personal benefit, but a highly educated population also enables the country to better benefit from globalisation. It can also help to expand freedoms by insisting on toleration and higher standards of governance.

And, finally, high levels of generosity, a widespread sense of meaning and a flourishing society evidence a country realising its full potential.

This blueprint explains how the policies pursued in Ireland have contributed to the population's greater wellbeing and why the country has risen up the UN rankings faster than any other developed nation over recent decades: we have delivered meaningful improvements for our citizens on all of the relevant factors.

“...96 per cent of Irish people said that they were fairly or very satisfied with their lives...”



“Let us be unapologetically brave in our ambition.”

The time is right for Ireland to track the nation’s wellbeing by assessing progress in the areas that matter most. The development of our ‘Wellbeing Framework’ is certainly welcome, however, knowledge of it among the public is practically absent.

Without widespread public support for its constituent elements, policy initiatives designed to drive improvements may be perceived as misdirected. Participative democracy could help solve this conundrum, for example, through a Citizens’ Assembly on wellbeing.

As currently structured, however, the framework has coverage gaps in areas of importance such as personal freedom, interpersonal generosity and international engagement. And it includes factors that have not yet been linked to levels of wellbeing such as work quantity (as opposed to work quality), net government worth and the number of research and development personnel.

We, furthermore, need to weigh the framework’s constituent factors by their impact on wellbeing – not all are equally important.

But a more fundamental question is: what improvement in wellbeing are we seeking for the Irish people? We have no targets for our framework. And is it the mean scores that we should seek to improve or their distribution among the population?

We need alignment across the political spectrum on where we want Ireland to be in 2030, 2040, and even 2050. We have achieved this with a shared political vision for the future of healthcare in Sláintecare. We should now attempt the same for the future health of the nation.

Ireland’s wellbeing framework needs to be more than just a post hoc budget evaluation tool – it should be a driver of policy and budget initiatives. Improving national wellbeing should be an explicit goal of government, integrated into policy analysis and decision-making. I acknowledge that there are practical challenges to doing so: research is still uncovering what actions can be taken to move the needle – our knowledge of causality is weak. But herein lies an opportunity for one of the world’s thriving nations: we should invest in advancing insight into national wellbeing and the factors that contribute to it. We should fund social researchers to understand the positive progress that Ireland (and similarly well-performing nations) have achieved and the policy implications arising from that.

The more we can learn to thrive, and assist others to do so, the happier place our world will be. And that’s a noble thing to aim for. Let us be unapologetically brave in our ambition.

Inclusive Prosperity and Good Jobs:

Professor Stefanie Stantcheva

NESC has really focused on inclusive prosperity, on bringing together economic, social and environmental concerns. I am particularly excited about this because these are issues that I have myself worked on with co-authors and colleagues and that I think are extremely important.

And so, I want to briefly discuss the recurring topic of the need for good jobs, and why we need a good jobs agenda. This is based on work with my colleague at the Kennedy School, Danny Rodrik.

We have a series of papers where we outline:

- The rationale for thinking about good jobs;
- Why current systems are not necessarily well adapted to providing them; and
- What can be done to improve this.

And so, to start with the first: the basic idea of why we need good jobs. This is something that has been shown to impact a lot of problems and you can see this in many indicators – in measures of labour-market polarisation, rising spatial and regional inequality, declining job stability, greater self-reported economic insecurity, and also a decreasing share of income going to the middle class or lower-income earners. And this disappearance of good jobs is not only an equity problem or an economic problem, but also a social problem.

Declining labour-market opportunities can produce a wide variety of social problems, such as family breakdowns, increasing crime and substance abuses. All have been shown by sociologists to be really far-reaching problems. Another consequence of a lack of good jobs are political problems. Again, research has shown an association between a decline in labour-market opportunities and living standards and the rise of authoritarian or nativist populist governments.

In addition, the absence of good jobs is a problem for economic efficiency. So not only for equity, but also for productivity and growth. When there is a dearth of good jobs, there is a lack of dissemination of innovation and technological progress from a few advanced sectors and firms to the rest of the economy. There is no mechanism for what happens at the top to then lift all boats, so that everybody in the economy can benefit. There is a lack of creation of productive jobs in the middle of the income distribution that is detrimental to efficiency and growth. We argue that conventional welfare state policies that centre on education on the one hand, and on the other hand, on redistribution through progressive taxation and social insurance on their own, are not so well suited to address the problem of a lack of good jobs.

Instead, we propose a different strategy based on several pillars which target the labour market and the productive sectors of the economy to increase the supply of good jobs, mainly jobs that provide a middle-class living, a sufficiently high wage, good benefits, reasonable levels of personal autonomy, adequate economic security and some career ladder prospects.

The main aspects of this strategy are:

- Active labour-market policies developed in close co-operation with employers;
- Industrial and regional policies which directly target the creation of good jobs;
- Innovation policy that incentivises more labour-friendly technologies instead of labour-replacing technologies; and
- International economic policies that facilitate the maintenance of high social and labour standards and prevent a race to the bottom on these standards.

When we think about how to deal with a problem as complex as good jobs, it is useful to consider a framework to identify where different categories of policies fit in (see Table 7.1).

In its columns, this framework provides a good distinction, a bit finer grained than the usual distinction, between pre-distribution, which groups the first two stages together under one banner, and redistribution.

The three different stages in this framework are:

- Pre-production – this is everything that happens before the labour market, firms and workers interact;
- Production – this is where labourers and firms meet and produce; and
- Post-production – this is what happens after people have received their market income.

It allows us to distinguish between policies that affect the endowments that people bring to the market, such as education and skills, and policies that will influence production, employment, and investment decisions, such as industrial or labour-market policies, in the middle. In the rows of the framework, we consider which groups of people are affected by any given policy. We can think about the bottom, middle, or top of the income distribution. For instance, a policy like the minimum wage typically targets low-income working people, while wealth taxes typically target those at the very top. We can populate these cells of the framework with different types of policies, existing ones or those we might propose.

“...we propose a different strategy based on several pillars which target the labour market and the productive sectors of the economy to increase the supply of good jobs, mainly jobs that provide a middle-class living, a sufficiently high wage, good benefits, reasonable levels of personal autonomy, adequate economic security and some career ladder prospects.”

Table 7.1: At What Stage of the Economy Does Policy Intervene?

		Pre-Production Stage	Production Stage	Post-Production Stage
Which income segment do we care about?	Lower Incomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Primary education • Early - childhood programmes • Vocational training 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minimum wage • Apprenticeships • Reduced social insurance contributions by firms • In-work benefits 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social transfers (housing, family/child benefits) • Guaranteed minimum income • Earned income tax credit • Full-employment macro stabilisation policies
	Middle Incomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public higher education • Adult retraining programs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enterprise policies • On-the-job training • Collective bargaining • Work Councils • Trade Policies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unemployment insurance • Pensions
	Higher Incomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inheritance, gift and estate taxes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • R&D tax credits • Competition and antitrust policies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Top income tax rates • Wealth taxes • Corporation taxes

The current policy discussion and, to a large extent, what has been happening in the last decade centres a lot on the first and third columns (pre- and post-production). The focus has been on providing education and training to people before they join the labour market, and on ex post redistribution through progressive taxes and social insurance policies and transfers.

Thus, the role of the government is viewed narrowly, as financing education and providing training and redistribution. And the underlying assumption – which was perhaps valid previously, but clearly is no longer the case – is that if you have a sufficiently good education, you will find a sufficiently good job that pays enough, i.e. intervening for equity reasons in the pre- and post-production stages is enough.

The intervening stage has been traditionally viewed as somehow different, that production is all about productivity, efficiency and growth. The growth and equity agendas were treated as largely distinct. We argue that these must be taken together, because the lack of good jobs is a structural problem arising from technological progress and globalisation. This requires us to actually think about the middle stage of the economy, the productive stage, together with the traditional welfare state ingredients in the first and third pillars. For example, we propose that active labour-market policies must aim to increase the prospects of employment or earnings. Many traditional programs focus on providing skills, training and certification, using employment subsidies, public sector employment, or assistance with job search. Studies on their impact have shown mixed results.

However, one more promising approach is sectoral training programmes, which have produced really encouraging results in the United States. These programs differ from general training courses in that they are very oriented towards the needs of particular employers, in particular regions, and are devised in close co-operation with them. They also provide a wide range of customised services to job seekers, for instance, through training in soft skills as well as occupation-specific skills and credentials. Community colleges partner with local employers and there is an extensive wraparound and follow-up service in addition to the training and job placement. There is a dual approach that involves both job seekers and employers.

A second example comes from regional and business-targeted policies that are highly geared towards the creation of good jobs. We consider existing programmes where much of the focus is on providing tax subsidies on

capital, essentially to make firms locate in a given place, which might not be the most direct way to deliver good jobs. The evidence for the effects on employment of those subsidies and business tax incentives is also mixed. An alternative is to centre on areas that have the potential to create good jobs, and explicitly make the creation of good jobs a prerequisite for subsidies. There can also be less emphasis on tax incentives and encouraging physical investment, and more on providing specific public services that firms require (e.g. zoning, infrastructure policies and local amenities). A portfolio of business services, not only tax incentives, can be strongly geared towards incentivising the creation of good jobs.

Transition to a Sustainable Future:

Professor Kevin O'Connor

Transition to 'Net-Zero C' or sustainable production is hugely challenging, but one which is essential if we are to thrive in a climate-change impacted world. Transition is very challenging for us all as it creates uncertainty. The word has negative connotations because it is associated with job losses and moving away from what you do now to something different. The just transition with respect to climate change is about protecting the jobs and livelihoods we have by decreasing greenhouse-gas emissions within the production sectors such as agriculture, forestry, marine, transport, etc., while also allowing for the development of new opportunities. Research in the area of transition to net zero is complex and requires partnership, as no single person or entity has all the answers or expertise to deliver on national and EU ambitions. At BiOrbic, the Science Foundation Ireland-funded bioeconomy research centre, we act as a platform for partnership between researchers, industry and other actors, such as county councils, civil servants

and policymakers, to help address global challenges in the bioeconomy of national strategic importance. Two examples illustrate the work under way.

First, Farm Zero C is a Deep Demonstrator project based at Shinagh Farm in Bandon, Co. Cork attempting to create a climate-neutral, nature-positive commercial dairy farm. Shinagh is owned by four West Cork co-operatives (Drinagh, Lisavaird, Bandon and Barryroe) that supply milk to the Carbery Group. The project, originally funded by SFI and also now by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, industry and the EU, is a partnership between Carbery Group, Shinagh farm, and BiOrbic (University College Dublin (UCD), Trinity College Dublin (TCD), Munster Technological University (MTU), Teagasc and University College Cork (UCC)).

It is widely recognised that agriculture needs to reduce its emissions and improve its environmental impact. Farmers receive a lot of negative press about the environmental effects of modern farming, but they have also been advised to implement practices that are now seen as unsustainable. Farmers are aware of the challenges and understand many of the solutions. They are best placed to bring about change and so they are a critical partner in testing, demonstrating and implementing solutions at scale.

Sustainably producing food, energy, fuels, high-value biobased materials and ecosystem services that will support Ireland's transition to a low-carbon economy

will require shifts in practice and investments in infrastructure by farmers (OECD, 2015; 2023a). Farmers need to be supported and rewarded for the changes at farm level that benefit society. On-farm innovation can change the carbon and nitrogen footprint of the products we eat (food and bioactives) and use (fibres, materials, biobased chemicals, bioenergy and biofuels) and positively impact biodiversity, which will increase the resilience of our food production system. The transition to net-zero, nature-positive agriculture costs money, effort and time and it must reward those making that change so that society can transition equitably.

The NESC report on Just Transition in Agriculture and Land-Use (NESC, 2023a) highlights that there are three pillars of sustainability (economic, environmental and social) and all three of these are equally important. Agricultural communities in Ireland feel their livelihoods and way of life is under threat. It is essential in any transition that farmers and their communities are central in the debate and planning of the transition to sustainable agriculture.

Dialogue is critical as people need to have a voice, feel they are being listened too and have a meaningful impact on the future direction of their communities. In working with farmers, farmer co-operatives and processors, you learn about the feasibility of solutions and the fact that change is slow and requires buy-in from the ground up if you want it to work.

“Farmers receive a lot of negative press about the environmental effects of modern farming, but they have also been advised to implement practices that are now seen as unsustainable.”

The second example is the National Bioeconomy Campus. While Farm Zero C focuses on changing practices inside the farm gate, Ireland also needs to change how it manufactures goods outside of it. As a society, fossil-based products make up almost everything we use: clothes, packaging, homeware, paints, glues, personal care products, and even some vitamins. We need to develop new ways to produce the materials we consume in our everyday lives. The scaling of new technologies is expensive and a high financial risk to companies. Pilot-scale facilities significantly reduce the capital and operational expenditure to test and validate new products and processes.

At Lisheen, the site of a former lead-zinc mine, the Irish Bioeconomy Foundation (IBF) is setting up pilot-scale facilities as part of a National Bioeconomy Campus, with the support of Enterprise Ireland.

This Demonstrator allows industrial and academic researchers to not only scale new technologies that can transform how we produce everyday goods using biotechnology (biomanufacturing), but also accelerate new technologies to market. BiOrbic, UCD, TCD, UCC, Technological University of the Shannon (TUS), Tipperary County Council, Commercial Mushroom Producers (CMP) and Tírlán formed the IBF, a not-for-profit organisation that seeks to promote the development of the bioeconomy in Ireland. Lisheen, through its pilot-scale facilities, can demonstrate new biobased innovations at a scale that helps industry and academia to generate data that derisks investments by investors, diversifies their product portfolio and accelerates the commercialisation of biobased technologies and products.

These examples illustrate the importance of three key issues: demonstration, partnership and innovation.

First, demonstration is crucial, as people often need to see an example of change in order to be willing to scale and implement that change across society. Deep demonstrators are a vital tool, which are place based and require the co-operation and integration of multiple actors. Deep demonstrators can show what is possible, the areas where improvements and further development are needed to achieve success and how wider implementation could be carried out. Scaling and implementing solutions is not easy, as actors come together from very different areas of society and work in a space that is outside their comfort zones. It is expensive and working in high risk and untested areas increases the risk of failure, but such demonstrators allow practitioners and researchers to learn from their failures and adopt or reinvent. Thomas Edison is quoted as saying, 'I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work'.

Second, partnership is key to getting deeper buy-in from collaborators and a better sense of the direction of a project. It is critical to the success of both Farm Zero C and the Lisheen pilot-scale facilities.

In Farm Zero C, Carbery, a highly innovative dairy processing company, is an active and willing partner that wants its farmer suppliers to become climate neutral and nature positive. It wants to secure the future of the sector for its milk-producing farmer co-operatives. As a result of the co-operation between Shinagh farm, its board, the Carbery Group and researchers, the Farm Zero C project has gone from strength to strength. Partners are motivated to demonstrate positive change through action at farm level, whether increasing biodiversity or reducing the carbon footprint of milk to meet and exceed national and EU targets while maintaining productivity. Carbery is also focused on the

social aspect, given that family-owned milk suppliers are members of their community who are looking to create a brighter future for their children and grandchildren.

At Lisheen, so many people with diverse skills and backgrounds have come together and invested a lot of time and expertise to make it a reality. Stakeholders from industry (Tírlán) and academia (UCD, TCD, TUS and UCC) have contributed their technological and engineering expertise, and Tipperary County Council has also integrated Lisheen into county and regional plans. Challenges such as buying and renting land and property, planning permission, legal agreements with mining companies, risk management, insurance, finance, employing the right people and picking the right partners have been addressed by the collective. No amount of training can prepare you for the journey of setting up such a deep demonstrator, but working as a team and forming a partnership helps to drive everyone forward with a common purpose. As mentioned earlier, government support has been critical to the establishment and development of the National Bioeconomy Campus at Lisheen.

Finally, partnerships will need to transcend borders, as can be seen with the latest initiatives that the Governments of Ireland and the UK are aiming to promote. For example, the Shared-Island Fund, where a Bioeconomy Demonstration Initiative Scheme will invest in sustainable, innovative and circular bioeconomy development on a shared-island basis.

Third, innovation is important. Driving innovation in a new area is like pushing a heavy, jagged rock up a steep, slippery hill. Systems set up to govern business, funding, and research and innovation must adapt and be flexible enough to enable co-operation between actors, allow

transformational ideas to be implemented and accelerate innovation in sustainable solutions. Investing in deep demonstrators in the bioeconomy is a way to showcase to society the new ways of production which will be central to the success of a sustainable Ireland. It can help people to visualise new economic opportunities which can help their communities to thrive and reverse population decline in rural Ireland.

Propelling Ireland's Innovation Landscape:

Jack O'Meara

Ireland's dynamic economy, renowned for its entrepreneurial spirit, stands at a pivotal moment. To maintain its competitive edge in the global market, fostering innovation and supporting start-up companies is vital.

There are many aspects to this. I would like to focus on the implementation of R&D tax credits similar to the UK system, favourable investor tax incentives, unlocking domestic pension capital for indigenous companies and establishing stronger links with US investors and advisors. These initiatives will catalyse the growth of small and start-up companies, driving Ireland's economic prosperity.

The remainder of this section provides further details. First, Ireland should implement R&D tax credits similar to the UK system, which offers a compelling model for Ireland. This scheme encourages companies to invest in research and development by providing tax relief on their R&D expenditures. Ireland's adoption of a similar framework would incentivise small companies to engage in innovative projects, leading to technological advancements and enhanced competitiveness. I suggest tailoring the UK model to align with Ireland's unique economic landscape and establishing clear

“Ireland’s commitment to nurturing its small and start-up companies is crucial for its sustained economic growth and global competitiveness.”

guidelines to ensure accessibility for small companies, while regularly reviewing the system to ensure its effectiveness and adaptability.

The benefits of this would include increases in R&D investments among small companies, a spur to further innovation and technological progress and the enhanced global competitiveness of Irish businesses.

Second, Ireland should introduce more favourable investor tax incentives to support start-up companies.

Tax incentives for investors can play a pivotal role in attracting capital to start-up companies. These incentives could include reductions in capital gains tax or tax credits for investments in start-ups. I propose introducing tax breaks for investments in start-up companies and establishing a threshold to target genuine investors and start-ups in need, while ensuring transparency and compliance to maintain fiscal responsibility. This would encourage greater investment in high-potential start-ups, help alleviate financial burdens on emerging companies and boost economic growth through the success of start-ups.

Third, Ireland should do more to unlock domestic pension capital for indigenous companies. Pension funds represent a significant, yet often untapped, source of capital. Allowing a portion of domestic pension funds to be invested in indigenous companies could provide a substantial boost to the local economy. I recommend creating a regulatory framework to facilitate pension

fund investments in local companies, setting investment limits to mitigate risks and offering incentives to pension funds that invest in Irish companies. This would allow a more stable source of long-term investment for Irish companies, help to diversify the investment portfolio of pension funds and contribute to the growth of the domestic economy.

Fourth, Ireland should forge better links with US investors and advisors. The United States, with its vast network of investors and seasoned advisors, offers invaluable resources for growing companies. Establishing partnerships and networks with US investors and advisors can provide Irish start-ups with capital, expertise and market access. I suggest offering incentives for US investors and advisors collaborating with Irish companies or establishing bilateral agreements to ease investment flows for VC funds. This would enable access to larger pools of investment capital, exposure to global markets and business networks, and the acquisition of knowledge and expertise from experienced US advisors.

In conclusion, Ireland’s commitment to nurturing its small and start-up companies is crucial for its sustained economic growth and global competitiveness. By implementing R&D tax credits, providing investor tax incentives, unlocking domestic pension capital, and forging links with US investors and advisors, Ireland can create a robust environment for innovation and entrepreneurship.

These strategic measures will not only support the growth of small and start-up companies but also contribute to the nation's broader economic development. The time is ripe for Ireland to embrace these changes and position itself as a leader in the global innovation landscape.

Preparing for Change in the Education System:

Dr Eburn Joseph

Europe has an ageing population at an average of 44.4 years while Africa has a young population aged 19. The United Nations' prediction is that by the 2040s, Africa will have the highest human capital in worker population, and one in four persons will have black or African heritage.

The implication is that Ireland and Europe would need human capital from Africa, not as enslaved bodies anymore but as expatriates to help the economy. While Europe and the rest of the world are experiencing an ageing and smaller population, Africa will produce two out of five young people in the world by 2050. Countries like Japan are already crying out about an impending crisis or dysfunction with a median age of 48 years. In India, the world's most populous country, it is 28. In Ireland, China and the United States, the median age is 38 years.

The question to ponder is, how ready is Ireland for such a change in the next 27 years? Somebody might be thinking it won't happen. The UN report states that the figure is not going to change, because the women who are going to produce those babies are already alive today.

"We must amend our curriculum to suit our modern-day society."



Some sectors have seen remarkable changes happening already. In the music industry, Afrobeats, a West African musical genre, had its songs streamed over 13 billion times on Spotify in 2022. And the genre's biggest hit, Rema's 'Calm Down', was a phenomenon at the FIFA World Cup in Qatar. Burna Boy filled an 80,000 stadium in the UK. In Paris Fashion Week, there's already a move to have a segment for African fashion. In the Grammys, there's a segment that has been introduced for best African artist. These adjustments have been made. By 2030, Africa's film and music industries could be worth \$20bn and create 20 million jobs, according to UNESCO estimates. Afrobeats is thought to be worth billions in the market. We're encouraging people to drive electric cars, yet, 60 to 70 per cent of that copper comes from Africa. How are we making sure that we have a good working relationship with Africa?

To draw our attention to what is happening for and in Africa, how ready is the Irish education system and curriculum for that? Many are asking for curriculum change, to decolonise the Irish curriculum which is extremely white and eurocentric. There is a worldwide

call for curriculums to be decolonised as all references and teachings are white. In Ireland now, one in five is foreign born. Our schools still have little or no reference to black and African history. Unfortunately, many children growing up in Ireland go through all of their education and are never taught by a person who looks like them. They also do not learn any positive aspects about their African heritage. Despite Ireland conducting export business with Africa, it still does not invest in building that knowledge into Irish schools. Educational changes and a decolonised curriculum is one place for us to be ready, to ensure that people who come to Ireland feel that it's home, not just for those who are of European decent. It is important to note that Europe will need human capital in the future and when Africans come, they won't be enslaved. The young African workers will be coming as expatriates, with choices, that Europe needs due to the ageing population.

So how can we position Ireland to be a place that can receive these young people, where they're not going to be oscillating between staying and leaving to go elsewhere? Ireland is advantaged because it is the only English-speaking country in the EU now. How can we ensure we get good labour when the time comes? I shouldn't be advocating for good labour. But it's going to happen because the population is going to be bursting at the seams and people will be leaving. They are moving already, particularly in healthcare and IT where staff are being recruited directly from the African continent. Our curriculum is one area that has to change if it remains as white as it is today.

As a person of African descent in our Irish universities, we mainly still see the negative stereotypes in the curriculum. If we continue that trend, we are going to disadvantage both the people of African descent and our

white Irish students. Because they will not be prepared for that Africa or the change that is coming. We must amend our curriculum to suit our modern-day society. The Irish Census showed that the fastest growing population is the mixed race. In another 10 years, we will all have a person of African descent as a niece or nephew. So how are we going to ensure that we know how to care for their hair or understand their history if it has not been taught in school. This is why we have been advocating for African history in schools and in the curriculum to ensure we are ready for the future.

You can go through life and not see a doctor, lawyer or banker. However, you cannot go through life without needing the school system. It is the way Europe and Ireland is set up. We cannot avoid going through the education system, unless we're hiding somewhere. Actually getting long-term, effective change will happen through our education system, so we need to make sure that it's fit for purpose. If we look at our society today, it is a product of who we educate. So, if we have a society that is not working well, we trained them to be that way. We created what we see today. When I witness racism, I don't blame the person performing the acts. We need to blame the education system, because we have not taught people to be anti-racist. Although we are trying to address racism, it won't work unless we have a whole community approach and change the negative narrative of Africa, the single story that paints Africa and its descendants negatively. This perpetuates racism. We need to look toward the education system, which has not taught us to instill these values. There are some values we have all developed, because they've been taught in our classrooms. We need to start with building those values, and get the people who have the responsibility to think about our educational system. It's a sprint, and it has to be long term to get the results we want.

Making Shared Island Work in Practice – Focus on Healthcare:

Professor Deirdre Heenan

Cross-border healthcare enhances the choice available to service users, can address issues around the viability of clinical specialisms, value for money and economies of scale, and facilitate the sharing of knowledge.

Over the past 20 years in Ireland, cross-border healthcare has been identified as a priority area for increased co-operation and collaboration. Yet despite this, progress to date has been remarkably slow and often project specific. Additionally, in spite of its obvious potential, cross-border working has been the subject of remarkably little research. The dearth of evidence on what works and why is a significant obstacle to all-island policymaking.

This short section outlines a number of the key challenges in this policy area and concludes that given the similar social, economic and political issues, leveraging the opportunities presented by cross-border collaboration should be a policy priority.

Notwithstanding a general agreement that healthcare offers significant potential for increased co-operation, repeated calls for further collaboration and co-operation have not been accompanied by any detailed plans, feasibility studies or robust data to support an all-island approach. Statements by political parties and policymakers urging improved cross-border working are expressed in general, vague terms. While there are some limited examples of co-operation in health services between Ireland and Northern Ireland (Pollak, 2019), to date, the approach has been minimalist and often project specific. Aside from the notable exceptions of the Congenital Heart Disease Network and the Northwest Cancer Centre in Derry, there is relatively little activity in this key policy area. A report on cross-border hospital

planning warned in 2011: 'There is an absence of any agreed strategic framework covering both health and social care systems which might facilitate cross-border co-operation, a situation exacerbated by the apparent lack of political will to commit to cross-border co-operation on a mutually agreed agenda of work'. (McQuillan and Sargent, 2011: 12).

There are major structural and financial differences between the health systems in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. However, they share similar core principles and values and face comparable social, economic and political pressures (Butler & Jamison, 2007; Jamison et al., 2001). To a large extent, they have adopted broadly similar approaches to tackling systemic issues. Key challenges include an ageing and growing population, evolving healthcare needs, workforce planning, rising costs associated with medical technology and increasing expectations. When compared to other European countries, both jurisdictions have poor population health outcomes.

The main causes of premature deaths are the same: cardiovascular disease, cancer, accidents and suicide. Given the shared health challenges confronting each jurisdiction, and the dominance of healthcare in the policy agenda, the dearth of research and knowledge in cross-border health is remarkable. While the lack of priority and absence of strategic planning may be partly explained by the political sensitivities of all-island working, particularly for unionists, it does not fully explain why the potential benefits and barriers have not been the focus of substantial research attention. The lack of comparable data and robust information on both systems and their respective outcomes for the populations they serve has enabled a general lack of understanding and misrepresentation. Analysis of the

potential to improve health outcomes and ensure greater access to healthcare across the jurisdictions is severely underdeveloped. Bolstering research through joint initiatives would benefit everyone living on this island.

The absence of an overarching framework for cross-border interventions is a significant obstacle to developing and sustaining initiatives. Cross-border collaboration is not a policy priority and initiatives are often short term, fragmented and project specific. The nature and extent of all-island healthcare is ultimately informed by the wider political landscape, and cross-border working is not actively pursued or supported at ministerial level on either side of the border. Sustainable long-term collaboration will remain a pipe dream if it is not supported by a strategic framework agreed by both jurisdictions. This requires leadership and a shared vision.

Alongside a lack of a strategic vision, there is no vehicle or unit where knowledge and best practice can be developed and disseminated. Information on cross-border initiatives is dated, incomplete and difficult to access. Shining a light on best practice in healthcare could facilitate the alignment of priorities and reviewing of projects, help enhance knowledge, forge links and strengthen networks, and foster partnerships at all levels. Knowledge sharing is vital for exploring uncertainties and preventing people from making the same mistakes again. This type of working can enable shared goals and measurements to paint the big picture. Monitoring and evaluation of initiatives within an agreed framework

can contribute to the co-production of knowledge. Capturing common challenges through a network of stakeholders can inform appropriate policy responses.

It is possible that a more collaborative approach to transplant services, orthopaedic services and mental health could deliver significantly better outcomes for service users, but to date, the evidence has not been collated. Where is the good practice and what are the barriers to it scaling up and becoming embedded in policy and practice? I am working with Prof. Mark Lawler, Queen's University Belfast, on an all-island cancer policy project funded by the Royal Irish Academy's ARINS (Analysing and Researching Ireland North and South) project. We are clear that cancer knows no borders and nor should we. We are not in competition with each other, but should be working together to fight a common enemy – cancer.

In conclusion, an all-island approach has the potential to address some of the current issues and ensure that the island of Ireland is well placed to deal with future challenges. This joint approach will involve both working within current structures and developing new all-island structures. However, there is currently a lack of impetus for this type of working, despite its obvious benefits. Work in this policy area is not a priority on either side of the Irish border. Without leadership and a strategic framework underpinned by an ambitious vision for collaboration, interventions will remain fragmented and piecemeal. Difficulties around the collection and sharing of data represent substantial barriers to progress. Given the similar health challenges faced by each jurisdiction,

“Analysis of the potential to improve health outcomes and ensure greater access to healthcare across the jurisdictions is severely underdeveloped.”

there is a need to undertake further research to identify and support areas for collaboration. The logic of co-operation on the use of resources, experiences and best practice on a North-South basis to address issues which provide major challenges to both systems is irrefutable.

Housing – A European Perspective:

Dara Turnbull

Among the challenges that Ireland has faced in recent years, there is arguably none that has inserted itself more firmly into the public discourse than that of housing.

From the remarkable crash of the sector following the global financial crisis – during which house prices declined by 55 per cent²⁰ – to a sustained period of undersupply of homes and sharp rises in private rents (+105 per cent between 2010 and 2023)²¹, housing has become, and remains, as described by the most recent Eurobarometer survey of Ireland, ‘the defining issue’ facing the country, ‘with 56 per cent of Irish people citing it as their primary concern’ (European Commission, 2023).

How and why housing has become the defining issue has been the subject of much analysis in recent years. While there is certainly disagreement on a number of points, it is generally accepted that a lack of supply and the increased ‘financialisation’ of the sector have been important factors. The latter describes the process by which housing has become a key ‘asset class’, moving away from housing as a basic ‘need’²² that ought to be placed alongside things like healthcare or education. However, in the interest of not relitigating the case here, let us rather look towards a general framework for improved future outcomes.

The first point to make is that knowledge is key. If we do not truly understand a problem, then we have no hope

to fully deal with it. While Ireland is among the best in Europe on the availability of housing-related data, far more information is still needed. For example, much of the information is at the household level, such as the annual statistics on income and living conditions (EU-SILC).

This can often mask underlying housing issues. For example, Ireland has one of the lowest so-called housing cost overburden rates in the EU.²³

However, that there were a massive 275,000 adults still living with their parents, but also primarily in employment in 2022 flatters the figures (CSO, 2023a), boosting household disposable incomes (i.e. increased number of workers per household), while obscuring the issue of younger adults effectively ‘trapped’ at home. Ireland’s relatively low levels of income tax are also an important factor.²⁴ Indeed, it is with some frustration that I am often asked by colleagues in Europe for the secret of Ireland’s relative success with regard to its low overburden rate. An image of apples and oranges comes to mind. Ireland could, therefore, learn a lot from our neighbours in England, whose annual ‘English Housing Survey’ provides much better granularity of data, and can better serve to flag developing housing issues with different population cohorts (DLUHC and Ministry of Housing, 2013).

Once we understand the causes of a problem, we need to ‘design’ policies to effectively tackle them. However, Ireland has not always taken a sufficiently ‘holistic’ approach. This means it does not fully appreciate how individual policies can actively pull in different directions, blunting or even negating each other. A good example of this has been the various social tenant purchase schemes. The goal of promoting greater homeownership has for decades been pulling against the goal of ensuring

“...housing has become, and remains, as described by the most recent Eurobarometer survey of Ireland, ‘the defining issue’ facing the country, ‘with 56 per cent of Irish people citing it as their primary concern’.”

that there is a sufficient supply of affordable homes for low-income and vulnerable households.

Another important issue is that of ‘governance’. More specifically, the systems and oversights that accompany our institutions to ensure that public policy can be effectively implemented. A common occurrence right across Europe has been that governments identify the housing issues of the day, bring forward measures and then watch on as little or no meaningful progress is made. More often than not, this is down to a failure of governance. A classic example of this in Ireland today is the prevalence of short-term lets.

At the start of 2024, there were close to 5,000 full homes available to rent on Airbnb in Dublin (Airbnb, 2024). Many of these lets are likely illegal, as owners would have to apply for a change of use for a change of use (Government of Ireland, 2019). However, local authorities often lack the resources to enforce the legislation, which can require significant resources and take a long time to be processed by the courts system. Thus, despite violating existing legislation, the system

perpetuates, and adds further strain to the housing sector. This is a clear failure of governance.

In summation, if we can get the ‘knowledge’ piece right, we can hopefully move on to a better informed and more holistic approach to the design of housing policies. However, we have to make certain that these policies are set up to succeed, ensuring that all of the requisite structures, processes and resources are provided to guarantee that good governance becomes the hallmark of Irish housing policy.

Finally, Ireland is not alone in facing housing challenges on multiple fronts. Fortunately, we can look to our neighbours in Europe for guidance with dealing with most, if not all, of them. Countries like Austria, Denmark, France and Finland have for many decades implemented policies that could provide inspiration to policymakers in Ireland. The recent report *Delivering on Housing in Ireland: A European Policy Perspective* outlines a number of these good practices (Housing Europe, 2023).

²⁰ The CSO’s Residential Property Price Index declined from a high of 163.6 in April 2007 to a low of 73.4 in March 2013.

²¹ Based on the change in the ‘private rents’ sub-index of the CSO’s Consumer Price Index between January 2013 and December 2023.

²² See, for example, the research by Gabor, D. and Kohl, S. (2022).

²³ 3.9 per cent of Irish households dedicated 40 per cent or more of their household disposable income to housing in 2022, less than half the EU average rate (Eurostat, 2024).

²⁴ For further discussion of affordability comparison issues, see Housing Europe (2023).

Chapter 8

Reflection on Key Themes

Paul Donnelly is Professor of Management and Organisation Studies at Technological University Dublin. He reflects on the various strands of discussion around the material in this section.

Paul provides a reminder that the economy, society and natural environment are interdependent. He suggests that the insights from the NESC@50 Conference shine a light on themes like community, dialogue and policy. Community, partnership, participation and inclusivity foster belonging and equitable distribution. He reiterates how dialogue can build consensus and challenge narratives, but requires active, inclusive listening.

Good policy grounded in research, knowledge sharing and effective governance is crucial for progress. Paul concludes that NESC is well positioned to provide the research, dialogue and advice that is foundational to an ambitious vision for Ireland.



Reflection from Professor Paul Donnelly

The economy, society and natural environment are mutually foundational to a thriving Ireland. A healthy economy depends on a sustainable natural environment to provide resources and support infrastructure, while a cohesive society shapes economic policies and practices. Together, they contribute to our wellbeing, quality of life and resilience as a society.

These reflections were sparked by insights from contributions at the NESC@50 Conference around the foundational elements for a thriving Ireland. A range of themes emerged – community, partnership, participation and inclusivity; dialogue and consensus building; vision and empowering storytelling; policy informed and enabled by research, knowledge, information sharing and effective governance; and lifelong learning and education – along with prompting thinking in relation to democracy and technological determinism. These themes speak to a different set of foundations underpinning a thriving Ireland, and it is this that I briefly explore herein.

The theme of community, partnership, participation and inclusivity is foundational to a thriving Ireland because it fosters a sense of belonging, collaboration and collective

“...people need to have a voice and to feel they are being listened to...”

responsibility, all of which strengthen social bonds and lead to the equitable distribution of opportunities and resources, and ultimately enhance the overall wellbeing and resilience of our society. Working inclusively in partnership and community empowers individuals to have a voice in shaping our society, ensuring that diverse perspectives are valued and that everyone has a chance to contribute, and facilitates creating new ways of understanding to tackle challenges we collectively face.

Fundamental to partnership and community is the theme of dialogue and consensus building. Indeed, important qualities of dialogue are that: it is grounded in diversity, in a multiplicity of voices; it is generative, affording new ways of seeing problems and enhancing solutions; it allows for challenging and questioning dominant narratives; and it facilitates buy-in and the emergence of consensus. To leverage the strengths of dialogue, it needs to be inclusive and requires good and deep listening.

Indeed, the NESC approach in building multistakeholder consensus is instrumental in avoiding damaging polarisation around policy ideas. Equally, people need to have a voice and to feel they are being listened to, along with believing they can have a meaningful input into and impact on the future direction of their communities and society.

Linking to dialogue is the power of vision, along with compelling and empowering storytelling, to provide a clear and inspiring pathway to bring people along the journey to where we want to go as a society, rallying

individuals and communities towards common goals, and fostering motivation, creativity and a sense of purpose that drives progress and positive change.

Fundamental to moving from dialogue to action in support of a powerful vision is the need for good policy, which is grounded in research, knowledge and information sharing, and enabled by effective governance to ensure implementation. Research, knowledge and information sharing provide a solid foundation of evidence and insights on which to both build understanding of issues and challenges as fully as possible and make informed decisions that then address them as effectively as possible. Thus, timely and meaningful data, evidence to better understand what works and why, and co-operation and collaboration to share good practice across borders are all important inputs to good policy. Additionally, open and transparent information sharing fosters public participation, accountability and collaboration, enhancing the legitimacy and effectiveness of policies in addressing societal challenges. While it is one thing to come up with good policy, governance failure can doom its delivery. Therefore, having the necessary structures, oversight and co-ordination in place is critical to ensuring that policies are delivered efficiently, equitably and in a manner that aligns with the needs and values of our society.

Closely related to knowledge is the theme of lifelong learning and education. The challenges and changes ahead, allied with skills having an ever-shorter shelf

life, require that we keep learning if we want quality employment. Further, a curriculum that acknowledges other ways of seeing and knowing the world, ways that can enrich learning and education, would benefit our society and economy.

Something very foundational to a thriving Ireland that went unsaid, but that needs to be acknowledged and reinforced, is a thriving democracy and the need to nurture and sustain it. This links with the theme of lifelong learning and education, which should not simply be about skills for the workplace. A thriving democracy needs an active and engaged citizenry who contribute positively to political and public life as informed citizens. Lifelong learning can contribute to nurturing and sustaining our democracy through equipping and empowering our citizens with the knowledge, skills and critical thinking necessary to actively participate and make informed contributions in their communities and society. Thus, lifelong learning is not simply about relearning how we learn to future-proof our education system to ensure quality jobs; seeing an active and engaged citizenry as involving lifelong learning would contribute towards future-proofing our democracy.

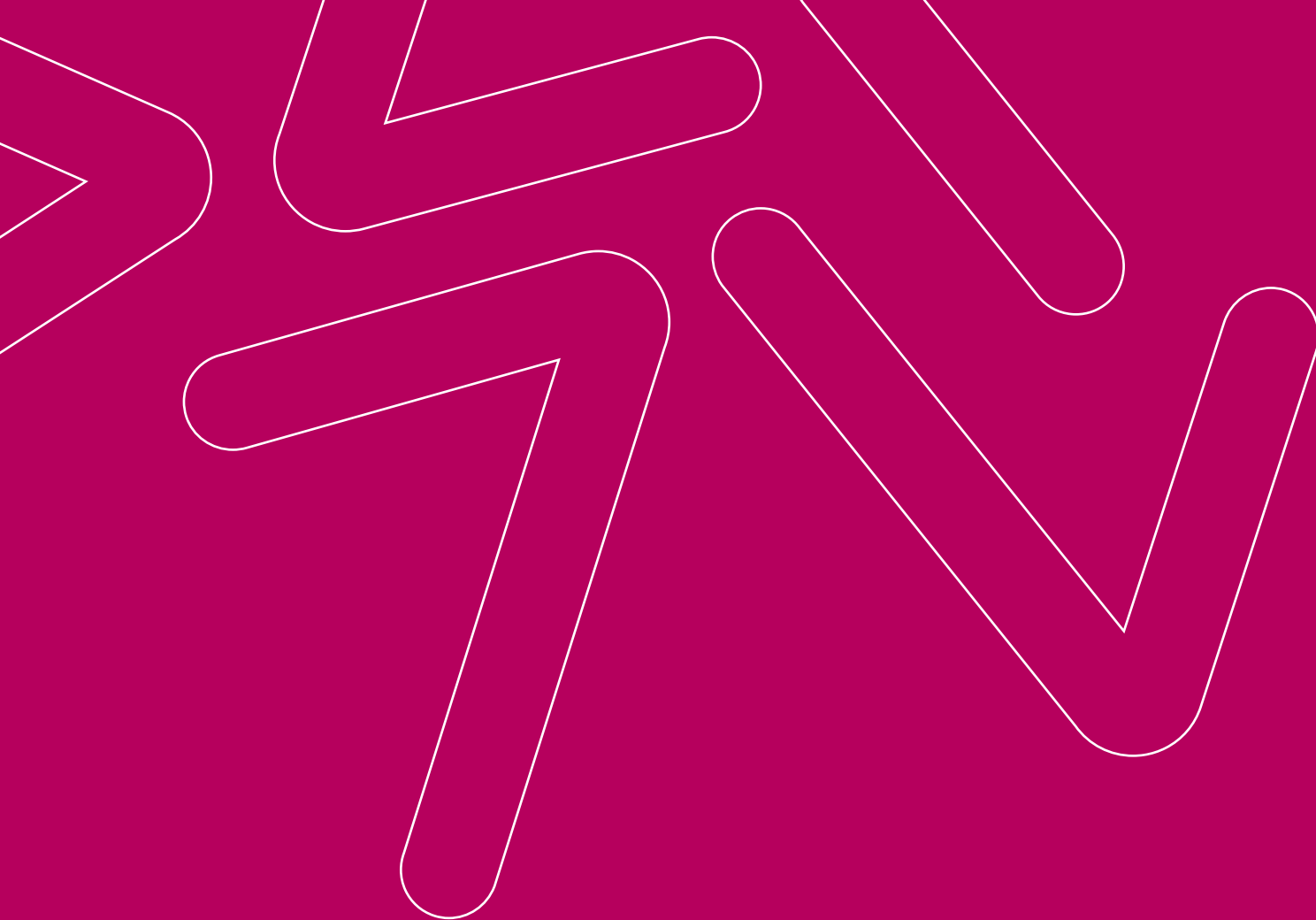
Over the course of our history, we have not been without agency and creativity to forge the sort of society we want, however imperfect. Therefore, looking forward and building on the foundations we have for a thriving Ireland, the sort of society we wish to have need not be determined by technology; we have agency to determine what technology does for us. We have the power to not just incentivise labour-friendly technologies, but, thinking more broadly, to incentivise society-friendly technologies. Since technologies do not suddenly arrive without warning – we develop them over time – we have the power to make decisions about the kinds of

technologies we prioritise to benefit society, along with establishing some basic guard rails, such as ‘do no harm’, and incentives to adhere to such guard rails. For Ireland to thrive, we cannot afford technologies that both undermine and profit from undermining democracy itself. By way of closing, it is apt to reflect that the set of foundations I have briefly explored speak to strengths that NESC has built over the past 50 years.

Indeed, as it has demonstrated over the past 50 years, NESC is well positioned to provide research, dialogue and advice that is foundational to an ambitious vision for Ireland as ‘a resilient, sustainable, thriving net-zero economy, environment and society, using innovation and collective preparedness to shape the future we want to achieve’.

“A thriving democracy needs an active and engaged citizenry who contribute positively to political and public life as informed citizens.”





Three

Building Resilience & Addressing Vulnerabilities

At the heart of NESC's vision of Ireland as 'thriving' is a commitment to resilience, inclusion and sustainability. The core objective of the three chapters in this section is to examine how these are fostered in practice. It looks at how we protect, care for and ensure all individuals are supported to thrive and flourish.

The section begins with a scene-setting overview of developmental welfare provision and systems. This is followed by the views of experts and practitioners working in various social contexts – care, healthcare, mental health and ageing. The question of how we protect people and other natural assets is also discussed. The section closes with a number of reflections on the main themes.

Chapter 9: Revisiting Developmental Welfare Provision

Chapter 10: Reactions from the Frontline: Ten Insights

Chapter 11: Reflection on Key Themes

Chapter 9

Revisiting Developmental Welfare Provision

Steven Ballantyne and Anton Hemerijck work at the Department of Political and Social Sciences at the European University Institute. Their paper considers the performance of the Irish economy, the role and nature of social protection and the potential for a fully-fledged developmental welfare state to enhance people's opportunities and their capabilities to resolve social risks typical of post-industrial societies.

Revisiting Developmental Welfare Provision:

Ballantyne and Hemerijck

Ireland is thriving again, and over the past 50 years, NESC has been a key institutional broker in helping to reform the Irish economy into good health, qualify for EMU membership through social partnership co-operation and respond to two dramatic shocks through dialogue underwritten by policy-oriented research, starting in the mid-1980s. When the Irish economy was running on full steam and reaching full employment in the early 2000s, NESC published a truly transformative report on the future of Irish social policy under the cogent title *The Developmental Welfare State* (2005). The report signaled a shift in social policy provision

from 'repairing' damage done by social security towards 'preparing' citizens and families to adapt to the knowledge economy with the support of tailored capacitating services.

At the time, the agenda-setting NESC report was paralleled by comparable contributions across Europe, all adopting a life-course approach to rethinking the welfare state. The social investment agenda-setting study *Why We Need a New Welfare State* (Esping-Andersen et al., 2002), commissioned by the Belgian Presidency of the European Union in 2001 to sociologist Gosta Esping-Andersen, together with Duncan Gallie, Anton Hemerijck and John Myles, even more-strongly advocated for the reallocation of social spending away from pensions and male breadwinner social security towards capacitating social investments in active labour-market policy, vocational training, early childhood development and care, family services and active ageing.

Likewise, the Dutch Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR, 2006) and the Swedish Institute for Futures Studies (Lindh and Palme, 2006) issued reports on the future of the welfare state in terms of novel policy mixes of benefit transfer layered with capacitating services to support dual-earner families, with a strong emphasis on prevention.

Then the global financial crisis struck, putting the emerging contours of the developmental or social investment welfare state in reverse gear. European policymakers relapsed into believing, mistakenly, that social policy comes with the price tag of hampering growth and competitiveness – an unaffordable luxury in the face of the Great Recession. For the EU, the Greek sovereign debt crisis marked the austerity reflex.

Hence, the European Commission’s Annual Growth Strategy (AGS) identified fiscal profligacy, protective labour markets and generous welfare transfer as the main impediments to European prosperity. Under the Troika, in Ireland, the modest expansion of social security coverage over the previous decades became a political justification for retrenchment. The Dutch Government also agreed to a long-term ‘sustainability package’, including cuts in childcare, social benefits and training services. Only in Sweden were social expenditures kept up on the wing of activating policies to maintain high levels of dual-earner employment, necessary to sustain the active and inclusive Swedish welfare state.

Evidently, Ireland recovered miraculously from the crash and the austerity reflex enforced by the Troika, reaching a record growth number of 23 per cent by 2015. Against the background of this saga of rescue and renewal, NESC celebrated its 50th anniversary at Dublin Castle on 23 November 2023 with a conference showcasing its lasting importance in bringing together the social partners, government and voluntary sector through dialogue on NESC’s policy-relevant research output.

Conspicuously, quite a few speakers at the conference invoked The Developmental Welfare State as one of NESC’s more transformative reports. In his speech, the then Taoiseach Leo Varadkar reckoned that this report fundamentally changed his thinking about how modern social policy is a sine qua non for a thriving Ireland:

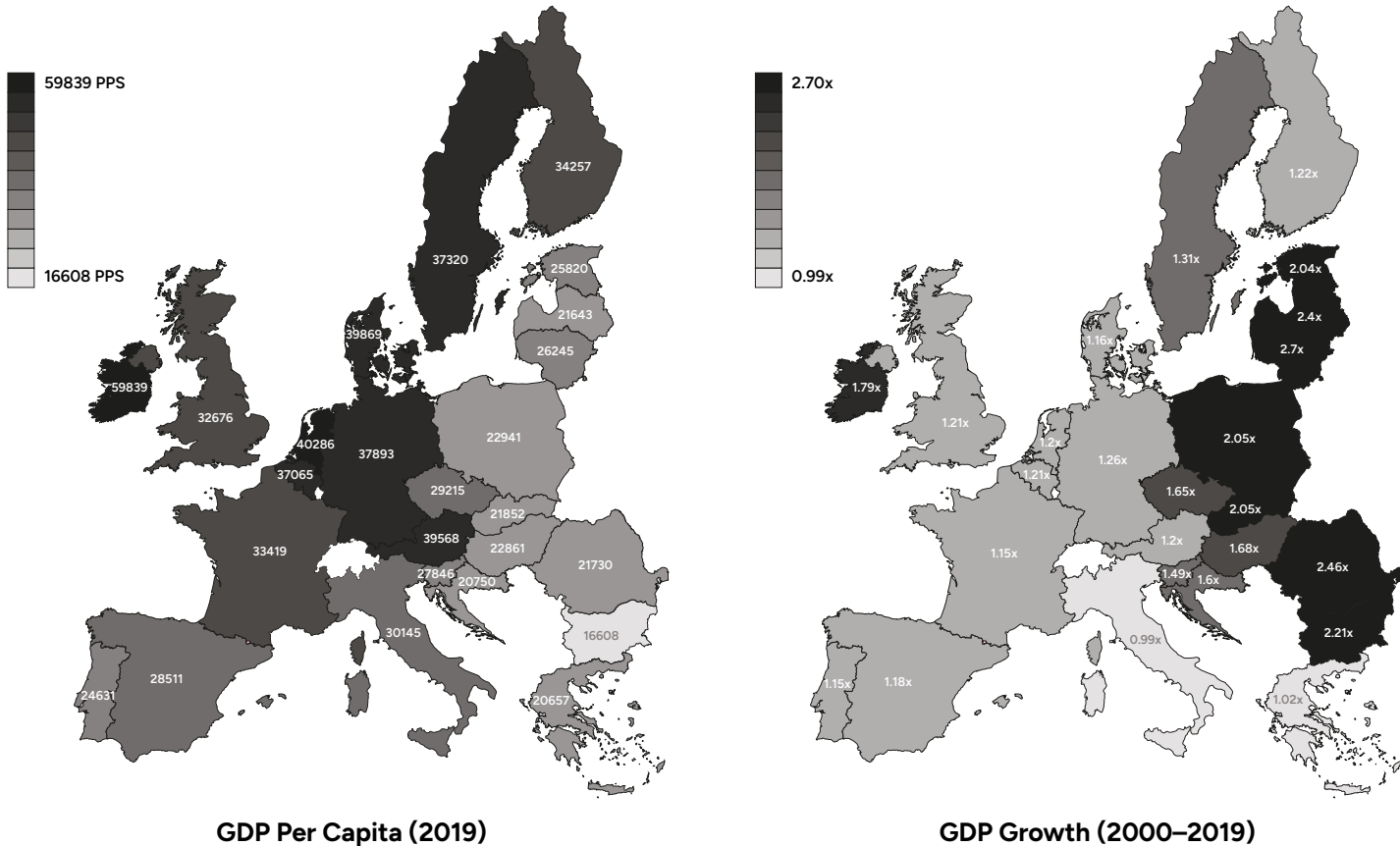
[NESC’s] holistic approach to policy advice is evident in its 2005 The Developmental Welfare State (DWS) report, one of the Council’s most influential publications. The DWS report stands out as an exemplar of NESC’s unique approach, emphasising the interconnectedness of economic and social policies with positive economic performance bolstering effective social policy and vice versa.

NESC acknowledged that Ireland’s social welfare system was primarily focused on income support and advocated for a profound enhancement of services that would include education, childcare and employment services, among others. This vision laid the groundwork for Ireland’s welfare state that we know today. As a former Minister for Social Protection, I had the privilege of witnessing the lasting impact of NESC’s recommendations on the social fabric of our country.²⁵

To some extent, any major anniversary is self-congratulating. True enough, The Developmental Welfare State report was published in 2005 when Ireland was thriving just like today. Yet, its policy advocacy to match social protection expansion with the development of high-quality capacitating social services was not really followed through, even though the report was widely cherished. It became the guiding framework of the 10-year social partnership agreement of 2006.

²⁵ From Taoiseach Varadkar’s address to the NESC@50 Conference, Dublin Castle, 23 November 2023.

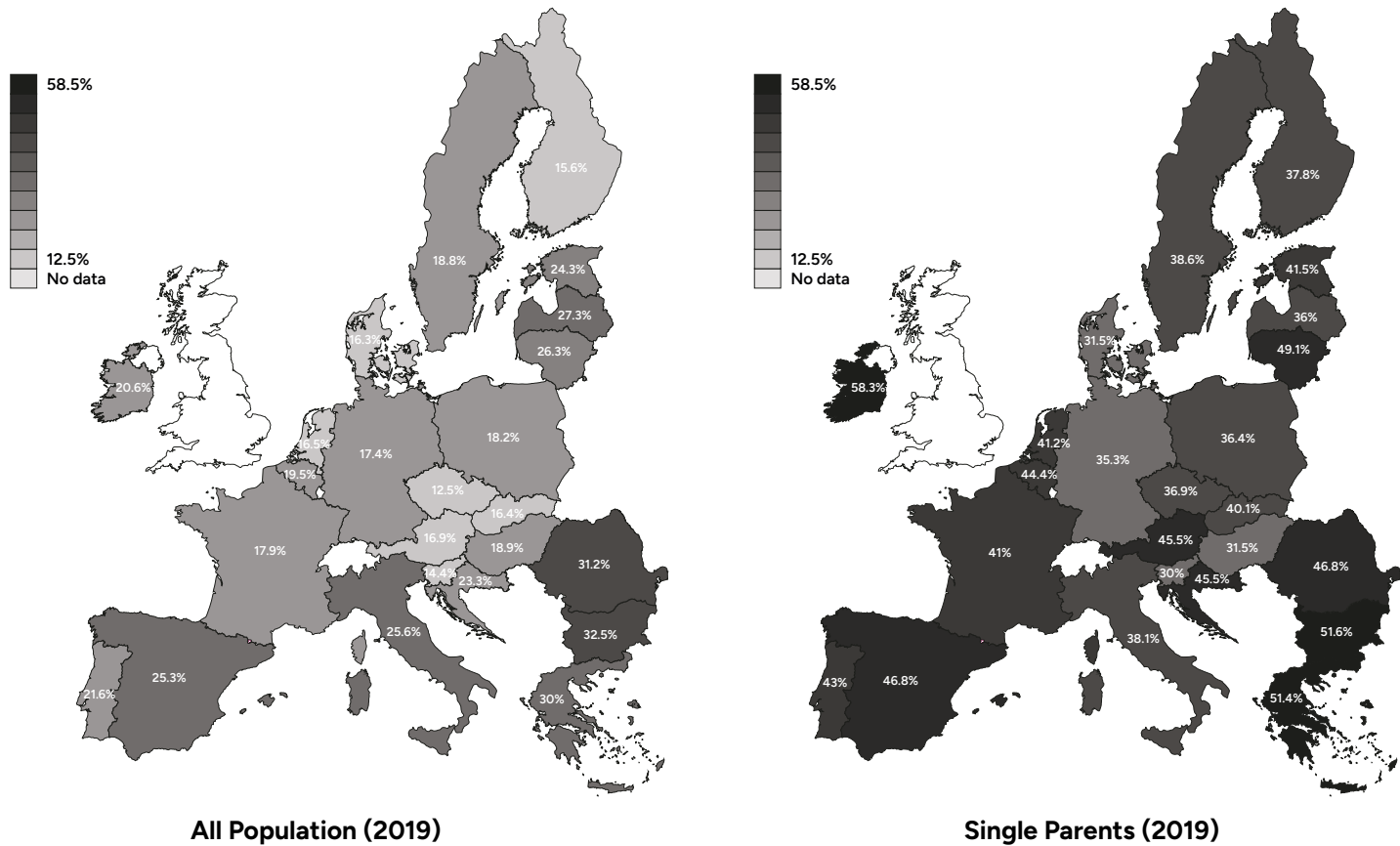
Figure 9.1: GDP Per Capita (2019) and GDP Growth (2000–2019)



Then, the fallout of the banking crisis, reducing government revenue by 20 per cent, cast great doubts on NESCs bold inference that a resilient, inclusive and active welfare state is a cornerstone for a resilient Irish economy. Social partnership came to a grinding halt, and Ireland undertook a three-year EU-IMF financial restructuring program, including welfare retrenchment and labour-market liberalisation (O'Donnell and Thomas, 2017).

Hard-boiled policymakers are hardly easily persuaded by evidence-based good news, there must be equity-efficiency trade-offs down the road, and in hard times, a conservative reflex looms large. By the same token, in good times, there is the electoral temptation to expand popular cash transfers and forget about long-term capacitation. In this respect, Taoiseach Varadkar's renewed endorsement of The Developmental Welfare State as a vision-changing report conjures a novel opportunity to make developmental welfare provision work this time around.

Figure 9.2: Household Poverty in the Total Population and Among Single Parents (2019)



From a comparative perspective, unquestionably, Ireland is thriving again on several fronts. The Irish economy today is the only country with a very high level of GDP per capita and high growth rates (Figure 9.1), but Ireland is not without social liabilities. One poignant vulnerability is the large degree of single-household poverty (Figure 9.2), strongly correlating with a backwardness in family services, which NESC urged the Irish Government to improve in 2005. A strength and weakness at the same time is that the Irish economy is highly dependent on

foreign direct investment (FDI), associated with its extremely low corporate tax level. Profits earned by multinational firms add to gross domestic product (GDP) but not to gross national product (GNP), as they are earned by foreign companies.

The overarching objective of a fully fledged developmental welfare state, or the social investment welfare state in the academic literature, is to enhance people's opportunities and capabilities to resolve social risks typical of post-industrial societies *ex ante*. Early childhood education and care, vocational training over the life course, capacitating active labour-market policies, work-life balance policies like paid parental leave, lifelong learning and long-term care; what all these policies have in common is that they transcend – but do not replace – the compensatory rationale of post-war social security that protected (predominantly male) workers and their (stable) families against industrial risks *ex-post* (Hemerijck, 2017).

In other words, the notion of social investment shifts the terms of the welfare state debate toward a more comprehensive understanding of how welfare provision interacts with demography, including family formation, education, skills, labour supply and productivity.

Reasoning from a life-course perspective, a social investment welfare state revolves around three core functions. The first is about fostering the lifelong development of human capital 'stock', helping people develop the skills they need to thrive in today's knowledge economy. The second is easing the 'flow' of family life-course and labour-market transitions. The third is about sustaining income-support 'buffers'. Stocks cover the education and training designed to improve people's capacity to work, flow policies help people balance work with family life and other commitments over their lives, while inclusive safety-net buffers are a prerequisite for those (temporarily) out of work. Let's take a closer look into how the Irish welfare state has evolved over the past two decades along the functions of stocks, flows and buffers.

Even today, the Irish buffers remain lean in comparison with those of north-western Europe. Despite the brief but intense period of austerity following the 2008 financial crisis, the trajectory in the past two decades has been broadly one of catching up with the welfare states on the European continent. Revenues gained through the country's FDI-led growth model have been deployed by governments to expand social protection buffers.

A clear example of success has been a significant decrease in old-age at-risk-of-poverty rates, particularly in the first decade of this century. More recently, the introduction of statutory sick pay, informed by the experience of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the announcement of a Pay-Related Jobseekers' Benefit System clearly indicate a Europeanisation of Ireland's welfare state. The latter occurred in the post-Brexit landscape, suggesting perhaps a more definitive break from the liberal welfare legacy of the United Kingdom, from which Ireland inherited its basic welfare state structures upon becoming independent.

It is perhaps not so surprising that while attempting to catch up with northern European standards in buffers that Irish policymakers made less progress in implementing more social investment-type stock and flow programs. Despite widespread social partnership endorsement of NESC's The Developmental Welfare State report, evidently less action was taken to upscale capacitating social services for dual-earner families than its authors had hoped for

By mid-2010, there was a definite shift towards activation, together with a stronger focus on education and training services to enhance employment prospects. Then again, Ireland is now in a different position. With stronger buffers in place – a pre-requisite for

effective social investment – the time is ripe to take The Developmental Welfare State forward by enhancing stocks, flows and buffers together, undergirded also by better public services.

As suggested above, good times come with the temptation to expand yesteryear's policies in a procyclical manner. The political narrative around the most recent budget highlights this risk, with the active selling of policies that 'put money back in people's pockets'.

“With stronger buffers in place – a pre-requisite for effective social investment – the time is ripe to take The Developmental Welfare State forward by enhancing stocks, flows and buffers together, undergirded also by better public services.”

While delivering income compensation in the here and now is certainly helpful to families most adversely affected by the cost-of-living crisis, a politics of the long term should not be overlooked. In that respect, several commitments in the budget – and subsequent policy announcements – expose a strong social investment flavour: increased investment in early childhood education and care as part of a long-term commitment to improve affordability, availability and quality, the extension of Parent's Benefit (the paid element of parental leave) and the flexibilisation of the state pension to promote longer working lives. Clearly, the developmental approach to pension reform is based on learning from the failed attempt to increase the state pension age, cancelled in 2021 by the current

government due to perceived political backlash.

Yet, it seems unescapable that the dossier of active ageing and flexible retirement will have to be revisited by future governments. Although Ireland's demographics are generally favourable in the European context, declining fertility rates combined with increasing life expectancy show that demographic ageing is already bringing increased costs of pension outlays and health and social care. Regarding the revenue base of the more mature Irish welfare state, increases – though marginal – in pay-related social insurance rates do show a wise commitment to ensuring the long-term sustainability of the welfare state, as advocated by the Commission on Taxation and Welfare (2022).

Another feature which requires addressing is the reliance on in-work benefits to reduce income inequalities. Although public employment services were reformed to become more activating during the crisis decade – in response to a spike in unemployment – they tend towards work-first interventions, with little consideration for human capital stock upskilling. Public employment services should be reformed to become more capacitating, thereby reducing the need for in-work benefits and serving as a stepping stone to quality employment, as advocated almost two decades ago in NESC's The Developmental Welfare State report. Then again, the proficiency of programmes like Community Employment for social inclusion, community cohesion and the delivery of core public services should continue to be reckoned with.

Finally, there is the ever-present risk of losing faith in developmental welfare provision when the fiscal space narrows. While current economic performance is strong, future shocks together with an overreliance on corporate



tax receipts may entice hard-boiled policymakers to harken back to narratives of trade-offs and trilemmas. The good news is that the evidence base for the proficiency of social investment and, ex negativo, the ineptitude of austerity is stronger than ever.

Ireland is thriving on many fronts. Notwithstanding, social vulnerabilities such as the poverty risk faced by single households and the reliance on in-work benefits to top up low wages illustrate that all that glistens is not gold. Ireland has slowly but surely moved away from the male breadwinner welfare state model but it has yet to make the quality leap to a fully fledged developmental welfare state. Economic growth has provided revenue to strengthen buffers and tangible progress has been made on stocks and flows.

Yet, to improve Ireland's position in comparison with the social investment vanguards of north-western Europe, momentum must be maintained and, in some areas, intensified. We interpret the Taoiseach Varadkar's renewed endorsement of NESC's The Developmental Welfare State report as a serious political commitment to reprioritise social investments, even if these may only bear fruit in the mid- to long term, over short-term giveaways motivated by narrow electoral concerns. A commitment worthy of celebration indeed.

Chapter 10

Reactions from the Frontline: 10 Insights

Building resilience within Irish society has been and will be shaped by the welfare state, and within the Developmental Welfare State, that comes from a commitment to income provision and services. This chapter reports the views of various practitioners and experts working in areas of service provision that seek to protect, include and nurture people and nature in different ways.

First, Rose Anne Kenny, Regius Professor of Physic (Medicine) and Chair of Medical Gerontology at Trinity College Dublin, examines the impact of demographic change and ageing on healthcare and other services. She reveals that the number of people over 65 in Ireland is set to double by 2051, representing 26 per cent of the population; the difference between life expectancy and healthy life expectancy; and the need for a life-course perspective to inform policy.

Second, Sara Burke, Associate Professor and Director of the Centre for Health Policy and Management in Trinity College's School of Medicine, discusses what it is to deliver on the ambitious programme of reform in healthcare. She notes that the health

system showed resilience during the pandemic, with low mortality rates and high vaccination rates, but also that vulnerabilities were exposed, particularly in protecting vulnerable citizens such as those in nursing homes. She highlights the cross-party political support for Sláintecare, aimed at universal, integrated, quality care, but argues that significant reforms are still needed.

Third, Stephanie Manahan, CEO of Pieta, has worked in healthcare for over 30 years in a range of areas including mental health services, hospital services, disability and education. She contends that mental health must be a key consideration, emphasising the need for accessible, integrated, community-based mental health services as well as collaboration and open dialogue between policymakers and communities to address issues such as mental health stigmas and inequalities.

Fourth, Zoe Hughes, Senior Policy and Research Officer with Care Alliance Ireland, highlights the numbers involved in care, and the challenges they face in balancing care with work and experiencing financial distress and poor health. She asserts

that carers feel excluded from society, with a higher risk of poor mental health compared to non-carers, and that they need to be more involved in policy decisions.

Fifth, Niall Muldoon, Ombudsman for Children, outlines how children and families can and must thrive within a thriving economy. He stresses that certain groups of children, including those in care, with disabilities, in poverty, LGBTQ+ children, homeless children, Traveller and Roma children, and children seeking refuge, still face disproportionate challenges. He states that despite some progress, there's still a lack of interdepartmental co-operation, hindering efficient service delivery for children.

Sixth, Ejiro Ogbevoen, founder of Black Therapists Ireland, which provides a platform for black therapists while actively promoting mental health and wellbeing among black people living in Ireland and globally, believes that more needs to be done to prioritise the representation of people of colour, emphasising the importance of diverse voices in policymaking.

Seventh, Martin Collins, Co-Director of Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre, identifies the health, employment and education disparities persisting for the Traveller and Roma community. He notes that while progress has been made in policy development, there is a need for greater emphasis on implementation to improve the quality of life for the Traveller and Roma community, requiring

national policies, targeted interventions and collaboration with those with lived experience.

Eighth, Joe Donohue, Governor of Shelton Abbey Open Centre, considers the vision of a truly inclusive Ireland from the perspective of prisoners, and offers an alternative view on prison operations in Ireland, stressing rehabilitation. He argues that a thriving Ireland must include and support those at their lowest point.

Ninth, Helen Dixon, Data Protection Commissioner (DPC), outlines how digital inclusion and data protection are increasingly important aspects of an inclusive and protective Ireland. She describes the ways in which the DPC guides organisations to uphold rights and freedoms, particularly for vulnerable groups, such as children, while enforcing the law and addressing individual complaints. She emphasises the importance of balancing data protection with accessibility while ensuring that vulnerable individuals are not excluded from online services.

Finally, Sue Pritchard, Chief Executive of the Food, Farming and Countryside Commission (UK), focuses on why as a society we need to find ways to change our systems and behaviours to ensure that our natural resources are protected. She highlights the Food Conversation Project, which engages people to help identify and address system-level issues and develop manifestos for radical action and change.

Healthy Life Expectancy:***Professor Rose Anne Kenny***

We are now living 2.2 years longer than a decade ago. The average life expectancy is 82 years of age in Ireland and is expected to rise to 86 years of age by 2050. This is a phenomenal increase from 76 years of age in 2000, driven by increased survival from chronic diseases and cancer and improved therapeutics to manage long-term illnesses, such as cardiovascular disease and HIV.

The unprecedented global increase in life expectancy over the last century is one of our greatest achievements and brings with it one of our greatest societal challenges – addressing ageing, a major demographic change.

Ireland is one of the youngest countries in the EU, however, our population aged 65 years and over will double from 806,300 in 2023 to over 1.6 million by 2051, accounting for 26 per cent of the total population. This is already the case in many European countries and is occurring with unprecedented speed in emerging economies such as India, China and the Americas. The key to successful longevity is enjoying a good quality of life in full health and living independently. However, healthy life expectancy, i.e. years spent without disability or disease, does not match life expectancy.

The gap between healthy life expectancy (health span) and life expectancy (life span) is currently 6.5 years for men and 8 years for women after the age of 65, meaning that these later years are spent living with disability and morbidity, impacting quality of life and

social and civic participation. The healthcare, social and economic impacts of this demographic transition have yet to be fully realised, but there is a concern that national governments are not sufficiently prepared for the challenges it will pose and that it represents a threat to the sustainability and resilience of our welfare, healthcare and social care systems.

Ageing itself is not a disease or disorder; rather it is the ageing process (biological, cognitive, physical, environmental and behavioural) that is associated with increased risk of disease and loss of function, impacting quality of life and independent living. Biological, cognitive, physical, environmental and behavioural processes are modifiable. We cannot understand the ageing process and therefore how to ensure healthy, longer lives without understanding the progenitors – i.e. the life course.

A better understanding of these mechanisms, coupled with technologies for monitoring, interventions and supporting independent living will provide the end user (individual, clinician, policymaker, corporate) with the means to improve quality of life and increase healthy life years, closing that gap between life span and health span.

The life course is an approach to studying and understanding the different life phases from its inception which occurs from early life and continues throughout the life span until death. The life-course approach employs longitudinal studies which collate repeated measures at regular and frequent intervals over

“Ireland is one of the youngest countries in the EU, however, our population aged 65 years and over will double from 806,300 in 2023 to over 1.6 million by 2051, accounting for 26 per cent of the total population.”

prolonged periods of time (i.e. decades) to understand how humans grow, develop and decline.

The process of ageing and the risk factors for disease and disability start very early in life. The life-course concept applies to many domains other than health, including lifelong learning, labour-market transitions, social landmarks (e.g. marriage) and psychosocial development, each of which have their own distinct developmental life-course trajectories, including milestones and critical periods.

The importance of adopting a life-course perspective is also increasingly being recognised by policymakers, with the new initiative on the Commission on Care for Older People emphasising how positive ageing can be supported across the life course.

TILDA is a large-scale, nationally representative, prospective cohort study that follows over 10,500 individuals aged 45 years and older, charting their health, social and economic circumstances in a series of data collection every two years. Other longitudinal studies of ageing on the island of Ireland include NICOLA, the Northern Ireland sister study to TILDA, following people aged 50 and over. Both studies employ a life-course approach to inform new policy and practice. Their longitudinal design also enables evaluation of the impact of new policies. In recognition of the TILDA study's international standing, Trinity College Dublin has been selected as the WHO Collaborating Centre for Longitudinal Studies in Ageing and the Life-course (2024).

“The importance of adopting a life-course perspective is also increasingly being recognised by policymakers...”

The Healthcare System and a Thriving Ireland:

Sara Burke

The health system is a critical element of any thriving society and Ireland's health system proved resilient during the pandemic (Thomas et al., 2023). Despite entering Covid-19 as an under-resourced, overstretched, fragmented health system, Ireland fared very well, with one of the lowest rates of mortality and highest rates of vaccination, with many decisions taken quickly, largely based on scientific evidence (Burke et al., 2021; Thomas et al., 2023). That said, there were areas we did not prove so resilient, such as the failure to protect some of our most vulnerable citizens (McGrath, 2021). During the first 11 months of Covid-19, 40 per cent of all deaths were in nursing homes (Covid-19 Nursing Homes Expert Panel, 2020).

Comparative research found the Irish authorities responded quickly, with high levels of public trust and support (Unruh et al., 2021; Nolan et al., 2021). A deep dive into how the Irish health system innovated during Covid-19 observed an agile response across sectors, where people on the frontline were given the resources and freedom to adopt novel, effective responses. This research also found that there is a serious risk of the system reverting to type rather than harnessing, scaling and sustaining the progress made during the pandemic (Parker et al., 2023).

During Covid-19, we experienced what is possible when there is a singular focus on one broad policy aim (Burke et al., 2021). Unfortunately, the real world of public policy and politics is much messier, with ever-competing demands that often reward the short-term rather than longer-term policy aims that are needed to bring about resilient, inclusive and protective societies and sustainable health systems.

“... we have failed to make significant inroads into the persistently stark inequalities in life and death...”

And while Ireland doubled its health expenditure on prevention during Covid-19, we still have much to do to sufficiently invest in prevention and early intervention, especially for children and those most at risk of poverty, ill health and disability.

Ireland has been on a journey during the 50 years of NESC’s existence. We are a society today that would have been virtually unrecognisable to those who sat on the Council’s first social policy committee in 1974. There have been many policy efforts and good progress, with metrics such as life expectancy and amenable mortality much better now than they were then. That said, we have failed to make significant inroads into the persistently stark inequalities in life and death, with people from poorer households and areas experiencing poorer health throughout the lifecycle and earlier deaths (Duffy et al., 2022). This is particularly true for some communities, such as the Traveller and Roma communities (HSE and Department of Health, 2022).

There is also a significant treatment burden for those with multiple chronic conditions which often doesn’t take the patients’ needs into account (Skou et al., 2022). Many long-standing challenges for the Irish health system were spotlighted by Covid-19 (Kennelly et al., 2020). These included low staff numbers, hospital overcrowding, poor infrastructure including the digital and physical environment, long waiting lists and an over-reliance on a hospital-centric model of care (Thomas et al., 2023).

There are positive developments – there remains in early 2024 cross-party political support for Sláintecare,

a policy commitment to introduce timely access to universal, integrated, quality care (Burke et al., 2021). And many high-level health indicators are moving in the right direction (OECD/European Observatory on Health Systems Policies, 2023).

But progress is slow (Thomas et al., 2021). We know that implementing system-wide reform takes time and requires sustained political focus, leadership and action on governance, a digital infrastructure and perhaps most importantly, supporting and retaining our health and social care workforce and bringing communities and the public with them on the reform journey.

While we must acknowledge the huge improvements, we must also be able to have the honest conversations about the fact that some of the thorny issues we face are a direct result of poor public policy and or political decisions made or not made.

As anyone with direct experience of the health system for themselves or loved ones knows, the Irish health system is still fragmented and can be difficult to navigate, with access to essential care often depending on if you have money to pay for it or just good or bad fortune of geography, disease or population group.

One strong pandemic experience was the acceptance of the state as the key actor in providing, leading and resourcing an inclusive and protective society. In order to deliver on the ambitious programme of reform that is Sláintecare, this political priority and leadership must remain, so that Ireland’s health system is resourced and

steered in the right direction, consistently delivering better access and outcomes to universal, equitable, timely, quality, integrated care. This in turn will directly contribute to a thriving, inclusive Ireland.

Moving the Dial on Mental Health and Wellbeing:

Stephanie Manahan

Pieta is Ireland's leading national charity supporting people who have experienced suicidal ideation, self-harm and bereavement from the suicide of loved ones. At Pieta, we believe that for Ireland to have a thriving economy, it has to be built on thriving communities, supported by a population who are thriving.

Of course, at Pieta, we know only too well that a population cannot thrive without positive mental health. We believe that an absolute priority is the need for resourced, integrated, community-based local services that are accessible and available at the point of need where our people live, work or study.

NESC has been at the forefront of social policy and in particular, social inequality for 50 years. At Pieta, we are at the coalface and in our therapy rooms, we see the impact of inequality and social disjointedness affecting people in our society and preventing our communities from thriving.

“The wellbeing framework should not be optional, it needs to be imprinted in all policies. We need to see meaningful and lived KPIs, and we need to stop avoiding the much-needed implementation conversation.”

I believe that NESC has a really important role to play in encouraging the government to think about how we can affect change across all elements of government. I think Ireland's wellbeing framework is absolutely critical. It isn't good enough that we haven't embraced it. It needs to inform our planning for the future and I hope that NESC pushes that agenda and that policymakers welcome and implement it across all areas.

The wellbeing framework should not be optional, it needs to be imprinted in all policies. We need to see meaningful and lived KPIs, and we need to stop avoiding the much-needed implementation conversation. Every year, every department should have an objective for better mental health and articulate its unique contribution to the mental health of our nation.

We need to start making decisions based on the information we can gather, and I believe an organisation like NESC can bring that tracking and insight to the table.

We need to foster thought leadership, we need to complement and inform that with lived experiences and layering over scientific analysis as well as data that together can show policymakers that it makes sense. Suicide remains a stigma and an issue that people shy away from speaking about. We've got to move the dial, we need to make some noise about the inequalities affecting society and the absence of fundamental life choices impacting the mental health of our population. We need to encourage our society and communities to believe that it's okay to talk and engage in hard conversations.

NESC can play a pivotal role in moving the agenda forward – until you talk about some of these things, it's going to be very hard to affect change in them. Working together and collectively, we can create a thriving Ireland, an Ireland that we will be immensely proud of when the next generation is reflecting on our legacy in 50 years.

Family Care in Ireland – Envisioning a New Future:

Zoe Hughes

There are over half a million family carers in Ireland (CSO, 2020), many of whom are caring or on call for caring 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. They are caring for someone who has additional needs due to a disability, mental or physical health condition, or who is ageing. Some 50 per cent of those carers are balancing work and care. 68 per cent of family carers report being in financial distress, and 23 per cent are cutting back on essentials because of this. Only 43 per cent report good health versus 85 per cent of the general population.

71 per cent feel left out of society (Family Carers Ireland, 2022). They have a 38 per cent higher chance of experiencing poor mental health than non-carers (Gallagher & Wetherell, 2020).

Those statistics are stark and point to how excluded family carers are in many areas of society. Large numbers are excluded from good emotional health, good physical health, good mental health and good financial health. The solutions posed by many policymakers and health and social care professionals are made with good intentions, but are the same 'solutions' posed for decades, often without the sufficient backing of resources which would enable them to truly be effective.

So, if we were to envision a new future where the family carers of Ireland are fully included, what could that look like? If we envision Ireland at the 100th anniversary of NESC, what would we see? What could we see?

It could look like a radical overhaul of the system of financial supports for family carers. The means-tested system we have is not inclusive, it is not respectful, and critically, it is not protective, most particularly of those family carers who are also impacted by the increased cost of disability (Murphy et al., 2023). Family carers across the country remain at risk of poverty (MacMahon et al., 2022).

Perhaps we will have changed the narrative of care and how we talk about carers at a societal level. We hear the words 'hero' and 'saint' and the phrase 'backbone of society' too much from our policymakers when they speak of care and caring.

Using these platitudes, without real consideration of how to include family carers in the fabric of Irish society, risks assuming that families will always be there, because 'heroes' never shirk their 'duties'. 'Saints' always put others above themselves (Care Alliance Ireland, 2022).

Could we also change the narrative of those in receipt of care? A valid critique of the language of 'care' and 'caring' is that it is paternalistic, infantilising and rooted in the medical model of disability. We need to stop thinking of care and caring as the 'opposite' of disability. There are many disabled people who care for others, work as carers, parent their children and support their friends, family and neighbours. They too are carers. It is not an either/or scenario.

In speaking with my colleagues internationally, it is clear that in some ways, we are the envy of Europe. We actually have a National Carers' Strategy that provides guidance for how carers should be included in policy, services and supports. However, that strategy was published in 2012, and is woefully out of date.

There was no implementation plan included, nor was there a budget for different stakeholders in order to progress any of the 42 actions contained within the strategy at the time of publication. Funding has been provided for various aspects of supports over time, however, the lack of commitment to a budget at inception was problematic and needs to be addressed in future iterations.

Putting in place a new National Carers' Strategy that cross-references other relevant governmental strategies, such as the National Disability Inclusion Strategy, the National Dementia Strategy, Sharing the Vision and others, is critical. The siloing of national policies only leads to confusion in implementation, and so ALL policies need to be designed to complement each other – at the very least, not directly contradict – and be the responsibility of all government departments in order to facilitate change (Care Alliance Ireland, 2017).

The development of any new strategy should be conducted in partnership with organisations within the sector, but more crucially, directly with family carers

themselves. Perhaps then, carers will experience what it is like to be seen as a 'key care partner', which is a phrase used in the present strategy that, to my mind, simply is not currently the case.

- What about researching innovative solutions, and trialling new policies and programs?
- Would a Universal Basic Income or Participation Income (Murphy et al., 2023) for family carers work?
- How can we ensure carers are supported without perpetuating the paternalism that so often creeps in when we talk about those needing care and support?
- How can we ensure that family carers from other socially excluded groups, such as racial and ethnic minorities, the LGBTQ+ community, the Traveller community and the disabled community, are not doubly or triply excluded from these conversations (Hughes, 2018)?
- How can we use technology to create innovative, evidence-based solutions to address the lack of supports for family carers across the country?

Finally, we need to ensure that family carers themselves are the drivers of any research, included at all levels, and part of any and all policy decisions that will impact them.

Inclusion must be meaningful and impactful, or we might as well not do it.

“We need to stop thinking of care and caring as the ‘opposite’ of disability.”

Children’s Rights Still Not at the Heart of Decision-Making:
Niall Muldoon

As the National Economic and Social Council marks a milestone half a century at the forefront of national public policy, it is clear how much Irish society has changed – changed utterly since it was established in 1973.

As we reflect on the type of Ireland we would like to see over the next 50 years, we need to ensure it is a place where all children and young people can reach their full potential. 2024 marks a milestone year for my Office, as we celebrate 20 years since it was first set up to promote and protect the rights of every child living in this state. Like NESCC, we also have a vision for Ireland, one where every child and young person is valued, respected and heard –and where they can fully enjoy their rights. While Ireland has indeed changed and we have made significant progress in many ways, we are still not, as Taoiseach Varadkar wishes for us to be, the best country in Europe to be a child.

There are still particular groups of children who are disproportionately affected by poor practice within departments: children in care, children in the justice system, children with disabilities, children in poverty, LGBTQ+ children, homeless children, Traveller and Roma children and children seeking refuge in Ireland.

Some of that poor practice includes the fact that more than 30 years since Ireland ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, it has yet to be incorporated into our laws in a significant way. We still do not know exactly what the state is spending on children, allied to that, the data needed to best determine how to resource services for children is not being adequately recorded.

Therefore, there is no way of really knowing how far

behind we are – and we are far behind many of our European counterparts. The agencies and departments who work directly with children, and who support some of our most vulnerable, are still not working together as efficiently or effectively as they could. To make our vision for Ireland a reality, making changes in these areas would create a positive and tangible difference in the lives of children.

One young teenager I spoke to about this issue encapsulated the best way to enhance interdepartment co-operation when they said:

It should be like the 17 Departments are part of a strong, positive community within a Terraced Street. 17 houses, side by side with long parallel gardens, where each house looks after its own garden, BUT each would have a number of gates on either side to allow access from other gardens as necessary. Good neighbours like Health, Education and Children should have a number of gates in and out of each other’s gardens so that children can pass between them without hindrance.

Those gates need to be clearly marked, consistently oiled and easy to open, so that the residents of each dwelling can enjoy the neighbourhood to its fullest.

Forward planning is also essential to avoid situations where the state has to react to a crisis. Take education, it would seem self-evident that anyone setting out to provide school-based education should know the number of students who are likely to be enrolled in any single year and for a five-year period after that. We have CSO figures, birth rates, and in the case of post-primary schools, we know how many classes are due to feed in, and what special educational needs might require

catering for. Yet, in June 2022, we could not guarantee that all children with special educational needs would be catered for in their own local area as some 300 had NO SCHOOL at all for that September. These issues also arise in housing, hospital planning, surgical operations and respite places for children with additional needs – and always, the most vulnerable suffer the impact.

Forward planning requires data and research to help the state achieve a better understanding of children’s lives and to identify disparities in the realisation of the rights of certain children. We have long called for the state to establish effective systems of data collection and to ensure that this data is evaluated and used to inform all policy development for children. It is said that sunlight is the best disinfectant, and, therefore, it is only by having clear, robust data that we can truly get transparency around the issues affecting children and the policies that need to be created as a result. To complement this, we believe, as does the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), the state should also introduce specific budgetary lines and ring-fenced funding to support specific children’s rights issues and specific groups of vulnerable children, and to develop mechanisms to support effective childproofing of budgetary measures.

Finally, the right of all children to be heard in all matters affecting them is not only one of the fundamental values of the UNCRC but is also an integral part of the work

of our Office. As outlined in Article 12, children should be free to have opinions in all matters affecting them, and those views should be given due weight, according to their age and maturity. It is up to public and civil servants across all departments, therefore, to make sure that children’s views are sought when it comes to decisions that impact them – not in a tokenistic way, but in a meaningful way. The next 5 to 10 years cannot be wasted in pushing public policies and legislation without full and careful consideration of their impact on the children of this island – as is their right. I hope the next two Governments can put children’s rights at the heart of the work of the civil and public services they lead and make 2034 a landmark year for the children of Ireland.

**Naming the Inclusion Challenge Must Only Be the Start:
*Ejiro Ogbevoen***

Black Therapists Ireland is an organisation that provides a platform for therapists of colour who have come together to make mental health accessible to the community at large, with a focus on the black community.

Our vision is well aligned with that of NESC in terms of protection, inclusion and addressing vulnerability. Our vision for the future is for mental health to be accessible to all, for everyone to be looked after – particularly those people that are vulnerable, just because of the nature of their being in Ireland.

“...we believe, as does the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), the state should also introduce specific budgetary lines and ring-fenced funding to support specific children’s rights issues and specific groups of vulnerable children, and to develop mechanisms to support effective childproofing of budgetary measures”.

“How can the Council speak and advocate for people that it knows little about? I would love to see a situation where people of colour are part of NESC so that we can influence as best we can the Council’s goal to be inclusive, protective and supportive of vulnerable communities.”

NESC@50 is a wonderful opportunity to focus on the Ireland of today, which is diverse and where many communities and people face challenges. When I read about NESC and its work, I am encouraged by its focus on inclusion and protection. Of course, it is vital for us to have an inclusive society, but who is looking out for the vulnerable in policymaking really? Who is identifying and protecting the vulnerable? We need to lean into that a little more and see how we can develop that.

One thing I would ask of NESC is to do more work on representation. I do not know how diverse NESC is as a body, but it is so important for us to be represented there. How can the Council speak and advocate for people that it knows little about? I would love to see a situation where people of colour are part of NESC so that we can influence as best we can the Council’s goal to be inclusive, protective and supportive of vulnerable communities.

We also need to employ more people of colour in services. There are a lot of places where you would not find us, especially in government organisations. We have approached several public bodies about this, but unfortunately, there are so many paths you have to take, that it knocks us down from the start. If the

government does not actively change this, those who represent people of colour in the area of mental health will continue to be excluded.

There is a lot of work that needs to be done, but the fact that NESC recognises this is really important. We need to name it, but that is not the end – this must only be the beginning. There is so much that could come out of NESC@50 as long as we have our hearts and heads in the right place.

Targeted Action to Deliver Inclusion:

Martin Collins

NESC’s vision for a thriving Ireland is the right one. Seán Lemass, quoting JFK, once said that ‘a rising tide lifts all boats’, but certain communities have found to great personal cost that this approach doesn’t fully work. It is not just a question of mainstreaming policies designed to support the vulnerable, we also need targeted action, making very specific interventions which truly address the needs of that community.

The Traveller and Roma community continues to suffer from racism and inequality. NESC’s vision has inclusion at its heart, takes a whole-of-society approach and places an emphasis on implementation as it delivers its research, dialogue and advice. These are essential and welcome qualities.

Firstly, the word ‘inclusion’ is very important to the Traveller and Roma community. An alternative term – ‘integration’ – is often a euphemism for ‘assimilation’. We must not forget that the Irish State, in particular from 1963 onwards with the Commission on Itinerancy, has a very negative history of forced policies of assimilation and effectively getting rid of Travellers.

Things have improved slightly and slowly. A cross-government, whole-of-society approach is essential if we are serious about making more progress in addressing the inequality and racism experienced by Roma and Travellers.

The Traveller and Roma community has health outcomes which are grossly inferior to the majority population. Only three per cent of Travellers live to be over 60 years of age. In 2010, when we conducted the all-Ireland Traveller health study, we found only eight Travellers over the age of 80 across the entire island. Traveller and Roma suffer from a high level of unemployment, which is hovering around an unacceptable 85 per cent. And there are educational inequalities, with only 13 per cent of Travellers completing second-level education compared to 93 per cent in the settled population.

It is a requirement of the European Commission that every EU member state develops a national action plan to promote inclusion and address the racism and inequality which is evident in these health, employment and education statistics. The process itself must be inclusive and seek input from local organisations right across the country. Today, we are working with the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth to develop Ireland's second National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy.

The health, employment and education inequalities suffered by the Traveller and Roma community are well documented – not just by the community itself, but by independent national and international bodies. The challenges have been well analysed, well articulated and well documented. The research has been completed and the facts are known, but unfortunately, some research fatigue is setting in. This is a problem for the

community and its representatives, and a lack of policy implementation and tangible positive progress in all of the areas identified makes people disillusioned.

We have worked very effectively in dialogue and partnership with government in developing policies and strategies. Insufficient implementation is a problem, and we need a greater emphasis on implementation to improve the quality of life of the Traveller and Roma community on the island. This will involve both mainstreaming and policy interventions.

The new National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy is a welcome development designed to have a more co-ordinated and a whole-of-government approach in addressing the many challenges facing Travellers and Roma. But to make NESC's vision a reality for the most vulnerable groups, we need national policies, targeted interventions and a greater emphasis on implementation. To address racism and inequality, we need the effective input and collaboration of those with the lived experience. Research, dialogue and advice will help us along the way.

“The Traveller and Roma community has health outcomes which are grossly inferior to the majority population.”

True 'Inclusion' in a Thriving Ireland:*Joe Donohue*

NESC's independence and access, particularly to the Department of the Taoiseach, coupled with a willingness to talk to people (like me), get the actual facts of the matter and then represent them nationally is really important. It is valuable to have an alternative opinion of what a prison does in Ireland, rather than relying on presumptions. Shelton Abbey Open Centre presents a different version of how to do 'the same job', but where rehabilitation is foremost in all our activities.

NESC presents the vision of an inclusive country and I think that is important – a 'thriving Ireland' is what we are all hoping for, and a thriving Ireland involves everybody.

The vision for Shelton is one of rehabilitation. That is where our primary focus is and where our energies go. At Shelton, we cannot press-gang somebody into doing something that they don't necessarily want to do. We find mostly that people will come here and they'll have an interest in something, or they'll want to try something that they've never done before. Our job is to provide a mechanism by which that can happen, with the hope that we feed them back into the thriving Ireland model – and that they will never come back to prison again. That's our job in a nutshell.

NESC's vision of a thriving Ireland is a fantastic thing to aim for, but it needs to include everybody. I represent people who are probably at their lowest ebb and may have been for quite a long time. I think a thriving Ireland needs to include those people.

"It is valuable to have an alternative opinion of what a prison does in Ireland, rather than relying on presumptions."

Data Protection and Digital Inclusion in a Thriving Ireland:*Helen Dixon*

The Data Protection Commission (DPC) has an important role in 'A Thriving Ireland', an Ireland that is protective and inclusive. Data protection laws – and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in particular – are all about safeguarding rights and freedoms.

They are about ensuring that information about any of us or all of us is processed in such a way that we are not subject to unfairness, discrimination, financial loss or any kind of economic or social disadvantage. And so the DPC has that role of guiding and supporting organisations to give effect to those aims and obligations, but also enforcing the law where it is necessary, and handling complaints from individuals so that they can empower themselves.

One important aspect is the identification of vulnerable groups. As part of the GDPR system, a very specific cohort – children – was identified as meriting special protections because they may be less aware of the risks involved in the processing of their personal data. So in recent years, we have invested heavily in consulting widely, including in particular with children, to develop guidelines in part for digital platforms, but more broadly, around how effect can be given to the GDPR principles. We have worked very closely with, and had expert support from, the Office of the Children's Ombudsman when we engaged with children. The insights we gathered directly from children were extremely important for the guidelines that we developed. For example, those guidelines emphasise that it is not

“But perhaps what has politely not been said is that the GDPR can sometimes be waved as a ‘big red flag’, as an excuse not to overcome data collection and sharing issues, where personal data is part of the mix.”

sufficient to say, ‘Well, it’s very difficult to protect children online and to develop and implement measures that protect them, so we will just cut them out of the service and knock them off the platform’. That is not good enough. The vulnerable, such as children, must be included and given access while also being protected online. The DPC has not hesitated to enforce in instances where we found that balance simply hasn’t been struck.

An additional way that we have identified vulnerable groups has been through the consultation process we held for our most recent strategy, which runs from 2022 to 2027. For example, we had responses from groups that advocate for at-risk adults, determining the data protection needs they considered to be important.

We recognise that for policymakers, evidence-based policy and thus the collection of data are crucial. There can of course be challenges in the collection and sharing of data. But perhaps what has politely not been said is that the GDPR can sometimes be waved as a ‘big red flag’, as an excuse not to overcome data collection and sharing issues, where personal data is part of the mix. That is not what the GDPR intends to be about. It is about safeguarding rights, not locking down and eliminating the utility of data. Over recent years, the DPC has worked on practical actions in terms of engaging with the big utility providers, banks, telcos and the new Decision Support Service to ensure that it is easier for

people to nominate an agent or representative to act for them and to assist them when accessing (increasingly online) services than it was in the past.

If nominating a representative is too onerous, it can effectively lock people out of those services. One example of success in this area was our engagement with banks that are leaving the Irish market, to put in place specific processes for facilitating vulnerable customers to move or close their accounts smoothly. Overall, data protection and inclusion are key elements of a thriving society and economy, and so we must keep in mind what actions are needed, and need to be revised, to maximise access to safe services, especially for the most vulnerable.

Protecting our Environment – Focus on Food:

Sue Pritchard

George Bernard Shaw said, ‘It is not enough to know what is good: you must be able to do it’. This dilemma is close to the heart of academics, business and political leaders the world over. How do we translate good research and evidence into real improvements in people’s lives?

At the Food Farming and Countryside Commission, this came into sharp relief as we pondered – with partner and stakeholder colleagues – just how much evidence does government need before it will act on the food-

system crisis? Food is essential to all our lives; yet the current food system – the whole web of connections from farm to fork – is at the nexus of some of the most critical challenges of our generation: health and wellbeing, land-use, climate change and nature loss, fair trade and social justice.

Many eminent organisations have produced thoroughly researched and well-presented reports explaining the problem and proposing solutions. And yet action has been slow, piecemeal, fragmented, delayed or declined. Worse, the reasons for this were persistently attributed to consumer sentiments. ‘No-one wants a nanny state’, ‘We can’t tell people what to eat’, ‘If consumers wanted to, they’d make different lifestyle choices’, ‘We can’t do anything in a cost-of-living crisis or global downturn’. Yet these sentiments were not what we were hearing when we worked with people in their communities. Far from it. Taking stock, we reflected on what we know about what works in helping change happen.

First, we knew we had to take the change equation seriously. Second, we wanted to bring conversations back to the real and practical – so that everyone could connect to the questions. Third, we needed to bring a healthy dose of critical thinking into the debates.

The change equation is a figurative device that’s been around since the 1960s for making sense of the conditions needed for change to happen. ‘D’ stands for Dissatisfaction with the current state, ‘V’ represents the Vision (I prefer ‘Version’) of a future better than now, ‘M’ is the Means to get from the present to the future, all of which, multiplied, must be greater than the pain or cost of change to overcome Resistance (‘R’) to change. The multiplier is important; if there is a low or even zero value in one of those components, then the product is low to

zero and there simply isn’t enough energy in the system to overcome the cost of change.

“...we wanted to bring conversations back to the real and practical – so that everyone could connect to the questions.”

When difficult issues depart too far from our everyday lived reality, it can be too hard to engage with them – let alone with the complexities and trade-offs inherent in their resolution. Food is central to the big global challenges: the climate crisis, collapsing biodiversity, geopolitical tensions and the shape of the economy. But the enormity and complexity of these huge issues can start to feel abstracted and distant from our immediate reality. And yet we all eat food, every day; it is essential to our health and wellbeing, and at the heart of our cultures and traditions. Everyone can join a conversation that starts with food.

Here, I draw on the emancipatory stance of Paolo Freire’s work. Thinking in systems cannot be divorced from politics or the boundaries we draw around what’s in and what’s outside of a systems approach. He names a ‘culture of silence’ in how we talk about power and resources and argues that drawing attention to this has the potential to create the conditions in which change can happen. It was clear to us that for all the research about food systems, many were simply silent on the political economy of food.

Despite its centrality to our lives, much of the modern global food system is invisible to us. For most of us, we have more choice, more availability and all at lower cost than at any time in recent history. The benefits are widely advertised, yet the downsides are skated over. Most of us can conceptualise a farm that produces the food we eat, and a supermarket where we buy it or the café we eat it in. Yet the true nature of modern food and farming is opaque.

How many people know that 70 to 80 per cent of the global grain trade is controlled by just four companies, known as the ABCDs, whose profits continue to soar while the cost-of-living crisis sees food prices spiral? How many know that huge companies like these control the cheap chicken industry, which contributes to deforesting the Amazon to produce soy for feed, and closer to home, devastates the ecology of the river Wye, due to the proliferation of intensive poultry production around its banks? How many consumers know that 50 per cent of farmers in the UK earn less than the minimum wage? And how many know that over 20 per cent of families with children in the UK are living with food insecurity, skipping meals sometimes for a whole day?

The Food Conversation is an ambitious national project that uses deliberative and citizen-centred approaches to tackle the question – what do we really want from food? We started with a proof of concept in two places – Birmingham and Cambridgeshire. Working with expert facilitation teams, and gold standard recruitment methods – sortition – we recruited a representative group of citizens in each place to explore all the ways the food system impacts our lives – food and health; food, farming and land-use; food, climate and nature; and food, trade and justice. Participants met four times

over three weeks and produced their own manifestos for change. Unlike typical citizens’ assemblies, we didn’t major on primary research; rather we used a kind of meta-analysis and shared with citizens the range and breadth of reports produced in the last 7 to 10 years by expert bodies in the UK and internationally. We worked through the similarities and differences, where recommendations aligned and where they diverged; we explored synergies, choices and trade-offs. And we started with the political economy of food. We explained that governments and businesses decline to act on many of these recommendations because, they argue, consumers don’t want them to.

The outputs of the dialogues are extraordinary. Across demographics and political allegiances, citizens are clear – they want radical action, and they reject excuses for inaction. And their thoughts about the food system tell us a great deal about the society they want – one that is fairer, healthier and greener, with government and business leaders taking the hard decisions that put people and the planet first.

- A healthier, greener food environment, including restrictions on junk-food advertising, higher standards for catering in schools and hospitals, and tighter controls on the availability and marketing of ultra-processed foods;
- Support for farmers to farm more sustainably, going beyond existing policies with more investments and incentives to do the right things;
- Taxes and regulations to hold big food businesses to account – such as adopting the polluter pays principle for environmental harm – and to reduce production of unhealthy foods;
- Practical help for citizens to eat more healthily and

sustainably – redistributing revenues from taxes and fines on food companies so those on low incomes can afford healthy and sustainable food, better information campaigns about the impacts of the food system and honest labelling; and

- Visible political leadership when it comes to food, and a plan of action that brings together the different parts of government, in coherent and aligned policies, so that policies in one department are not undermined by another or placing further costs on the Treasury and the taxpayer.

Already, this project has generated substantial impact. We've invested in high quality communications that show citizens speaking in their own voices and in straightforward terms. The simplicity and clarity of their messages are landing well with policymakers and partner organisations, helping to shift the energy in the system towards more radical and practical change.

It's early days. We have a full programme through 2024 to involve more citizens around the UK. Let's see whether this starts to bridge the knowing-doing gap.



Chapter 11

Reflection on Key Themes

Sinéad Gibney was appointed Chief Commissioner of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC) by President Michael D. Higgins in July 2020. Sinéad looks at the key themes across section three.

The focus of this section is on how Ireland can thrive and the services and issues which need to be kept in view to build resilience and address vulnerabilities. The inputs invoke a rich and diverse set of issues, including:

- Balancing short-term income compensation with long-term social investments;
- Adopting a life-course perspective (and healthy life expectancy) to policy consideration;
- Progressing significant reforms with greater haste, especially where cross-party political support exists;
- Initiating greater collaboration and dialogue between organisations like NESC, policymakers and communities;
- Ensuring further, real interdepartmental co-operation, forward planning and robust data collection to anticipate and address crises effectively, and improve policy development and resource allocation;
- Increasing diversity in the Council, in the public service and, indeed, in policymaking more broadly to deliver inclusion and protection;
- Including and supporting even those ‘at their lowest ebb’ as an important aspect of a thriving Ireland;
- Placing greater emphasis on implementation (as opposed to more consultation or research) to improve the quality of life for the vulnerable, requiring national policies, targeted interventions and collaboration with those with lived experience;
- Delivering data-driven welfare reform, gender-sensitive systems and increased participation to address systemic issues faced by the vulnerable;

- **Balancing data protection with accessibility, ensuring that vulnerable individuals are not excluded from (online) services;**
- **Realising that a fully inclusive, thriving Ireland means overhauling financial supports, changing societal narratives and updating outdated strategies; and**
- **Utilising the change equation ($D \times V \times M > R$), involving dissatisfaction, vision, means, and resistance, as crucial for effective change management.**

Reflection from Sinéad Gibney

As Chief Commissioner of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, I was delighted to be a part of the celebrations to mark 50 years of the National Economic and Social Council.

The panel that I reported on, entitled 'a resilient, inclusive and protective Ireland', focused on key themes essential to the development of Ireland, namely data, care, investment in services, participation, human rights and equality.



As the national human rights and equality body, a strong evidence base is crucial to our work. Without robust and timely equality data, we can't truly quantify the experience of distinct groups in Irish society, particularly those who experience marginalisation, disadvantage and discrimination. Simply put – what we cannot measure, we cannot change.

Reflective of this importance, the speakers raised interesting perspectives on the topic. These ranged from a critical view that GDPR has been used to erect barriers to effective collection of data, through to the importance of longitudinal data in capturing the ongoing experience of individuals and groups. Current initiatives such as the Growing Up in Ireland study and The Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing (TILDA) are welcome in this space. It is essential that the state continues to improve on the collection, disaggregation and reporting of equality data, and that that data is made accessible and useful for public bodies, civil society and researchers to analyse and better inform policy development and decision-making. In that context, we can look forward to the imminent publication of the National Equality Strategy.

Care, a strategic priority area for IHREC, was another topic that came up throughout the session, and indeed at various other points during the day. Our Commission emphasises the importance of recognising care as valuable in and of itself, as well as an activity which contributes to the economic health of the nation. There

needs to be a shift in understanding and attitudes about care, and the gendered and racialised nature of care must be addressed. It is not a coincidence that in the realm of paid care, migrant women are disproportionately represented, just as women are heavily overrepresented in unpaid care. We need to acknowledge the significant economic contribution that unpaid care makes to our society and accordingly, consider how it can be properly supported through welfare reform.

Expanding on this, the theme of welfare reform was another common thread running through much of the commentary. It was noted how effective welfare provision supports growth, providing buffers to stabilise the economy in times of crisis, and family services, to contribute to more participation of women in the labour market. One contributor spoke about how welfare reform should aspire towards being a service intensive, gender sensitive, life-course orientated system, in tune with the economy. One example given was that of flexible retirement, noting how countries that enable it have much higher social wellbeing perceptions. However, in Ireland, concerns over service provision to children and older people particularly remain.

Participation is another hallmark of our work in IHREC. We regularly use the phrase 'nothing about us without us' to emphasise the importance of capturing the lived experience of those who are most impacted by our

"If we want to see real equality in Ireland, we must resist the divisive forces in our society and come back to the position that equality is good for us all, not just those who will be lifted out of disadvantage and marginalisation."

work, in its development. It has been a privilege of my job to hear directly from rights holders, and we have consistently stated that a similar level of engagement should be standard across the public sector and the Oireachtas. The importance of the child in policymaking was emphasised in the panel, and how vital meaningful participation is in developing specific interventions as well as mainstream solutions.

This last point applies to the Irish Traveller population and the range of poor outcomes that they face during their lives – in health, employment, education and life expectancy. The experience of Irish Travellers is the most acute rights and equality issue that we deal with in IHREC. Besides the systemic issues that prevent Travellers from accessing their rights and enjoying a life equal to members of the settled community, Travellers experience daily racism, stigma and discrimination that remains the most accepted bigotry in our society. During the session, we heard about the policy fatigue that is setting in with the Traveller community and the need to see less plans, strategies and reports, but more implementation and impact on the ground.

At the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, we witnessed a real moment of national solidarity. A connectivity that we all share was illuminated, and people realised that we all needed to be well for any of us to be well.

That solidarity may have been fleeting, but it still serves to highlight the widely held aspiration of people in Ireland on the kind of society we want to live in, and the values we cherish. Our own polling year-on-year confirms how the overwhelming majority of people here believe that everyone should be treated equally, regardless of who you are or where you come from.

And yet, rights and equality are under threat across our globe. If we want to see real equality in Ireland, we must resist the divisive forces in our society and come back to the position that equality is good for us all, not just those who will be lifted out of disadvantage and marginalisation.

This discussion takes place in the context of the new and complex challenges Ireland is facing, from the climate crisis, prolonged war in multiple areas, and a broad range of technological advancements, including digitalisation, the development of AI and data protection concerns. We are one of the fastest-ageing countries in Europe, impacting the heavily gendered care burden that is already worryingly high. All of these factors are likely to fundamentally reshape how we live, work and more broadly, function as a society. However daunting they may seem, it's important to highlight that some of these challenges, with the right approach, contain immense opportunities that can make Ireland a better, fairer and more equal place for everyone.

Forward & Outward Looking

At the heart of NESC's vision of Ireland is the ability as a society to shape the future we want to achieve. This means that we have to be able to look forward, to understand the forces which will shape our future and figure out ways in which we can fashion those forces. We must also maintain a capacity to understand our relationship with other countries and citizens in an increasingly interconnected and volatile world.

This section begins with a scene-setting piece which focuses on the role of vision and values and how Ireland could be improved. This is followed by views of people working in various areas on what actions could be taken to improve our capacity to anticipate and respond to changes in the economic, social and environment spheres. The section closes with some reflections.

Chapter 12: Imaging Hope -A New Line of Inquiry

Chapter 13: Responses from Eight Perspectives

Chapter 14: Reflections - New Approaches for New Realities

Chapter 12



Imaging Hope - A New Line of Inquiry

Philip McDonagh is Adjunct Professor in the Faculty of Humanities at Dublin City University and Director of the Centre for Religion, Human Values, and International Relations. In this chapter he argues for the need for a collective sense of direction; and a four part-methodology which could nurture Ireland's shared vision and values.

The Need for a Sense of Direction

As one of the scene-setting speakers at November's NESC@50 Conference, I argued for a stronger focus on 'cathedral thinking'. Without lessening our commitment to the day-to-day business of government, we can develop spaces for longer-term deliberation. The present paper develops this argument further. I propose a new workstream or line of inquiry for NESC focusing explicitly on hope as a unifying political value.

NESC is already a leading advocate of coherent long-term thinking. Structured co-operation among social partners can create trust and thereby opportunities for change. In the face of climate change, Ireland is committed to a co-ordinated, multiannual transition. The Programme for Government provides for the development of a comprehensive wellbeing framework within which to evaluate particular policies. In Northern Ireland, there are proposals to develop a framework for policy, drawing perhaps on the concept of 'positive peace', which by definition has a cross-border and even a global dimension.

The term 'positive peace' encourages us to 'image' the opposite of a failed state. Different elements come together, such as an effective government, the equitable distribution of resources, access to information and good relations with neighbours. At the present historical moment in Europe, perhaps the most urgent need is

for a compact between generations. Young people fear the future. A sense of not being able to influence public affairs is pervasive.

In a society that experiences hope, the whole is always greater than the sum of its parts. We belong to a living community. We have shared agency and we accept shared decisions. At stake is the structural question that arises in every period of history: is there a common life or collective wellbeing that is more than the sum of our private interests?

In his inaugural lecture as Professor of Poetry at Oxford, Seamus Heaney quoted Vaclav Havel on hope:
... a state of mind, not a state of the world ... It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out.

That 'something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out' is a dynamic assertion. We are ready to act, to take rational risks, even in the face of difficulty. Coming together as a society to address our most consequential challenges lends resonance to words like 'hope' and 'justice'. When such words do not seem relevant in a deliberative process, decisions become 'technical', 'transactional' and disconnected from one another, contributing to a loss of trust in politics.

The State is Not Absent from Markets

A binary model of market-plus-state (selfishness in the market, duty to the state) oversimplifies the ethical framework within which we make economic decisions. Climate change has taught us that economic choices are rarely 'negligible' with respect to social outcomes (Lane, 2012). In Ireland, we recognise in numerous ways that

economic activity can serve a social purpose beyond mere efficiency. Examples include the employment of people with disabilities, 'green' conditionality, loan guarantees for homebuyers, free travel for pensioners and quotas for locally engaged workers in construction contracts. Government plays a powerful role in shaping the overall economic environment and providing the public goods, such as education, on which economic actors depend.

On the other hand, the genuine values and clear sense of direction implicit in many government interventions are often undermined in practice by forces that are impersonal – 'impersonal' because they do not flow from any direct, conscious and accountable political decision. In Ireland, as in other wealthier societies, income earned through work has been falling steadily relative to income derived from assets, as researched so convincingly by Thomas Piketty and others. Metrics for growth fail to capture anomalies such as the lower life expectancy of Travellers and the correlation between poor housing and the incidence of non-communicable diseases.

We can usefully contrast these examples of social deprivation with the in-built advantages enjoyed by high earners as represented, for example, by share options, bonuses, the chasm between professional fees and earned wages, and patterns of remuneration in the healthcare sector.

"In a society that experiences hope, the whole is always greater than the sum of its parts."

How do we assess the causes and consequences of all these expressions of unintended inequality? If our guiding idea is that good work and a shared way of life are central to the idea of citizenship, then outcomes that bear no relationship to this vision are not 'residual' problems; they are embedded flaws, symptomatic of a loss of shared agency.

NESC's report of summer 2023, *Exploring a Just Transition in Agriculture and Land-Use*, is a good example of creative long-term deliberation in which the blending of ethics and efficiency is at the heart of evolutionary change. NESC begins with basic methodological propositions:

- The need to accept a longer-term responsibility;
- The principle that policy springs from vision and values; and
- Acceptance that in the face of complexity, we need credible spaces for deliberation.

A sense of where we are trying to go risks being lost sight of if we aim merely at a series of technical changes in separate sectors – carbon commitments, land-use, soil quality, water quality, biodiversity, the nutritional value of what is produced, animal welfare, employment, housing, transport infrastructure, taxation, EU regulations and so on. What is needed in addition to tracking individual sectors is a compelling vision that can inspire the relevant stakeholders to embark on a journey of change.

John Gilliland, Professor of Practice at Queen's University Belfast, speaks of a 'transition to deliver multiple public goods'. In Professor Gilliland's vision, there is a role for local government in enabling multistakeholder co-operation and promoting compliance with the emerging strategies. New forms of public investment will be needed, building on the extensive systems of public

support that are already in place in the agricultural sector. There is scope to include social indicators as part of a holistic approach to measurement.

In the economy as a whole, as in the sphere of agriculture and land-use, any dichotomy between profit-based considerations and not-for-profit or ethical considerations does not do full justice to reality or offer adequate practical direction for the future.

'Cathedral thinking' should include a research agenda carefully aimed at clarifying the many important situations in which both profit and not-for-profit considerations are in play. For example, the recent AI Act passed by the European Parliament brings the interests of both companies and society into dialogue.

The proposed new programme of research, which I tentatively name 'Imaging Hope', would contribute to the development of regulatory frameworks, relevant codes of practice at governmental level, and new environmental, social and governance (ESG) metrics. In the longer run, an 'Imaging Hope' project within NESC would revive interest in the Directive Principles of Social Policy of Bunreacht na hÉireann.

The Perspective of the Sustainable Development Goals

Innovative social and economic thinking at home will only take root if it connects in a believable way with the wider European and global circumstances. In the words of an American political scientist (Thomas Hale), the transition we are facing at the global level is deep, wide and long – deep, because we need responses at every level of society; wide, because it will depend in part on regional and global conditions; and above all, long, because we are beginning to wake up to our responsibility to future generations.

“As of July 2023, the UN’s Food and Agriculture Organization calculates that the number of people unable to afford a healthy diet is more than three billion.”

The new line of inquiry addressing the overlap between profit-based considerations and not-for-profit or ethical considerations in economic decisions should be linked explicitly to the ‘compact between generations’ alluded to above and to the renewal of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Over the coming decades, peace will depend on a cultural and socioecological transition at the global level even more far-reaching than the gradual emancipation of women in the 20th century and the progressive discrediting of racial discrimination over the same period. Absent the SDGs, it is hard to imagine a starting point from which to develop a common medium-term plan for humanity.

During the NESC@50 Conference, one speaker identified food security as a key metric of wellbeing and an issue bridging urban and rural agendas. Perhaps we can use food security as a lens through which to understand the present historical moment at a global level.

As of July 2023, the UN’s Food and Agriculture Organization calculates that the number of people unable to afford a healthy diet is more than three billion (FAO, 2024). In parallel, the number of people facing acute hunger and undernourishment has risen to 9.2 per cent of the global population; around 735 million people (ibid).

We readily understand that in the pluralist societies that are now emerging in both jurisdictions on this island, perspectives from the ‘global south’ are an essential

part of the school curriculum. To understand these perspectives is equally essential in the realm of public policy, as we seek to ‘image’ the future.

Including Churches and Faith Communities in the Discussion

NESC’s methodology is based on research – a multifaceted or multimethod inquiry into different forms of evidence; dialogue – respectful, deep listening to experts, those impacted by policy, those at the ‘frontline’, decision-makers and social thinkers; and advice – a commitment to continuous learning and the scaling up of advisory services. Research, dialogue and advice form a nexus or system.

The NESC consultative report of July 2021 on the development of wellbeing indicators includes the following statement:

Future work may also benefit from engaging the goodwill of churches and faith communities across the island in implementing the wellbeing framework. Through the Irish Inter-Church Meeting and the Dublin City Inter-Faith Forum, these communities are already conducting their own research (facilitated by academics) on the economics of wellbeing and belonging and have indicated to NESC their willingness to become involved.

The principle that public authorities should engage with faith communities is established under Article 17 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. Article 17 was partly inspired by the late Jacques Delors, who was both a socialist and a Christian believer. Delors wanted to keep alive the deep cultural perspective of the European Union's foundational thinkers. Another influence on Article 17 is a school within German political thought, according to which democracy depends on cultural conditions that it cannot itself generate or guarantee.

The philosopher Jürgen Habermas, usually regarded as a 'secular' thinker, states the following:

The markets and the power of the bureaucracy are expelling social solidarity from more and more spheres of life. Thus, it is in the interest of the constitutional state to deal carefully with all the cultural sources that nourish its citizens' consciousness of norms and their solidarity (Habermas & Ratzinger, 2006: 45).

Speaking in April 2021 at the inauguration of the Centre for Religion, Human Values and International Relations at Dublin City University, the then Taoiseach (now Tánaiste) Micheál Martin framed the current challenge as follows: 'to interpret and apply our high-level values in a world that is changing rapidly and faces many "existential" questions in the realm of climate-change and technological developments'.

The engagement of public authorities with churches and faith communities can take many different forms. 'Churches do not have the first or the last word' (Archbishop John McDowell). As we approach this dialogue, the core values that come to mind are mutual hospitality and social friendship.

There is an opportunity for religious leaders to engage experts, encourage new forms of leadership and network with relevant civic society organisations. The 'social capital' of faith communities can make a real difference in the implementation of transformative policies.

Towards a Four-Part Methodology for Nurturing our Vision and Values

What would it mean in practice to develop a workstream focusing on hope and perhaps other words of fundamental importance in the public realm? The line of inquiry that I have in mind can take shape through four mutually reinforcing levels of reflection:

- The explicit search for an overarching vision;
- An examination of selected issues having demonstration value, or confidence-building value, in the light of the kind of society we want;
- Place-based policies and the role of local communities; and
- International comparisons.

A few years ago, the French Roman Catholic bishops wrote about the need to 'recover the meaning of politics', making a distinction between *le politique*, understanding what a shared life in society involves, and *la politique*, the specific actions and policies that we debate in each electoral cycle (Conseil Permanent de la Conférence des Évêques de France, 2016). The proposed four-part methodology is intended to strengthen our grasp of, and belief in, *le politique*. Greater transparency will encourage citizens, especially young people, to trust the processes of political decision-making and to get involved.

Finding an overarching vision

Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states the following:

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

Article 28 relates human dignity to life in community:

Everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration can be fully realised.

The use of the word ‘brotherhood’ in Article 1 of the Universal Declaration is echoed by the centrality of the word ‘fraternity’ in religious traditions and in particular, in the Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together signed by Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Dr Ahmed El-Tayeb, in 2019.

Within this ‘first level of reflection’, one possible starting point is to identify and explore the high-level values implicit in documents acknowledged by citizens as key reference points. For example, researchers could look at the Directive Social Principles (referenced above), the Good Friday Agreement, the principles and themes promoted in early childhood education (Aistear and Síolta) and Seamus Heaney’s Nobel Lecture. Beyond the island of Ireland, key points of reference might include the UN Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other human rights commitments, the 1951 Refugee Convention, the Helsinki Final Act, climate agreements, the Sustainable Development Goals, and religious appeals to the whole of humanity such as the Document on Human Fraternity mentioned above and *Laudato Si’*.

Issues having demonstration value

The proposed second ‘level of reflection’ derives from the dialogical relationship between our high-level values and our particular decisions. ‘Measures having demonstration value’ are those particular political choices that stand out in terms of reflecting and reaffirming our high-level values. In NESC’s ‘systemic’ understanding of political change, a breakthrough in any one space can create ripples elsewhere within a multilevel set of interactions. A ‘measure having demonstration value’ can be narrow in its initial conception yet influential in the longer run because of its clear meaning and confidence-building potential. In our work with churches and faith communities, our Centre for Religion, Human Values, and International Relations has examined a number of current issues which, if properly addressed, would have ‘demonstration value’ of this kind, pointing towards a society characterised by compassion and hope. These issues include child food poverty, housing, aspects of the criminal justice system and policies for an ageing population. We are planning a further project aimed at empowering a younger cohort of participants to advocate for an ‘economics of belonging’.

Place-based policies and the role of local communities

Our proposed third ‘level of reflection’ derives from the renewed interest in the role of local government, local communities and place-based policies in general.

Here in Ireland, during the pandemic, ‘Community Call’ was a support mechanism put in place in March 2020 under the guidance of local authorities. The goal was to reach the most vulnerable members of society with food, medicines, fuel and other forms of support. Individuals could take the initiative and make themselves

known to a local contact point. Registers were created of those most in need. Community Call co-ordinated the efforts of a wide range of actors, including the HSE, the Department of Social Protection, the postal service, the Garda Síochána, local businesses and charitable organisations.

At the international level, the business commentator Rana Faroohar (of the Financial Times) writes as follows in her recent book *Homecoming*:

Regionalisation and localisation are the future. Countries, cities and individual communities are increasingly shaping their own futures. Supply chains are shortening. The capital/labour divide is finally, after decades, shrinking. A wave of technological innovation is making it possible to move jobs and wealth to a far greater number of places, including back home. A new generation of (Millennial) workers and voters is pushing politicians and business leaders alike to put the rules of the global economy back in service to the communal wellbeing ... we need to step back from unfettered globalisation and work to re-moor prosperity to place (Faroohar, 2022: xviii – xix).

‘Community wealth building’ (CWB) is a movement based in Manchester. Finance, the workforce, and land and property are seen as complementary factors that can be utilised to create a sense of inclusive ownership. A work just published in the United States, *Fragile Neighbourhoods/Repairing American Society One Zip Code at a Time*, speaks to a similar agenda (Kaplan, 2024). Current initiatives in the north-east inner city in Dublin and East Belfast have much in common with the CWB and the ‘fragile neighbourhoods’ approaches.

International Comparisons

The NESC report on wellbeing of July 2021 suggests examining the relevant experience of the Nordics and other countries, such as (at that time) New Zealand pioneering the use of wellbeing as a measure. Consideration might be given to requesting our Embassy network to report regularly on promising practices in selected countries and on relevant ongoing developments in the European Union and multilateral organisations. It would be worthwhile to explore the degree to which other countries link domestic programmes for government to constitutional protections, the UN Sustainable Development Goals, climate targets and international human rights commitments.

The Standard of Hope

The concept of ‘demonstration value’ implies a common criterion of evaluation in seemingly different and distinct situations. This common criterion can usefully be described as ‘belief in the future’ or ‘the standard of hope’.

From a religious perspective, hope is an inner resource implying a readiness to engage with our circumstances and act where possible, even in the face of steep odds. In this religious perspective, ‘peace is a true idea’, as stated by Senator George Mitchell in Belfast in April 2023. We are uncovering a source. We are pushing at history’s open door as co-workers in a project where we cannot claim to be fully the masters of cause and effect. Actions that conform with hope and build peace will be in harmony with other similar actions, including other people’s actions. There is an ‘in-built’ consistency, compatibility and coherence. This is not just about shaping coalitions. That can happen, certainly. But the point is deeper. From a religious perspective, a common criterion of evaluation – the ‘standard of hope’ – links one situation to another and enables a variety of actors to give the

“In a ‘failed state’, there is no commonly agreed narrative, no hierarchy of values, no comfortable meeting place, no effective deliberation about the future.”

future a good character, even before the overall picture becomes clear. It has been said that ‘all upright conduct is hope in action’.²⁶

In the 21st century, planetary ecology and the need for a just transition in the organisation of the economy depend on numerous individual decisions linked together by a common criterion of evaluation. This common criterion will almost by definition reflect ‘belief in the future’. It cannot be the standard of mere self-interest, which inevitably pushes us in different directions. This insight can transform our understanding of effective action. For someone who is not a religious believer in the traditional sense, a common criterion of evaluation at the local or global level can resemble the ‘standard of hope’, as described here. A disposition of hope – a disposition to believe in the future – becomes the hypothesis that underpins all our scattered endeavours.

Social friendship cannot be ensured by a single ‘constitutive’ decision within the legislative or political process. Society is held together, ultimately, through a dialogical process involving both a sufficiently shared and perhaps evolving world view and (on the other hand) our day-to-day decisions. In a ‘failed state’, there is no commonly agreed narrative, no hierarchy of values, no

comfortable meeting place, no effective deliberation about the future. The most consequential political issues, including our responsibility to future generations, are lost from view. Impersonal forces gain traction. Reconstituting a shared account of reality is the rational alternative to polarisation and chaos. The standard of hope, if restored to a fuller meaning in our culture, can inspire and bring together all those who face the future determined to be ‘part of the solution’.

Conclusions

In the expectation that a forward- and outward-looking Ireland will accept the NESC principle that policy springs from vision and values, and that we need a more deeply rooted ethos and a more clearly articulated sense of direction, I put forward six points for consideration. First, a vision and values-led approach to politics should give an overriding priority to sharing the primary goods of life while also accepting a longer-term responsibility to promote the ecological and climatic conditions on which life depends.

Second, with a view to a ‘just’ or ‘fair’ transition in the face of potential ecological tipping points, we are already starting to reconnect the values of freedom and responsibility. This insight needs to be developed further.

²⁶ Pope Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*.

Democracy should have a direction of travel that inspires personal, psychological and political maturity.

We should work towards a new, instructive definition of democracy: democracy will be fully implemented only when all individuals and all peoples have access to the primary goods of life, food, water, shelter, healthcare, education, work and certainty of their rights, through an ordering of internal and international relations that guarantees everyone a chance to participate.

Third, at the global level, we should adopt ‘holistic’ or ‘systems thinking’, taking into account cultural, economic, ecological, financial, technological and other factors. Polarisation, inequality, conflict and preparation for conflict represent key variables. Systems thinking will change our understanding of ‘agency’ in politics and of the ways in which we can promote peace.

Fourth, a dichotomy between profit-based activities and non-profit activities does not do full justice to reality or offer adequate practical direction for the future. To

recognise that our political and economic thought is ‘incomplete’ is to invite a practical response.

Fifth, detailed conceptual work is needed on regulatory frameworks, relevant codes of practice at governmental level, and new environmental, social and governance (ESG) metrics. In particular, addressing inequality requires the government to consider its own policies and the signal that is sent to society in such areas as regulation, planning, procurement, the outsourcing of services, investment, tax, fees, remuneration, business supports and education. The approach taken by the state has a profound impact on societal relationships and a spirit of equity among citizens.

Sixth, to promote the sustained co-ordination of actors across multiple domains, we need a bigger language. ‘Imaging hope’ – a project to restore to the word ‘hope’ a fuller meaning and a greater resonance – can help to bridge the gap between the familiar and the unknown, between today and a future that is perhaps not even imaginable.



Chapter 13

Responses from Eight Perspectives

The need to agree and work towards a shared vision, the importance of inclusivity and equity in framing this vision and practical ways of moving this forward set the scene for this chapter. The respondents were invited to consider Ireland's future from very diverse vantage points.

First, Toto Daly, a 20-year-old climate activist and Leaving Certificate student, argues that climate and biodiversity are not thriving. She highlights that to drive people to take action depends on values, more than targets. She believes that a key challenge is finding ways to ask what Ireland stands for in 2023, and what are the shared values?

Second, Dr Matt Crowe, former EPA Director and current Chair of the National Water Forum, contends that success in maintaining economic and social gains depends on effectively decarbonising the economy and addressing climate change. He also emphasises shared visions for the future, improved implementation and greater use of varying forms of deliberative democracy as part of what he refers to as a coming decade of cathedral thinking.

Third, Niall Cussen, Chief Executive and Planning Regulator at the Office of the Planning Regulator, concentrates on the critical role of planning in shaping our future. He highlights recent innovations, including the creation of the OPR and Land Development Agency, but also acknowledges continuing challenges around increased litigation in planning, outdated planning systems and a crisis of confidence in An Bord Pleanála. He stresses the need to deliver compact urban development, co-ordinate planning and deepen societal understanding of climate action's connection to planning.

Fourth, Donncha Kavanagh, Professor of Information and Organisation in the College of Business at UCD, delves into the dangers of our tendency to privilege the present, recent past and near future at the expense of the longer term. He focuses on the future of Ireland's research and innovation ecosystem, including the role of universities, the balance between basic and applied research and the influence of national policies, and the potential role of a new agency to ensure a focus on long-term strategic planning.

Fifth, Dennis C. Grube, Professor of Politics and Public Policy at the University of Cambridge, hones in on the factors shaping our ability to do forward-looking policymaking. He highlights the disconnect felt by citizens and politicians, arguing for more emphasis on clearer problem definitions, more robust gathering of evidence, compelling narratives and interventions aligned with these elements.

Sixth, Jane Suiter, Professor in the School of Communications at Dublin City University and Director of DCU's Institute for Future Media, Democracy and Society, observes how misinformation obstructs collective action in policy domains, undermining information credibility and deceiving citizens. She proposes that strategies like fostering citizen engagement, implementing pre-bunking tactics and enhancing digital literacy are essential for combating misinformation and fostering societal resilience.

Seventh, Cían FitzGerald, Researcher at the Institute of International and European Affairs (IIEA), pinpoints a further source of uncertainty and volatility. He describes the emergence of geopolitical contestation and new security risks which fall between peace and war, so-called grey-zone threats. He argues that a whole-of-society approach is required to address these challenges, as traditional security apparatus and approaches may prove inadequate.



Eighth, Malachy Ó Néill, Director of Regional Engagement at Ulster University, advises that to build our capacity to look forward and outward, there is the need for more academic collaboration and engagement and for the potential of a Shared-Island approach. He outlines the approach to collaboration rooted in specific projects which have an explicit forward-looking focus, such as the University of Ulster collaboration with Atlantic Technological University (ATU).

Finally, this chapter was very usefully framed by the inputs of young people who have been engaged in NESC work. See the box on the following page which provides a summary of the issues raised.

Young People's Perspectives

To support its work, NESC liaised with the National Participation Office (NPO) to establish a NESC@50 Youth Advisory Group. The Group collaborated closely with NESC and the NPO to produce a report identifying challenges facing Ireland and some solutions. The full report is available at www.nesc.ie, while the six main areas are summarised here.

Housing and Poverty: Within this discussion, we highlighted several barriers such as the difficulty in applying for apprenticeships, unaffordable housing, insufficient support for single-parent families, a lack of council housing and student accommodation, problems with direct provision centres, the need for rent caps, and how minority groups are more severely impacted by poverty and homelessness.

Possible solutions for these issues include providing more apprenticeship opportunities, eliminating the special subminimum wage for 18-year-olds, building affordable housing, supplying means-tested rent support, reinstating the eviction ban, reforming the multiproperty tax, renovating derelict properties, building affordable student accommodation, providing government-funded public transport in rural areas and creating a national building company.

Transport and Accommodation: We revealed challenges such as a lack of student accommodation, poor public transport services, insufficient public transport and expensive school bus travel costs in rural areas, and a lack of interconnection between different areas of Ireland.

Potential solutions include subsidising school transport for secondary school students, creating public transport connections between rural counties, providing more student accommodation under rent caps, passing legislation to protect students in digs, installing more bike racks, increasing advertisement of transport methods and routes, and promoting safer public transport.

Health and Wellbeing: The obstacles observed involve long waiting lists, issues with CAMHS, a lack of supports for people with non-life-threatening conditions, a lack of awareness around hidden disabilities, a lack of safe spaces for teenagers and the interconnection between having a disability and living in poverty.

Possible solutions include increasing public spaces in cities and towns, enhancing support for those with hidden disabilities and eating disorders, providing more funding for youth work, promoting websites which have work opportunities for young people, banning unpaid internships and offering counselling for all students in both secondary- and third-level education.

Education: We highlighted barriers to secondary-level education such as an archaic education system, a lack of subject choice, insufficient equipment, a lack of teachers and examiners, inadequate funding for youth work, unpaid internships, insufficient cultural and political education, ineffective student councils, and transport.

Potential solutions include introducing more continuous assessment in secondary schools, promoting languages, creating strategic guidelines for student councils, providing more political, diversity and cultural education, reforming CSPE and SPHE curriculums and using more creativity and

collaboration in the classroom. In third-level education, we suggested expanding the Erasmus programme, consulting young people on educational reform, having a fully means-tested SUSI grant, creating inner-city Gaeltachts and providing Irish language courses for those outside of the education system.

Discrimination and Equality: The impediments identified include insufficient awareness of different cultures and ethnic backgrounds, discrimination against hidden disabilities, few platforms for ethnic minorities, stigma around neurodivergence, hate speech, microaggressions and an unbalanced representation in politics and policymaking.

Possible solutions include more education on inclusive language and different cultures, creating a report system for hate speech and providing spaces for ethnic minorities in policymaking.

Climate Action: We pinpointed barriers such as insufficient public transport in rural areas, a lack of support for farming communities, a lack of awareness on the seriousness and immediate impacts of the climate crisis, insufficient public knowledge on the SDGs, the influence of the media, a lack of ownership and leadership on the climate crisis and insufficient financial resources.

Potential solutions include further raising awareness of climate change by showing people the personal impacts it can have, working towards achieving the SDGs and making a conscious effort to assist rural areas in adapting to and mitigating the effects of climate change.

Value-Driven Motivation:

Toto Daly

At the NESC@50 Conference, I was asked about the key challenge for all of us: understanding, owning and acting to ensure future generations enjoy a thriving climate and biodiversity. Something which we do not have at the moment. The climate and our biodiversity are not thriving.

The Council wanted my views on what needs to be done to motivate and inspire more action, real action and change. Motivation is really interesting and figuring out how to sustain motivation is critical, especially if we want sustained action from the individual right up to a national and even global level, beyond Ireland.

Since 2019, I have worked in the climate advocacy sphere. I have helped organise the Irish student climate strikes with other young people. And I have inadvertently learned a lot about motivation and the factors that drive people to undertake an action and ultimately drive change. Looking at Ireland from my 20-year-old perspective, I think it comes down to values and the mechanisms by which people are able to act on those values.

NESC understands this, but I think as a whole, we tend to forget about values when approaching the climate emergency and go for more tangible things like targets and outcomes. We forget that values are the very thing that motivate us. They influence everything: how we think, the decisions we make, the habits we have. And as a country, we need to ask ourselves what are our values? What do we stand for? We are a pretty fantastic country considering our size. We have had phenomenal referenda this last decade. We are very multicultural. We have got an ability to talk to anyone about anything for an extended amount of time, even if it is just about the weather!

“...as a country, we need to ask ourselves what are our values?”

But considering all of that, we are a country that is failing miserably on its climate targets. We are due to fail in meeting our 2030 climate targets. Our social infrastructure is very poor. We have 30-year-olds waking up in their childhood bedrooms. We have young nurses leaving in their droves. We have university students sleeping in their cars because they can't get accommodation. And according to a recent report, people in Ireland are the loneliest in Europe.

And so I think Ireland must ask what is its sense of itself in 2023? What does it stand for when all is said and done to be able to motivate and inspire the kind of action we need? We need a set of cultural values that transverse our cultural demographic and social boundaries, as well as time. Because those boundaries are incredibly vast. We need to reduce the emphasis on extrinsic neoliberal values of money and power and material possessions, and grow more towards intrinsic values. Those ones that come from within the values that, when you wake up in the morning and think about the world, you can say 'yes, there is hope'.

I do not think these values have to be very complex. We would be going in the right direction if, firstly, we considered everyone as equal no matter what their beliefs or circumstances were. And extend that beyond Ireland. We must realise that we are not just an isolated island, and our actions affect everyone globally. Secondly, respect and care for the world. Its beauty and its complexity. I think we tend to lose that fascination as

we get older. And thirdly, it would be great if we could learn the value of giving ourselves a 'kick up the ass' every now and again!

Because at the end of the day, the question of whether we are able to come to a global agreement to stay within a global carbon budget comes down to the necessity of fairness and respect. And as the price of our actions on the earth go up, we need to be capable of caring, of knowing when enough is enough and not pushing for more.

These values, I think we will come to realise as the years go on, are not just a nicety, but are a practical necessity for our survival.

We have a massive challenge ahead of us, but we have to make the most of this planet. Planet A; because there's no Planet B. And luckily this planet is still wonderful. It is on the edge, but it is still wonderful. We have to take whatever values we end up choosing by the neck and run with them consistently.

A Decade of Cathedral Thinking:

Dr Matt Crowe

Marking the 50th anniversary of the National Economic and Social Council and Ireland's membership of the wider European family, through its joining of the EEC in 1973, is an opportunity to reflect on where next for Ireland.

“...we cannot claim that Ireland is currently thriving when we are clearly going in the wrong direction in one of the three interconnected strands of sustainable development.”

It is also an opportunity to think about what type of Ireland we would like to live in over the next 50 to 100 years. But before considering the future, we first need to have an honest debate about how well Ireland is doing right now. How do we start to consider the question of whether or not Ireland is thriving? For example, if we were to benchmark ourselves against the United Nations Human Development Index (HDI), Ireland ranks eighth in the world. Between 1990 and 2021, Ireland’s HDI score grew from 0.737 to 0.945, a remarkable rise by any standard. So, in the areas measured by the UN Human Development Index – long and healthy life, access to knowledge and a decent standard of living – Ireland compares favourably with the rest of the world and could be said to be thriving.

But, in thinking about the concept of thriving through the lens of sustainable development, we must go much further as we need to embrace in equal measure environmental, economic and social dimensions. We know, from successive State of the Environment Reports published by the Environmental Protection Agency, that the state of our natural environment has deteriorated over that same period in which we have made economic and social progress.

I would therefore argue that we cannot claim that Ireland is currently thriving when we are clearly going in the wrong direction in one of the three interconnected

strands of sustainable development – and in a very fundamental way for the future of planetary and human health and wellbeing, the most important strand.

Our national parliament has quite rightly declared both a climate and biodiversity emergency but as a society we are only starting to get to grips with the economic and social risks associated with the damage we as a species are inflicting on our planet and by extension to ourselves.

What this means is that the very real and hard-won gains we have made in economic and social terms over the past 50 years will, over the next 50 years, be put at risk if we don’t successfully decarbonise the world economy and deal with the impacts of climate change and human-induced damage inflicted on the natural world on which we depend. In short, protecting and building on the economic and social gains we have made over the past 50 years will be dependent on the degree to which we succeed in ensuring a thriving and well-protected natural environment.

So, how do we do this? Firstly, we need to get much better at considering economic, social and environmental issues in a more integrated and joined-up way. Secondly, we need to get much better at developing shared visions of where we want to go over the next 50 to 100 years so we have some shared idea of our possible futures as a society. Thirdly, we need to get

much better at implementation in a world dealing with interconnected wicked problems. This is not easy.

For example, the current debates about agriculture across Europe and in Ireland are pitting environmental protection against economic and social development. This is a zero-sum game that fails to recognise the fundamental interdependencies of environmental, social and economic dimensions in charting the future direction of agriculture, food production and rural communities. Do we even have a shared sense of what we, as a society, want rural Ireland to look like in 50 years' time? I don't think so.

Without some kind of shared vision or a discussion about the different types of possible futures that there might be, we risk stumbling into some version of the future that few people want and that could have been avoided. For sure, there are many things that will happen in the future that we cannot even begin to imagine now, in the same way that we could not have predicted the rise of the internet and social media when thinking about the future in 1973.

But there are also many things we can agree that we want or don't want to have in the future and we can start planning for that now.

For example, we are likely to want to preserve and build on the economic and social gains we have made in the past 50 years. We are also likely to get societal agreement that we want a thriving and well-protected natural environment free from pollution.

What though do we want our urban, suburban and rural communities to look like in 50 and 100 years' time? Do we still want small family-owned farms to be a major feature of our countryside or do we want to have a

smaller number of much larger farms? Do we want our farms to be still mainly involved in grass-fed dairy and beef production or growing a more diverse range of food and crops?

Similar questions can be posed for urban and suburban environments. The good news is that Ireland has developed some of the most innovative ways of addressing these complex questions through its experiments in deliberative democracy and particularly through the development and maturing of the citizen assembly and stakeholder engagement systems. Having just lived through a decade of centenaries, looking back to and learning over the last 100 years why not dedicate the next decade to thinking about what we want Ireland to be like in the next 100 years – a decade of cathedral thinking.

Planning and Enabling Change:

Niall Cussen

Meeting the many challenges Ireland faces depends on the abilities of our systems, processes and institutions to enable actions needed on the ground. Ireland's planning process is one of a number of means connecting national, regional and local actors to individual action. Ireland has benefitted from strong national economic progress in recent years, while at the same time, we encounter ongoing challenges in areas including housing and climate action.

Learning from other countries with strong traditions in planning, such as Denmark, Holland and northern European countries, the role that planning plays in both protecting and building on our achievements and addressing new challenges is strongly recognised here today.

Examples of innovations in recent years include the following:

- Ireland is the only country in Europe with a joined-up spatial and multibillion capital investment plan – the National Planning Framework (NPF) and National Development Plan (NDP) which share 10 strategic outcomes, from housing to transport, environment, community and infrastructure under Project Ireland 2040;
- Implementation of the strategic planning objectives of the NPF has been strengthened in the role of the Office of the Planning Regulator (OPR), ensuring that planning policies at national, regional and local levels align;
- Establishment of the Land Development Agency – to harness the potential of state lands in implementing the National Planning Framework and to work with wider housing and development partners; and
- Introduction of land-activation measures including the Residential Zoned Land Tax and proposed Land Value Sharing to give real impetus to ‘plan implementation’ through the alignment of planning, fiscal and tax systems.

New challenges are also emerging. There have been increases in the level of litigation in planning, influenced by novel regulatory obligations to meet environmental and planning objectives under EU law. Certain matters of concern arose in relation to An Bord Pleanála in 2022 that led to a crisis of confidence in this key national planning body and resulted in a number of reviews and reports, including two by the OPR.

There is also a contrast between, on the one hand, evident urgency in boosting housing supply, delivering infrastructure and developing in a way that

decarbonises our economy and society, and on the other hand, the amount of time it takes to get things done, reliant on older and increasingly out-of-date planning systems and procedures.

In short, the window within which we need to take action to meet challenges is tightening, while the timescales for taking those actions are becoming more lengthy and complex.

Consideration of the Government’s Planning and Development Bill 2023 will therefore be an important step in building on the parts of the planning process that are working better, such as the move towards a much more strongly plan-led approach since the 2010 Planning Act, while tackling necessary reforms. The planning bill also proposes fundamental reshaping of An Bord Pleanála, enabling it to make expertly assessed and robust planning decisions within a modern governance structure.

The approaching review of the National Planning Framework will allow an effective stock-take of progress since 2018 and the latest demographic and econometric modelling. This will ensure the best available information underpins delivery at regional and local levels.

It was only 25 years ago that Ireland’s planning process had no such co-ordination, and little practical alignment with national infrastructure planning. The 2002 National Spatial Strategy came after the 2000 National Development Plan, for example.

The National Economic and Social Council has played a key role in shaping stakeholder and institutional thinking around planning, through a number of key reports on housing and more recently, on the opportunities presented by Transit Oriented Development.

While many of the tools Ireland's planning process needs to meet future challenges are or soon will be in place, it is also worth considering three further delivery elements.

First, building up the resources and capacity of our planning process will be critical to realising the potential of a reformed legislative and regulatory framework for planning. Resourcing in terms of people, skills and systems needed to make good policies and great planning policy implementation is significantly behind the level required. Reforming the funding underpinnings of the local authority planning process is overdue, recognising that currently, planning-application-fee income represents about 17 per cent of the €160m annual cost of running the 31 local authorities' planning processes. Reasonable fees and charges will enable the planning process to boost training pathways, hire the necessary skilled people and invest in replacing outdated and fragmented background administrative and data collection systems.

Second, overcoming economic challenges in delivering more compact and sustainable urban development that is key to meeting both climate and housing targets in and around city and town centres while being more affordable to buy or rent is critical.

Currently, the much more attractive economics of building homes at the edges of cities and towns wins over the much more challenging economics of complex regeneration of the extensive vacant and underutilised areas of cities and towns.

Underpinning the costs of different forms of urban development (apartments versus own-door housing) and co-ordinating the consents needed, in addition to planning for building refurbishment, the timing of enabling infrastructural delivery, and an institutional

awareness of increasing levels of vacancy in our high streets and responding interventions all need work.

Third, it is important to retain a focus on the island and indeed the island's dimension to our spatial planning, co-ordinating long-term planning in Ireland with that of Northern Ireland, including the wider UK and EU context. In tandem with these three areas above, there is deepening our societal understanding of the interconnections between climate action, sustainable communities and planning, and harnessing that shared understanding into action on the ground to ensure planning ultimately delivers the right development, in the right places and at the right times.

Through evidence and engagement, we can better ground the planning choices we make, in long-term, sustainable, net-zero planning thinking. The work of NESC will be key.

“Consideration of the Government’s Planning and Development Bill 2023 will therefore be an important step in building on the parts of the planning process that are working better, such as the move towards a much more strongly plan-led approach since the 2010 Planning Act, while tackling necessary reforms.”

NESC@ 100?

Professor Donncha Kavanagh

NESC was created in 1973, just 10 years after TIME Magazine had Seán Lemass on its cover, anticipating

Ireland's industrialisation with its article, 'Lifting the Green Curtain'. In retrospect, Ireland did lift the green curtain in the 1960s and 1970s, as it purposefully replaced De Valera's vision of a pastoral, self-sufficient, Gaelic, Catholic Ireland with a paradigm based on urbanisation, free trade, secularism, science and technology.

In brief, Ireland moved from a pre-modern society, where beliefs were based on traditional knowledge and religious authority, to a modern society centred on science, rational discourse and non-religious beliefs. The common consensus is that the shift was warranted and is the basis for the country's current prosperity.

But what might have been lost in the shift? One perspective is to consider how the different paradigms conceptualise time and the relative importance they give to temporal concepts such as mythology, the remote past, the distant past, the recent past, the present, the near future, the distant future, the remote future and eternity. Catholicism, for instance, privileges the remote past, especially the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, and the remote future, as set out in the apocalyptic and eschatological sections of the Bible depicting the Last Judgment. Likewise, Gaelic nationalism, as articulated by people like de Valera, sees the present as continuing ancient traditions and ways of being that reach back into pre-history. Modernity, in contrast, tends to privilege the present, recent past and near future at the expense of the longer term. Hence, we might describe modernity as 'presentcentric'.

Markets and liberal democracies are aligned with and foster presentcentrism as future generations have no access to today's markets and cannot vote in our elections. In contrast, many cultures and religions take a much longer-term perspective on their community and

the cosmos and indeed there is much merit in doing so, not least because of climate change. Hence, NESC's 50th celebration is a good time to look to the longer term, say, 50 years into the future (or futures, because one lesson from foresight thinking is that we need to imagine many different possible futures, rather than a single future).

So, what will NESC look like in 50 years' time? That might not be a good question because in many future scenarios NESC might not even exist, as institutions routinely change and are transformed.

So instead of focusing on NESC's future, it might be better to look at Ireland's research and innovation ecosystem, which we might understand as the structures, practices, values, assumptions and beliefs about research, and what they might look like in 2073. Looking back 50 years, to 1973 when NESC was formed, we can see that the research ecosystem was radically different to what we have today. At a minimum, the changes since then prompt us to ask certain questions about what might change in the next 50.

So for instance, in 1973, the universities were much smaller and didn't carry out much research. In 2073, will we have universities of a different size with different objectives and possibilities, some perhaps focused on teaching, remembering that Newman's idea of the university didn't include research?

What will be the balance between basic and applied research, and between different disciplines and approaches to research? How much research and innovation will take place in the public and private sectors and how will the latter be distributed between indigenous and foreign-owned businesses?

“...we need a new agency dedicated to research and innovation policy, drawing on practices that were previously embedded in a string of entities, from the National Science Council, which was set up in the 1960s, to Forfás, which was closed nine years ago.”

Will we be educating students to become producers, consumers or retailers of research, or managers of research projects, or investors in research? In 1973, we produced very few PhDs, but most undergraduate programmes had a research element, research masters were the norm and there were few taught masters programmes. Today, our system downplays research in undergraduate and masters programmes and instead frames research as most appropriately done at the level of the PhD. Might this shift in emphasis be reversed over the next 50 years?

Will research centres, currently embedded in universities, transform into something more akin to the Fraunhofer Institutes in Germany, which focus on applied or industrial research and innovation, or will this be done by state research organisations?

In 1973, the state ‘made’ knowledge – usually applicable knowledge – through in-house institutions like the IIRS, An Foras Talúntais and An Foras Forbartha, which dominated the research ecosystem at the time. Today, such in-house institutions are a much smaller part of the ecosystem, and the state now uses the market or market mechanisms to ‘buy’ rather than ‘make’ knowledge. In the 2070s, what knowledge will the state ‘make’ in-house, what will it buy in the market, and what policies and practices will be in place to enable this?

How will we fund research? How many funding agencies should we have? What different mechanisms will we use to fund research, other than the market and tax incentives, such as lotteries and grants?

In 1973, research policy was the responsibility of the National Science Council, while UCD had a Science Policy Research Centre. Today, with the demise of Forfás, there’s no entity focused on research and innovation policy. Symptomatic of that gap is the recent announcement that Science Foundation Ireland and the Irish Research Council will be merged into a new entity, Taighde Éireann, which is a research funding agency – policy isn’t its remit. Ironically, this policy decision to reconfigure Ireland’s research ecosystem does not seem itself to have been informed by substantive research.

Looking forward, I think we need a new agency dedicated to research and innovation policy, drawing on practices that were previously embedded in a string of entities, from the National Science Council, which was set up in the 1960s, to Forfás, which was closed nine years ago.

While NESC can address strategic questions over a longer time frame, it is always prone to being captured by immediate political priorities, given its location in the Department of the Taoiseach.

The new agency would be statutorily focused on what the research ecosystem might and should look like over the longer term and how innovation policies might best be developed and implemented. It could be housed within NESDO, NESC’s parent body, share services and resources with NESC, but have a different and complementary remit. It would develop expertise and run futures exercises in foresight, horizon scanning, scenario modelling, simulation gaming, community dialogues and citizens’ assemblies, and should build up a repository of

data, expertise and wisdom that could be retained and used by and for our children and future generations.

An Evidence-Plus Approach to Policymaking:

Dennis C. Grube

Policymaking does not happen at one remove from the world. It doesn't occur in a laboratory, where the comforts of trial and error are easily accessed. It happens in the full heat of political debate amidst ever-changing events. It occurs as a rolling, complex interchange between evidence, citizens and politics. That poses challenges for the ways in which we construct policy and advise policymakers. But it also holds opportunities. To understand those opportunities, we need to stop seeing policy analysis as a technocratic, inherently rational activity, based solely on the careful weighing of data and evidence. Data and evidence remain vital; without them good policy is almost impossible to achieve. But they are not enough by themselves. To drive change, I argue that we need to reconceptualise evidence-based policymaking as an 'evidence-plus' approach.

An evidence-plus approach allows us to consider more fully the perspectives of the two most important groups of people at the heart of the policy process: politicians and citizens. Too often, citizens are positioned as distant observers of politics, looking on in bewilderment as their elected representatives seem unwilling to solve their problems.

The perennial challenges of health, education, housing and the cost of living march ever onwards without resolution. Citizens feel discontent, even anger, as the world changes around them and their concerns are apparently left behind. Forgotten, disillusioned and disheartened, citizens find themselves looking at the

policymaking system as something detached from the reality of their own lives.

Politicians are equally frustrated. They ceaselessly navigate the complexity of policymaking to try and deliver for their constituents. They wrestle with finite budgets and infinite wants. They bring out policy proposals to reassure citizens that they are trying to help. From housing grants to hospital investments, welfare payments to promises of climate-change action, the policy conveyor belt doesn't stop. And yet, instead of public understanding of this complexity, our politicians face relentless and remorseless criticism. In the age of social media, voter anger, virulent protest and even death threats are such everyday activities in the lives of elected representatives that they become almost part of the background noise. To engage with the immensity of that noise is to risk becoming overwhelmed by it.

So how did we get here and how can we find our way out? Let me offer three observations, and then suggest four ducks that we need to get in a row. The first observation is that policy analysis is geared too heavily towards the provision of evidence, and not heavily enough to what we then do with it. The system runs on a deficit-of-evidence model, firm in the belief that the way to solve problems is to generate ever-more evidence and pour it into the policymaking system until it spills over.

“Our governments are forced to make policy at speed, with imperfect information, for a sceptical citizenry, without any room for quiet contemplation in a public square that never sleeps.”

My observation is that evidence alone does not solve problems. The reason we are yet to solve climate change is not because we don't know enough about it. We need the evidence, and must continue to gather it, but there are further ingredients needed to turn information into lasting policy change.

The second observation is that we need to reframe the challenges of policymaking in a way that encourages shared understandings. Too often, elected representatives and citizens alike are seen as irrational roadblocks to good policy. The truth is that both are an integral part of policymaking. Politicians are our decision-makers, not variables that can be nudged out of the way. Equally, citizens, even the angry ones, are at the very heart of our democracy. To simply tell them that they are wrong to be angry is to disrespect their lived experience.

The third observation is that the public square in which our conversations on policy and politics are now happening has fundamentally changed over the last two decades. Due to the influence of everything from the 24/7 news media, social media, hyper-partisanship and resurgent populism – the public square has become more congested and more heated.

Our governments are forced to make policy at speed, with imperfect information, for a sceptical citizenry, without any room for quiet contemplation in a public square that never sleeps.

I argue that there are four ducks that we need to get in a row if we are to take some of the heat out of the public square and let in rather more light. The first is that we need clearer and sharper assessments of what the policy problems actually are. Let's step away from woolly encapsulations towards crisper definitions so

that citizens can see why policymakers do what they do. Secondly, we need to push on with ever-better gathering of data and evidence, to give confidence to citizens and political decision-makers alike that we collectively understand the problems we want to solve. Third, policymakers need to line up the problem and the evidence with a narrative that connects the two convincingly. Storytelling is as integral as evidence to good policymaking. Fourth, we then need to devise interventions that line up with the other three ducks. It's no good defining a problem, telling a story about it, and then settling for what scholars like Allan McConnell have called 'placebo policies' that won't actually solve the problem. Action for the sake of action might make politicians look like they are doing something in the short term, but will sow the seeds of future discontent if citizens feel they have been taken for fools.

There are plenty of examples to show that these things are possible. Take smoking rates. When I was a kid growing up in Australia, every corner store was plastered with glamorous pictures of the lifestyle joys associated with smoking. Not today. The advertising is gone, and the packets of cigarettes themselves come with large pictures of cancerous mouths, diseased eyeballs and rotting flesh. The cost of cigarettes has climbed astronomically as a direct result of deliberate tax increases. But the truly extraordinary thing is that all this has happened with consistently high levels of public support. How can this be?

The four ducks have been in a row on this for decades. The problem definition is clear. The issue is not about tobacco per se; it is about its impacts, and particularly the vicarious impacts on non-smokers. There is no prohibition on tobacco; the substance has not been made illegal. The failure of alcohol prohibition in 1920s

America shows what happens if you just ban something seen as a lifestyle choice. Instead, the interventions have been lined up with the problem. The problem is to make sure that smokers don't harm non-smokers. That's why you are not allowed to smoke in cars with children; you are not allowed to smoke in restaurants or airports. The 'story' that supports those actions is one that encourages healthcare and support programmes for people who want to stop smoking.

The narrative doesn't start by trying to label smokers as somehow being 'bad' people doing an 'evil' thing. It's a health issue, an addiction that can be addressed by providing help rather than judgement. The data and evidence on the dangers of smoking have been clear for decades.

But it has been the alignment of that with the right policy action, and the right narrative, around a clearly defined problem, that has led to success.

What NESC has done successfully for 50 years is to place evidence at the heart of policymaking in government. Its reports have been vital in providing successive Irish governments with the kind of detailed information that underpins all successful policy action. To maintain that success over the next 50 years, it will be up to policymakers, public servants and citizens to build such evidential insights into a convincing story of policy change. In other words, to build an evidence-plus approach that meets the complex challenges of governing in the 21st century.

Addressing Challenges within the Information Environment:

Jane Suiter

Misinformation poses a significant challenge in various complex policy domains, impeding collective action for the common good. The peril of misinformation resides in its capacity to sow confusion, undermine the credibility of information and deceive citizens. Misinformation hinders public access to precise and varied information, hindering the informed decision-making crucial for a robust democratic society.

Tackling this challenge necessitates a nuanced approach that protects individual freedoms while actively countering the detrimental effects of misleading information. This issue is particularly pronounced when addressing long-term complex challenges such as climate and digital transitions.

We should prioritise principles that bolster societal resilience and foster a varied and ethical news and media environment. The focus should be on empowering the public through deliberation and media literacy, enhancing the quality and diversity of the media landscape, focusing on trust building and advancing research and transparency.

The Covid-19 pandemic has underscored a global tension between expert advice and citizen engagement. Prior to the pandemic, public policymaking exhibited a tendency to engage somewhat passively and intermittently with experts, stakeholders and citizens. This approach has been identified by NESC as contributing to a decline in trust, resulting in a widening gap between citizens, politicians and experts. Such gaps provide opportunities for bad actors to propagate narratives leading to misperceptions, including instances of vaccine hesitancy and Covid-19 denial.

In light of these challenges, it is imperative to bridge the gap between expert advice and citizen engagement in policymaking. Proactive and sustained efforts are required to foster trust, encourage active dialogue and narrow the divide between policymakers, experts and the general public. This, in turn, will help mitigate the impact of misinformation on public perceptions and contribute to more effective policymaking.

The UN Human Rights Council sets out a number of pathways to focus on, including enhancing and properly funding free and fair public service media, empowering and involving citizens in policymaking and investing in media and digital literacy, in order to rebuild public trust. Our research indicates three additional areas that warrant consideration: fostering citizen engagement through dialogue, implementing pre-bunking or innovative strategies and enhancing digital and algorithmic literacy across the population.

In light of the societal consensus and trust required for impactful climate action and tackling other complex problems, a more inclusive social dialogue becomes imperative, extending to areas such as the biodiversity emergency and housing. Clear communication, transparency and enhancing research literacy are pivotal in building trust, particularly in comprehending policy choices. As NESC has previously argued, policymakers must enhance their capacity to reach out, actively listen and communicate clearly.

Engaging citizens with policymaking can address some questions of democratic legitimacy. Research on democratic theory and practice suggests that mini-publics – small forums of randomly selected citizens – can increase the legitimacy and accountability of policymaking. They also function in two trust-based roles, first, as trusted proxies of the wider public and

second, as ‘anticipatory publics’ in areas that are likely to be of public concern in the future. This of course can take various forms, for example, large-scale citizens’ assemblies where Ireland is already a world leader and which have been used to tackle policy where there are clear gaps between and within parties

Smaller citizens’ juries and other forms of democratic innovation, exemplified by the patient organisation IPPOSI’s successful deployment in complex areas like data sharing in the medical environment, can also play a valuable role. While not advocating for the allocation of all policymaking decisions to citizens, for example, at the start of the pandemic in April 2020, we found that citizens were unsure and scared, preferring strong leadership, clear rules and no delay to consulting with groups, whether citizens or indeed parliament.

Thus, it is crucial to recognise that, especially during crises, citizens may initially seek strong leadership and decisive action. This underscores the importance of preparedness, consultation, active listening and pre-emptive planning in the policymaking process!

“We should prioritise principles that bolster societal resilience and foster a varied and ethical news and media environment.”

In It Together – A Whole-of-Society Approach to National Security:

Cían FitzGerald

Over the last decade, new security risks and trends have emerged that are best described as features of the grey zone of geopolitical contestation. The grey zone refers

“Ireland plays a leading role in global financial services and in technology, with approximately 30 per cent of all data in the EU hosted on the island of Ireland. However, there is also a growing perception that Ireland is a weak link in the European security architecture.”

to geopolitical competition which takes place above the threshold of peace, but which falls short of war. Against the backdrop of war returning to European soil, mounting geopolitical tensions and the spectre of large-scale interstate conflict, the global risk picture is stark. However, interstate competition takes place on a spectrum, with ‘measures short of war’ becoming preferred by hostile actors such as the Russian Federation against EU member states, the United Kingdom and the United States. These measures may involve cyberwarfare, disinformation and misinformation, corporate and industrial espionage, the weaponisation of energy, and intimidation through threats of violence and military exercises, such as that which occurred with the presence of Russian warships off the coast of Ireland in January 2022.

Cyberwarfare, often carried out by states but disguised as the activity of criminal organisations, is becoming a preferred means of causing disruption around the globe. As recently as 2023, a large number of operators in Denmark’s energy infrastructure were targeted by a devastating cyberattack which is largely believed to have been carried out by Russian military intelligence, the GRU. This approach to conflict can allow aggressive states such as the Russian Federation to cause huge disruption, while avoiding detection, and, perhaps most importantly, to enhance their relative power at the expense of their rivals.

What many of these emerging threats and trends have in common is that the focus has turned from targeting states via traditional kinetic warfare, to seeking to undermine democratic norms and prosperity. Increasingly, private organisations, some of whom have a role to play in the delivery of critical services and infrastructure or in maintaining a state’s technological edge, are at risk of being targeted to either disrupt service or steal key technologies. Geopolitics is coming not only for cabinets, but also for boardrooms and society itself.

In this context, one may ask where Ireland fits in. Ireland is a geostrategically significant actor. Its recent term on the UN Security Council and its role as a committed EU member have made it one of the most diplomatically powerful countries in the world.

Meanwhile, Ireland plays a leading role in global financial services and in technology, with approximately 30 per cent of all data in the EU hosted on the island of Ireland. However, there is also a growing perception that Ireland is a weak link in the European security architecture. Consequently, though many of these things combined generate the prosperity which Ireland enjoys, the globally interconnected nature and importance of these sectors in the economy make it a target of grey-zone activity such as cyberattacks, disinformation and espionage, not solely to victimise Ireland, but with the

country seen as a potential vector by which to target other EU member states, the United Kingdom and the United States.

Indeed, this poses a real challenge for governments. The traditional security apparatus of the state, military and police service is not designed to deal with grey-zone conflict. In a paper written for the Institute of International and European Affairs which examined grey-zone threats to energy infrastructure, the author argued that to protect Ireland, its prosperity and people from grey-zone activity as a whole, it will require a whole-of-society approach to security. This approach takes a broader definition of security than just the state and includes state security services, but also bringing together private industry, the government and its agencies, think tanks, universities and even individual citizens to protect our society from harm. Whole-of-society approaches are built on partnerships and by using the resilience of your society to defend against aggression.

A key part of guarding against grey-zone threats involves spreading awareness about the changing risk environment and the increased geopolitical risk that government, private organisations and society face. Importantly, this whole-of-society approach must be built on partnerships between public institutions and the private sector as ultimately, communicating that corporate risks can have national security implications, while sharing information and experiences, can play a role in making not only individual organisations or government institutions safer, but also protecting society as a whole.

The resilience of Irish society against grey-zone threats is in many ways about individuals. Where aggressive states choose to target our societies, often using information

warfare campaigns, they do so to isolate, fragment and atomise our societies, exploiting social cleaves, disillusioned individuals and inequalities with the ultimate goal of undermining our democratic and economic vibrancy, likely in such a way as to cause disruption beyond Ireland's shores. Though connections to foreign actors have yet to be verified in Ireland, suspected links between Moscow and various far-right movements in other European jurisdictions have been documented.

Addressing challenges such as the just transition, housing shortages, energy security, information literacy and social inclusion, while building partnerships between the public and private sectors will not only enrich our societies, but in the end, by strengthening our society, bringing together the full spectrum of its resources and working together, it will also make Ireland more prosperous, more resilient and ultimately, more secure to meet the challenges of a more dangerous world. To conclude, Ireland finds itself in a position without precedent in the history of the state. Though it has successfully weathered times of geopolitical tension before, Ireland's increasing importance in the global economy and international community, coupled with an underdeveloped defence architecture, have made it a more strategically relevant target than it has ever been. Aggressive states, in particular the Russian Federation, will continue to use grey-zone instruments to cause disruption throughout the Euro-Atlantic area. A whole-of-society approach to defence could help to provide a guiding framework to enhance Ireland's societal resilience, a resilience which may not only enable a better response when grey-zone aggression occurs, but could deter such aggression in the first place.

People, Place, Partnership:

Malachy Ó Néill

Ulster University (UU) is an extraordinary institution with a pivotal role to play in a thriving Ireland of the future. We are a large, complex organisation, successfully maintaining a dual focus on research and teaching while actively driving exemplary social mobility and civic engagement. Our multicampus operation enables impactful change across the northern half of the island and beyond.

Embodied in the University's Strategy 'People, Place, Partnership' is a commitment to increase our impact on society and to play our part as a university which addresses both regional and global challenges. This plan builds on our commitment to create a university that is sustainable and innovative, with a strong reputation and a rich and varied network of strong 'partnerships with purpose'. As an institution, we actively seek opportunities for collaboration, the enhancement of potential is central to everything we do, as we aim to drive innovation and build a skills pipeline for the economy and wider society.

Our partnerships across the island of Ireland amplify our individual efforts to secure economic growth, deliver investment opportunities, build future leaders and provide other societal benefits to create a thriving Ireland.

In January of 2024, Ulster University signed an inaugural Memorandum of Understanding which formalised a new partnership between two institutions that were already deeply committed to delivering positive action across the island of Ireland.

Ulster University has for many years collaborated closely with the former institutions which combined to

form the Atlantic Technological University (ATU/LYIT). Our proximity in the North West of Ireland has always enabled Derry-Donegal relations and colleagues at LYIT and Magee College have played a major part in the formative years of partnership, while a shared specialism in biomedical science has fostered a very meaningful knowledge exchange between UU colleagues in IT Sligo for the past few decades.

The inception of ATU in April 2022 was the foundation upon which the North West Tertiary Education Cluster became a reality. The cluster represents our shared commitment to education, training and innovation, a commitment that is central to the growth of this north-west city region and is further enabled via the Smart Industry Board as a key strand of the cluster.

Its unique interjurisdictional structure, led by Derry City, Strabane District Council and Donegal County Council and endorsed by both governments through the North South Ministerial Council, is recognised internationally as an example of best in class in terms of interjurisdictional tertiary-level collaboration.

Ulster University's track record of collaboration in terms of research and innovation is complemented by long-running programme partnerships, providing a vital transjurisdictional postgraduate provision through a unique masters programme delivered by the Business Schools of UU and ATU which has run successfully for over 20 years.

Both Ulster University and ATU are committed to furthering the objectives of the 1998 peace accord to enhance co-operation, connection and mutual understanding to ensure continued peace and a sustainable future for everyone on this island. This collaboration aims to foster synergy

and promote mutually beneficial activities for the regional multicampus universities. In Ulster University, for example, we are delivering a fully funded leadership programme to develop and nurture the leaders of tomorrow. The 25@25 programme is taking 25 people, on the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement, with a firm focus on the next 25 years ahead.

25@25 is about the future and is designed to expand experiences, grow leadership capacity and build a long-lasting network of change-makers.

Our future. Your future. Everyone's future. A further example of Ulster University's outcomes-driven collaboration in research terms is embodied in the Atlantic Futures project, enabling an Atlantic Innovation Corridor along the west coast and bringing together the brightest and best at ATU and Ulster University alongside researchers from the University of Limerick and the University of Galway.

Atlantic Futures is a €4m, four-year, cross-border research project funded by The North-South Research Programme, a collaborative scheme under the Irish Government's Shared Island Fund. The partnership project:

- Creates a research team organised in three co-located hubs at Derry, Galway and Limerick;
- Unites both strategic and basic research strategies and deploys a variety of methodologies, including science studies, behavioural science, action research, critical feminist studies, citizen research, patient participant enquiry, and a variety of methodologies from economics and management; and
- Develops a national resource on the scale and with similar ambition to the Edinburgh Futures Institute.

The project was launched in January 2023 and, over a four-year period, the aim of the collaboration is for it to become self-sustaining and established as an internationally recognised centre of excellence for impactful research.

Also, through the Shared Island Fund, the Irish Government has a commitment to invest €44.5m to expand Ulster University's campus in the historic city of Derry.

This will make a very significant contribution toward preparing the campus for substantial growth and is part of a larger investment package that comprises our own investment, City Deal funding, Inclusive Futures funding, and Department for the Economy capital grant monies. With our partners, we have an ambitious vision to continue to expand student numbers on our Derry campus and to grow our economic and social impact in the whole of the north-west and across the island.

New challenges emerge for us all daily – but so do new opportunities. There are new connections, technologies, research and skills that can be synergised to deliver solutions to grand challenges, sustainable economic growth, healthier and more thriving societies. Combining People, Place and Partnership, the potential is set for an era of growth and innovation, learning from our history as we write our future, together. Ar aghaidh linn le chéile.

Chapter 14

Reflections - New Approaches for New Realities

Martin Hawkes is a former civil servant in the Department of Finance and a banker with Banque Nationale de Paris, whose career has spanned commercial and social enterprise. He was a founding trustee and chair of the landscape charity Burrenbeo Trust as well as the Burren College of Art.

Martin was asked to provide some reflections on the conversations in this section, and he focused on quality of life and prosperity within planetary boundaries, the sense of permacrisis linked to safe planetary boundaries, the Covid-19 pandemic, wars, mass migration and the rise of generative AI. To tackle these challenges, he argues that there is a need for a fundamental change of approach, shifting from short-term welfare to concern for the future of humanity and the planet.



Remarks by Martin Hawkes

In the paper elucidating the theme of the NESC@50 Programme, it was pointed out that: 'Like other high-income countries, Ireland faces the huge challenge of ensuring satisfactory quality of life and prosperity within planetary boundaries'. It acknowledged that 'Ireland is living beyond its fair share of planetary boundaries'.

According to the Stockholm Resilience Institute, our world is now transgressing six out of nine 'safe planetary boundaries'. There is a sense that the centre cannot hold. These existential realities have been compounded by the Covid-19 pandemic, wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, mass migration, post-truth and the potential for massive disruption from generative AI. We are truly in an age characterised as the polycrisis or, indeed, 'permacrisis'. In a globalised world, no-one is immune, certainly not an economy and society as open as Ireland's.

“Looking to institutional seeds of a thriving future, Ireland is blessed to be to the fore internationally in participatory democracy, in the form of citizens’ assemblies.”

How to ensure our future wellbeing in the face of this tsunami of change? While the natural impulse is to speed up what we are each doing in our own contexts, in reality, the complex nature of the challenges we face calls for a fundamental change of approach.

We need to take time to slow down, step back and look at the deeper sources of these systemically related issues which, in the words of MIT’s Otto Scharmer, ‘are creating results that no-one wants’.

NESC’s invitation, in its framing paper, and the focus of much of this section (to act from the perspective of cathedral builders) are, in effect, a call for a paradigm shift in the values which animate our culture and civilisation, from short-term welfare optimisation to a concern for the future of our species and the planet. The permacrisis we see all around us is, it transpires, the result of an underlying metacrisis, that is to say a crisis in meaning-making and legitimacy.

Dealing with the metacrisis requires rebalancing our thinking from ever-more specialisation and siloed thinking towards systemic integration. Science, technology and specialisation have given us the tools to solve our problems, what we lack is the wisdom which a holistic understanding would afford us. It’s time for a new approach.

Dealing with the metacrisis also needs innovation in process, engaging bottom-up, middle-in as well as top-down in systemic dialogue and learning. It requires the collective wisdom of crowds. In this, NESC is well placed with its multistakeholder composition, traditional curiosity and ability to listen –capacities that have been characterised as most important for leadership capacity of the 21st century.

From the perspective of an art college whose community-engagement work has entailed the application of creative practice to systems change in the areas of climate, education and the Irish language, the advice is to be bold in making time and space for deep dives on issues of importance and be willing to bring creative processes and creative facilitation to bear.

Looking to institutional seeds of a thriving future, Ireland is blessed to be to the fore internationally in participatory democracy, in the form of citizens’ assemblies. At their best, citizens’ assemblies allow citizens to articulate things they ‘didn’t know they knew’. They allow intuitions that are latent to surface and inform wider society.

The Citizens’ Assembly on the Future of Education (CAFÉ), the last of four assemblies promised in the 2020 Programme for Government, has particular significance in this context. The product of a ground-

up initiative, CAFÉ is due to be convened in 2024 and holds a promise of influencing the future of Irish society for years to come.

Given the necessary terms of reference, this assembly provides a unique opportunity for citizens to consider the vision and values that should inform Irish education in the 21st century.

Combined with the promise in the Programme for Government that the voice of the young will be central – a significant innovation in the traditional citizens’ assembly process – CAFÉ has the potential to be transformative in addressing the metacrisis which is ultimately about the values and paradigms we transmit intergenerationally.

The importance of education to preparing society for a radically changing world is underlined by how the Scandinavian education reforms of the 19th century paved the way for the much-lauded Nordic model. It’s no surprise then that Sweden is the source of a fascinating forward-looking leadership initiative called the Inner Development Goals (IDGs), supported by major Scandinavian multinationals as well as leading universities such as Harvard, Columbia and MIT.

The IDGs are premised on the belief that there is little chance of reaching the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030 without a fundamental shift in our general leadership competence. The challenges we face derive as much from the paradigms out of which we operate, our inner mindsets, as they do from outer realities. If, as Einstein is reputed to have said, problems can’t be solved at the level of consciousness that created them, it follows logically that we all – and not just those in the education system – need to get into

training if we are to rise to the challenges ahead. Might the IDGs become part of essential leadership training for the Irish public service?

Finally, in looking to the future, we would be missing something vital in an Irish context if we failed to consider the possibilities of bilingualism as a bridge to what is uniquely our own – our language and tradition: *Ar scáth a chéile a mhairimid*. Irish, one of Europe’s oldest languages in continuous use, is grounded in an indigenous sensibility and carries an embedded awareness of interdependence and connection not just to each other, but to the physical world and the other world – precisely the remedies that are required for the disconnects of our time.

As a younger generation is discovering, our heritage has gifted us a resource, hidden in plain sight, that can serve as a corrective to the blind spots in the dominant discourse. ‘Tá dóchas sa dúchas.’



About the Contributors

Steven Ballantyne is a PhD Researcher at the European University Institute in Florence, Italy. His research interests include comparative welfare states, with a particular focus on the territorial dimension of social investment, and comparative political economy. He holds an MSc in European Politics from the University of Strathclyde and an MRes from the European University Institute. He recently contributed to a report for the European Commission High-Level Group on the Future of Cohesion Policy (2023). Between 2014 and 2016, he worked in the Scottish Government as a Caseworker and later as Assistant to the Cabinet Secretary for Health.

Sara Burke is Associate Professor and Director of the Centre for Health Policy and Management in Trinity College's School of Medicine. She is PI on an HRB-funded project researching the potential of Covid-19 health system responses for the effective implementation of Sláintecare. Sara is a Co-Director of the national SPHeRE structured PhD programme and loves teaching health systems and policy to undergraduates and postgraduates. Her research interests are health policy, health systems, inequities in health and access to healthcare, as well as the politics of health reform.

Elizabeth Canavan is Assistant Secretary General of the Social Policy and Public Service Reform Division in the Department of the Taoiseach. She is the Secretary to several Cabinet Sub-Committees, namely Health; Education; Social Affairs and Equality; and Accommodation and Supports for Ukrainian refugees. She is Chair of the associated Senior Officials Groups. In this role, she is

also responsible for co-ordinating and overseeing the Government's Humanitarian Response to the Ukrainian Crisis and held similar responsibilities for the Government's response to Covid-19. She is Deputy Chair of the National Economic and Social Council and Secretary to the Civil Service Management Board. Elizabeth is a career civil servant and has worked extensively in the policy development in the areas of Health, Children & Families and Public Service Reform. Previously, she held the position of Assistant Secretary General in the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, Acting Secretary General in both the Departments of Children and Youth Affairs, and Rural and Community Development, Chief Executive Officer of the Adoption Authority of Ireland and Deputy Director of the then National Children's Office.

Peter Cassells is former General Secretary of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions and more recently Director of the Edward M. Kennedy Institute for Conflict Intervention, Maynooth University. For twenty years, Peter was a member of the National Economic and Social Council. As general secretary of Congress he was lead negotiator of five national Partnership Programmes with Government. He was a member of the IDA Board and chaired the board of Forfas. While vice-chair of the governing authority of Maynooth University, he chaired the review of the Funding of Higher Education commissioned by the Minister for Education. For a number of years, Peter was chair of Action Aid which supports women and community development in Africa. He also chaired Holocaust Education Ireland. He currently chairs the Dialogue Forum established by the Department of Health to improve relations between the HSE and the voluntary sector.

Martin Collins is Co-Director of Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre and a Traveller rights activist for over 30 years. He represented Pavee Point on the Government Task Force on Travellers in the early 1990s, which resulted in a shift to interculturalism in terms of the Government's approach to Traveller issues.

Niall Cussen is Chief Executive and Planning Regulator at the Office of the Planning Regulator (OPR) established by the government in April 2019. The OPR's functions are to oversee the effective delivery of planning services by Ireland's 31 local authorities and An Bord Pleanála, including implementation of national and regional policies, and to conduct research and public awareness programmes in relation to planning. Prior to his appointment, Niall was Chief Planner at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government from July 2014, having worked in the department from January 2000. Prior to this, Niall had an extensive planning career working for local authorities in Clare and Meath as well as for Dublin City Council and An Bord Pleanála. Niall holds qualifications in economics and geography, regional and urban planning, and environmental engineering from Maynooth University, University College Dublin, and Trinity College Dublin, respectively, and is both a member and a past President of the Irish Planning Institute.

Matt Crowe is currently Chair of An Foram Uisce – the National Water Forum. Dr Crowe retired in 2020 from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), having served for 10 years as a director and 15 years as a member of staff. Prior to joining the EPA, Matt spent five years working in Vancouver doing contract research. Matt holds a BSc and PhD in biochemistry from University College Dublin.

Toto Daly, is a Climate Activist, and in November 2023 was a Leaving Certificate student.

Helen Dixon was Data Protection Commissioner for Ireland from 2014 to (February) 2024. Responsible for upholding the rights of individuals regarding how data about them is used, the role, among other things, required the regulation of many US internet multinationals with European bases in Ireland. Previously, as Irish Registrar of Companies, she led the regulatory enforcement of compliance with the filing provisions of the Companies Acts. Helen has also held senior roles in the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, working on economic migration, science, technology and innovation policy. She spent the first 10 years of her career in the IT industry. She holds postgraduate qualifications in European Economic and Public Affairs, Governance, Computer Science, Official Statistics for Policy Evaluation, and Judicial Skills and Decision-Making. She was delighted to have been awarded an honorary fellowship of the Institute of Chartered Secretaries and Administrators (ICSA) in 2014.

Paul Donnelly is Professor of Management and Organisation Studies at Technological University Dublin. He received his PhD from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst (USA) and is both a Fulbright Fellow and a Taiwan Fellow. He is Chair of the Fulbright Commission in Ireland, Vice-Chair of Transparency International Ireland, an independent non-executive director of Dóchas (the Irish association of non-governmental development organisations), and a member of the Royal Irish Academy's Social Sciences Committee. He was an Independent Expert on the National Economic and Social Council, and Chair of the Critical Management Studies Division of the Academy of Management.

Joe Donohue is Governor of Shelton Abbey Open Centre and has been a prison officer for 29 years, operating mainly in closed prisons in Dublin, including Mountjoy, Cloverhill and Wheatfield. Joe also spent time in the Operational Support Group which dealt with searching and intelligence. He has been Governor in Shelton for five years and in that time the prison has won awards for its work with the prison's estate, the Prisons' Innovation Awards, and was a finalist in the Civil Service Excellence and Innovation Awards. Shelton has also won awards from the Arklow Chamber of Commerce for its work locally in the business community, and has established strong links with employer partners, such as the Katherine Howard Foundation and Stephen's Green, with a focus on family units for inmates.

Tom Ferris is a consultant economist. He was formerly the Senior Economist at the Department of Transport and President of the Chartered Institute of Transport in Ireland. Tom has wide experience of the public sector and the private realm. He has undertaken consultancy projects for the World Bank, USAID, the OECD, and a number of Irish government departments, as well as private and public sector companies in Ireland. He has published widely on economics and good governance.

Cían FitzGerald is a Researcher at the Institute of International and European Affairs (IIEA), specialising in defence and security as well as foreign policy analysis. His research interests include geopolitical competition and grand strategy, with a specific focus on irregular and unconventional conflict. Cían holds an MSc in International Relations of the Middle East with Arabic from the University of Edinburgh and a BA MOD in Classical Civilisation and English Literature from Trinity College Dublin, where he was awarded the Gold Medal for Academic Achievement.

Sinéad Gibney was appointed Chief Commissioner of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission by President Michael D. Higgins in July 2020. She was the inaugural Director of the Commission between 2014 and 2016. Prior to this, Sinéad built and led Google Ireland's corporate social responsibility function, Social Action. She also worked for herself for a number of years, providing training, consultancy and media production to a range of organisations in the civil society and public sectors. Sinéad is a lifelong learner with an undergraduate degree in History from the

University of Ulster, four postgraduate qualifications in IT and Education, Cyberpsychology, Equality Studies and Human Rights Law, and is currently studying German. She is a former Chair of the board of One Family and has served on a number of other boards, including Digital Charity Lab, Victims' Rights Alliance and the EU's Responsible Research and Innovation industry advisory group.

Dennis C. Grube is a Professor of Politics and Public Policy at the University of Cambridge, where he also leads research on political decision-making in the Bennett Institute for Public Policy. He has researched and written widely on public policy, public service leadership, the Westminster system of government, and political rhetoric. His latest book, *Why Governments Get it Wrong*, was released in paperback in September of 2023.

Martin Hawkes is a former civil servant in the Department of Finance and a banker with Banque Nationale de Paris, whose career has spanned commercial and social enterprise. Martin was a founding trustee and Chair of the landscape charity Burrenbeo Trust as well as the Burren College of Art. His current focus is on bringing the creative processes of an art college to bear on systemic social challenges from climate change, the fate of the Gaeltacht, and the future of the education system.

Deirdre Heenan is Professor of Social Policy in Ulster University and was formerly Provost and Dean of Academic Development at the Magee Campus. A distinguished researcher, author and broadcaster, she is a member of the Institute for Research in Social Sciences and has published widely on healthcare, education policy, social care and devolution. Deirdre is a co-founder and former co-director of the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey.

Anton Hemerijck is Professor of Political Science and Sociology at the Department of Political and Social Sciences at the European University Institute. Trained as an economist at Tilburg University in the Netherlands, he took his doctorate from Oxford University. In his capacity as Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences at the Vrije Universiteit of Amsterdam, together with Jonathan Zeitlin, Anton founded the Amsterdam Centre for Contemporary European Studies. He also directed the Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR), the principle think tank in the Netherlands. Between 2014 and 2017, Anton was Centennial Professor of Social Policy at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). Most recently, he was a member of the European Commission's newly formed High-Level Group on the Future of Social Protection and of the Welfare State in Europe, which published its report this year.

Mark Henry is based in Technological University Dublin, where he leads the communications and marketing function. Dr Henry is the author of the best-selling book *In Fact: An Optimist's Guide to Ireland at 100* – the first one to take a data-led approach to telling the story of Ireland's modern progress. A regular media commentator, Mark provides a 'rationally optimistic' take on the state of Ireland today. He holds an MA in Psychology from University College Dublin, an MBA from Smurfit Business School and a PhD from the University of Westminster.

Zoe Hughes joined Care Alliance Ireland in January of 2015. Zoe has qualifications in Social Work (MSW), Social Policy (HDip Soc. Pol.) and Disability Studies (M.Litt), and her past work has included working with a number of academic and voluntary sector organisations. She has a particular interest in the topic of diversity within caring, along with inclusive and participatory research methods. As Senior Policy and Research Officer at Care Alliance Ireland, Zoe co-ordinates the research and policy functions in addition to supporting member organisations to input documents and submissions. She has published articles in the *International Journal of Care and Caring*, *Frontiers in Public Health*, and *Applied Psychology: Health and Well-Being*. She won the inaugural 'Research Contribution to Practice' Award at the All-Ireland Research in Social Work Conference 2019. Zoe commenced work on a Doctorate in Applied Social Studies in University College Cork in October 2017, with a focus on the broad topic of family care within the LGBTQIA+ community.

Ebun Joseph is Director and Founder of the Institute of Antiracism and Black Studies (www.iabs.ie). Dr Joseph has developed antiracism courses that incorporate theoretical and cultural insights. She also works with organisations to develop employee resource groups, support minority employees and enhance inclusiveness. Her courses are based on over 15 years of working with minority groups and four years of studying labour-market experiences of migrants at PhD level. Ebun's expertise encompasses four years as a Career Development Consultant at the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland. She also worked in University College Dublin (UCD) in a similar role, and, before this, with Business in the Community (BITC) as a Training and Employment Officer for nine years, providing guidance to migrants from over 73 nationalities to access the labour market. Ebun started, co-ordinates and lectures at the first black studies module in Ireland in UCD. She was a Sociology lecturer in Trinity College Dublin's race ethnicity and identity modules and the MPhil in Race, Ethnicity, Conflict, developing the module on intersectionality of race and gender.

Rose Anne Kenny is Regius Professor of Physic (Medicine) and holds the Chair of Medical Gerontology at Trinity College Dublin (TCD). She is the founding Principal Investigator of The Irish Longitudinal study on Ageing (TILDA) and Director of the Mercer’s Institute for Successful Ageing (MISA) at St. James’s Hospital, where she is also Director of the Falls and Syncope Unit. Her recently published book *Age Proof – The New Science of Living a Longer and Healthier Life* was shortlisted for the 2022 Royal Society Science Book Prize. In 2020, she was elected President of the Irish Gerontological Society. In 2022, she was nominated as the 24th Regius Professor of Physic at TCD (est. 1637), the first female nominee.

Donncha Kavanagh is Professor of Information & Organisation in the College of Business at University College Dublin, Ireland. His research interests include the sociology of knowledge and technology, the history and philosophy of management thought, futures studies, money, play and ethics. He has published widely in the fields of information and organization, management, marketing, organization studies, and engineering. Website: <https://people.ucd.ie/donncha.kavanagh>.

Stephanie Manahan joined Pieta in May 2022 as CEO, where she is responsible for the overall leadership and operation of all services. Stephanie is passionate about mental health services and has a focus on the needs of children and young people who experience suicidal ideation and engage in self-harm. Prior to her role at Pieta, as Chief Executive of the Central Remedial Clinic (CRC), Stephanie was central to establishing new management structures and robust governance which

led to a transformational change programme. She has worked in healthcare for over 30 years, specifically in mental health services, hospital services, disability and education, where she has held senior management and C-suite roles. She holds a BSc from Trinity, an MSc from the University of London, a Professional Diploma in Corporate Governance and is currently undertaking the Professional Diploma in Executive Coaching with the Irish Management Institute. Stephanie is a non-executive director and member of the Council of CORU (the state body for the regulation of Irish Health and Social Care Professions) and a member of the Board of Mental Health Reform.

Dermot McCarthy retired as Secretary General to the Government and Secretary General of the Department of the Taoiseach in July 2011. He served with NESC as Social Policy Analyst from 1978–1980, Director from 1990–1993, Deputy Chair from 1996–2000 and Chair from 2000 until his retirement. A graduate of Trinity College Dublin in economics, he also worked in the Departments of Industry and Commerce, and Health. Since retirement, he has been active on the boards of various voluntary organisations, currently chairing St. Andrew’s Resource Centre, and St. Francis Hospice.

Philip McDonagh is Adjunct Professor in the Faculty of Humanities at Dublin City University and Director of the Centre for Religion, Human Values, and International Relations. As a diplomat, he was involved in the Northern Ireland peace process in the build-up to the Good Friday Agreement (as Political Counsellor and Deputy Head of Mission in London). Later, he served as ambassador to India, the Holy See, Finland and Russia and as Permanent Representative to the OSCE. Philip was lead author of the evaluation report on of the Palestinian Market Development Programme (PMDP) in 2019, and, is a member of the International Advisory Council of the Institute for Integrated Transitions (Barcelona). Philip is co-author of *On the Significance of Religion for Global Diplomacy* (Routledge, 2021). His poetry collections and works for the theatre include *Gondla, or the Salvation of the Wolves* (Arlen House, 2016), a translation of Nikolay Gumilev's verse drama.

Mairead McGuinness is the European Commissioner for Financial services, Financial Stability and Capital Markets Union. The Commissioner's vision for the portfolio is focused on ensuring the financial sector's strength and stability, so that it can deliver for people, society and the environment. Before joining the Commission in October 2020, Ms McGuinness was First Vice-President of the European Parliament. She served as an MEP for Ireland for 16 years and was a Vice-President of the Parliament since 2014. As Vice-President, she oversaw relations with national parliaments, led the dialogue with religious and philosophical organisations and had responsibility for the Parliament's communication policy. During her time in the Parliament, Ms McGuinness sat on a range of

committees, covering agriculture, environment, public health, budgets, petitions and constitutional affairs.

Her legislative work included leading for the EPP Group on the European Climate Law, the revision of medical-devices legislation and CAP reform post-2013. As an Irish MEP representing the border region, she was outspoken on Brexit and the consequences for the EU and Ireland. In 2006-2007, Ms McGuinness chaired the Parliament's investigation into the collapse of the Equitable Life Assurance Society which identified issues around weak financial regulation. Prior to becoming an MEP, she was an award-winning journalist, broadcaster and commentator.

John McHale is Established Professor of Economics at the J.E. Cairnes School of Business and Economics, University of Galway. He previously served as Executive Dean of the College of Business, Public Policy and Law. He holds PhD and A.M degrees from Harvard University. John was Chair of the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council from its inception in 2011 to 2016 and an independent member of the National Economic and Social Council and the Pensions Authority. He served as President of the Irish Economic Association from 2016 to 2018.

Niall Muldoon is Ireland's second Ombudsman for Children. Niall, who is a Counselling and Clinical Psychologist, was appointed for a second six-year term by President Michael D. Higgins in February 2021. As Ombudsman for Children, Niall has focused on generating an Ireland where children and young people are actively heard, particularly those who are most

vulnerable. During his tenure, the Office has sought to give voice to those children who are often not listened to. It has therefore consulted with young people availing of Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) as well as those who are in Direct Provision, in children’s hospitals, or are homeless and living in Family Hubs. The Office has also facilitated young people to produce a report for the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2022).

Mary P. Murphy is Head of Department and Professor in the Department of Sociology, Maynooth University, with research interests in ecosocial welfare, gender, care and social security, globalisation and welfare states, and power and civil society. She co-edited *The Irish Welfare State in the Twenty-First Century: Challenges and Change* (Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2016) and authored *Creating an Ecosocial Welfare Future* (Policy Press, May 2023). An active advocate for social justice and gender equality, she was appointed to the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (2013–2017) and is currently a member of the Council of State in Ireland.

Aoibhinn Ní Shúilleabháin is Associate Professor in the University College Dublin School of Mathematics and Statistics, where she is Director of the STEM teacher education programme. A former teacher in a socioeconomically disadvantaged area, she is a member of the Department of Education’s STEM Education Policy Advisory Group. In April 2022, Aoibhinn was invited by the Taoiseach Micheál Martin to chair Ireland’s Citizens’ Assembly on Biodiversity Loss, whose report and recommendations were published earlier this year.

She is a member of the UCD Earth Institute that works to improve the understanding of our rapidly changing environment and find solutions for a sustainable future.

Michelle Norris is Professor of Social Policy and Director of the Geary Institute for Public Policy at University College Dublin. With her teaching and research interests focused on housing policy and urban regeneration, she has led over 30 research projects on these issues and produced 200 publications on the results. She has strong links with policymakers in Ireland and internationally.

Michelle has served as an independent member of NESC on three occasions and as a member of the boards of two of the main agencies responsible for providing social housing in Ireland – the Housing Finance Agency and Land Development Agency. She is also a member of the Commission on Housing established by the government in 2021. She was one of the lead authors of the #Housing2030 report on improving affordable housing outcomes, which was commissioned by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe and UN-Habitat and published in 2021. In recognition of the outstanding policy impact of her research, she was awarded the Irish Research Council’s research impact award in 2021.

Noelle O Connell was appointed CEO of European Movement Ireland in April 2011. Noelle is also Vice-President of European Movement International, which encompasses European Movement councils in 34 countries. Prior to this, she provided business development training, education and public affairs consultancy to a variety of private and public sector clients. She has extensive experience working in the third-level sector and has managed significant national and international funding projects (e.g. Interreg, Skillnets, Erasmus+, Europe for Citizens, etc.). In 2022, Noelle was selected as one of the Taoiseach's independent nominees to serve in the National Economic and Social Council.

Kevin O'Connor is Director of BiOrbic SFI Bioeconomy Research Centre, and Professor at University College Dublin. He is a member of the scientific committee for the Circular Bio-based Europe Joint Undertaking (CBE JU) and a former member of the European Commission's Mission Board for Adaptation to Climate Change, including societal transformation. With research interests in sustainable production and consumption, he has published over 100 international peer review articles, filed eight patents, and is a major driver behind the development of the rural Bioeconomy Campus at Lisheen, Co. Tipperary and a climate-neutral dairy farm in West Cork, in collaboration with the Carbery Group.

Ejro Ogbevoen is a Dublin-based Counselling Psychotherapist and Clinical Supervisor. She works predominantly with adults, offering professional guidance for emotional regulation, low mood, anxiety, depression, stress and more. With degrees in Industrial Relations and Personnel Management, Counselling and Psychotherapy, and Clinical Supervision, she manages a private practice and lectures in Dublin City University as well as PCI College. She is the founder of Black Therapists Ireland, an organisation that provides a platform for black therapists, while actively promoting mental health and wellbeing among black people living in Ireland and globally. Black Therapists Ireland has partnered with numerous organisations to offer therapeutic support to stakeholders, including consultations, Employee Assistance Programmes, workshops, training and counselling.

Jack O'Meara is co-founder and CEO of Ochre Bio, a biotechnology company developing a portfolio of liver medicines for patients and families affected around the world. The company uses a combination of advanced genomics, machine learning and human-centric translational models to improve the probability of clinical success for its products. At Ochre, Jack's role involved raising \$44m in venture capital from tier-one global investors, assembling a seasoned management team and board, and shepherding the development of novel RNAi medicines for chronic liver disease – soon through to human testing. Jack's work has been featured in the Financial Times and Wall Street Journal, and he was previously listed on the Forbes 30 under 30 list. He received his bachelor's degree from the National

University of Galway and his Masters from the University of Notre Dame.

Malachy Ó Néill is Director of Regional Engagement at Ulster University (since August 2021), taking responsibility for relationships with key stakeholders, including governmental agencies, councils, trusts and other relevant authorities on behalf of the institution. He was awarded a Personal Chair in Irish (2020), was Provost of the Magee Campus in Derry (2016–2021) and Head of the School of Irish Language and Literature (2012–2017). He has played a central role in a range of strategic initiatives for the University, including City and Growth Deals (UK Government), Shared Island (Irish Government), the inception of a School of Medicine (opened in 2021), the development of the North-West Cross-Border Tertiary Cluster and the accreditation of Derry/Strabane as a UNESCO Learning City Region.

Seán Ó Ríain is Professor of Sociology at the National University of Ireland, Maynooth. He is the author of *The Politics of High Tech Growth* (Cambridge, 2004), *The Rise and Fall of Ireland's Celtic Tiger* (Cambridge, 2014) and co-editor of *The Changing Worlds and Workplaces of Capitalism* (Palgrave, 2015). He was Principal Investigator of the New Deals in the New Economy project, funded by a European Research Council Consolidator Grant 2012–2017. He was a member of the National Economic and Social Council from 2011–2016.

Sue Pritchard is the Chief Executive of the Food, Farming and Countryside Commission (FFCC) and is focused on leading the organisation in its mission to bring people together to find radical and practical ways to transform our food system and improve our climate, nature, health and economy. She brings extensive experience in working with leaders in businesses, governments and enterprises, blending the academic and the practical for sustainable systems change. Sue lives with her family on an organic, permaculture, livestock farm in Wales, which accounts for pretty much all of her time outside of FFCC and is a grounding reminder of the gritty realities of turning ideas into workable actions.

Stefanie Stantcheva is the Nathaniel Ropes Professor of Political Economy at Harvard and founder of the Social Economics Lab. She is a member of the National Bureau of Economic Research, the Centre for Economic Policy Research, the Econometric Society and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Since 2018, she is a member of the French Council of Economic Advisers (CAE). Stefanie is the recipient of an NSF Career Award, the Elaine Bennett Research Prize in Economics, the Calvo-Armengol International Prize in Economics, the Maurice Allais Prize in Economics, the Best Young French Economist Award, a Sloan Fellowship and a Carnegie Fellowship.

Jane Suiter is Professor in the School of Communications at Dublin City University and Director of DCU's Institute for Future Media, Democracy and Society. Her research focus is on the information environment in the public sphere and in particular, on scaling-up deliberation and tackling disinformation. Jane was awarded an IRC Laureate in 2022 for COMDEL Examining the Potential of Communicative Deliberation for Climate Action. She was the joint winner of the Brown Democracy Medal in 2019 and the President's Award for Research. She was bestowed the prestigious title of the Irish Research Council's Researcher of the Year in 2020.

Dara Turnbull is Research Co-ordinator at Housing Europe, where he has worked since 2019. He is responsible for managing various research projects, striving to improve the uptake of good practices by public, cooperative and social housing providers in Europe. He also leads the work of Housing Europe on a number of EU-funded research projects, looking at areas as diverse as energy communities, the circular economy and social engagement with residents. An economist by training, prior to joining Housing Europe, Dara worked for seven years in the banking sector in Ireland. He holds a Masters in Economics from the National University of Ireland, Galway.

Leo Varadkar TD became Taoiseach for the second time on 17 December 2022 and resigned on 20 March 2024. He was born and raised in Dublin, is a qualified medical doctor and a graduate of Trinity College Dublin. First elected Taoiseach in June 2017, Mr Varadkar was a member of Fingal County Council (2003–2007), was elected to Dáil Éireann for the Dublin West constituency on his first attempt in 2007 and was re-elected to a fourth term in 2020. As Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport (2011–2014), he connected Dublin's light-rail system (the Luas), helped restore growth to the tourism industry and led 'The Gathering Ireland 2013' initiative. As Minister for Health (2014–2016), he brought in free GP care for children under the age of 6 and adults over 70, launched Ireland's first National Maternity Strategy and published the Public Health Alcohol Bill which is now law. As Minister for Social Protection (2016–2017), he increased pensions and social welfare payments for carers, people with disabilities and lone parents. He introduced paid paternity benefit for the first time in Ireland and extended new social insurance benefits and protections to the self-employed and farmers. Mr Varadkar is parliamentary leader and President of the Fine Gael party (EPP affiliate), which he led into an historic third term in government, in coalition with Fianna Fáil and the Green Party.

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