



Better Europe Alliance

Input to European Semester process

2024

1. Introduction to the Better Europe Alliance

The Better Europe Alliance of eleven Irish Civil Society Organisations for a Social and Sustainable Europe involves a range of social and equality NGOs, the Environmental Pillar and the SIPTU trade union. The overall objective of the Alliance is to strengthen progress towards social and environmental goals of the EU and to improve the level of debate and engagement of all stakeholders in progressing the European Semester and related strategies, including the European Pillar of Social Rights. The Better Europe Alliance is coordinated by the European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN) Ireland.

The members of the Better Europe Alliance are:

- Co-operative Housing Ireland
- Disability Federation of Ireland
- Environmental Pillar
- European Anti-Poverty Network Ireland
- Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed
- Irish Rural Link
- National Adult Literacy Agency
- National Women's Council
- SIPTU
- Social Justice Ireland
- Society of Saint Vincent de Paul

The Alliance engages with the European Semester process annually. Up until 2020 the Alliance made an annual response to the European Commission's Country Report for Ireland including proposals for the Country Specific Recommendations for Ireland and for the Government's National Reform Programme. Since 2021 the Alliance has made an annual Input to European Semester Process.

2. European Semester – An opportunity for an integrated approach to policy development

The European Semester process has evolved over time. As a process primarily focused on economic governance, and the implementation of the Stability and Growth Pact, it has slowly expanded to become a more integrated approach to monitoring economic, social and environmental policy. This came about initially due to the integration of the Europe 2020 Strategy into the Semester process in 2010, the lessons learned from the narrow and

damaging approach taken to recovery from the last economic crisis, and the sustained engagement of civil society in seeking a reform to the existing approach.

The possibility of a more integrated approach has been strengthened by the introduction of monitoring the implementation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals into the Semester in 2020. This followed the introduction into the Semester of reporting on the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights in 2018 and the European Green Deal in 2019. While the Alliance welcomes some positive signs that progress can be made in addressing social and environmental challenges, there needs to be a significant policy shift if we are to meet our ambitious targets to make progress on social commitments, address climate change and protect biodiversity while ensuring the transition to a net zero carbon future is fair and helps the furthest behind first. To date the introduction of these social and environmental developments into the Semester process has been weak and they have yet to make any real impact.

The weak progress in achieving social goals was already clear under the Europe 2020 Strategy which saw only half the target of lifting 20 million people out of poverty or social exclusion by 2020 achieved. So far there is little indication that there will be better progress under the Pillar of Social Rights. The adoption of the Action Plan for the implementation of the Pillar in 2021 provided an opportunity to strengthen how the European Semester Process addresses employment and social rights over time. The Action Plan includes a range of policy and legislative initiatives and three targets on training, employment and poverty reduction. This third target is to reduce the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion by at least 15 million by 2030, including 5 million children. There were 95.4 million people, or 1 in 5 of the EU population at risk of poverty or social exclusion when this target was set using 2019 poverty levels as the benchmark year. However, Eurostat reported that four years later in 2023 there were 94.5 million people at risk of poverty or social exclusion in the EU, progress of less than one million over that period¹. The number of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion has increased since the target was set with almost 20 million, or one quarter of children, at risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2023. In this same period, despite significant economic growth, Ireland has made no progress on its EU target for reducing poverty or social exclusion. While the EU region has experienced a number of major crises during this period, this clearly shows that those in poverty and on low incomes have experienced the greatest negative impact.

Since 2021, National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRPs), as part of NextGenerationEU, are now also being monitored through the European Semester process. NRRPs outline areas of investment and reform and lead to the drawdown of grants and loans through the Recovery and Resilience Facility. The NRRPs were developed to respond to the impact and lessons from the Covid-19 pandemic, but also to support a shift towards more longer-term EU priorities of the climate and digital transitions. Ireland's National Recovery and Resilience Plan outlines investments and reforms that will enable it to draw down €989 million.

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https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ilc_pecs01/default/table?lang=en&category=tepsr.tepsr_spi.tepsr_spi_hi

In June 2024 the EU adopted new Country Specific Recommendations (CSRs). The four [2024 CSRs for Ireland](#) continued to take the narrower focus that was reflected in the 2022 and 2023 CSRs. The 2024 CSRs focus on addressing the expected increase in age-related expenditure by making the healthcare system more cost-effective; addressing delays in the implementation of the recovery and resilience plan and accelerating the implementation of cohesion policy programmes; increasing investments and addressing deficiencies in the water and electricity infrastructure; and finally, increasing efforts to improve energy performance of private buildings to reduce energy bills and energy system costs.

The only reference to social concerns is the recognition of the ageing of the population and potentially the improved energy performance of private buildings, if schemes to retrofit homes are accessible and affordable to those on low incomes and includes social housing and private rental housing in which those on low incomes live. This is in contrast to CSRs before 2022 that included Recommendations on the accessibility of the health system including ensuring universal coverage to primary care, the provision of personalised active integration support and upskilling of those most distant from the labour market, addressing the digital divide, increasing the provision of social and affordable housing and the provision of affordable and quality childcare. Tax measures, including the broadening of the tax base was a recurring Recommendation. The Better Europe alliance regrets that the CSRs in recent years have not contained any focus on social measures and issues, which undermines the social aspect of the process. The alliance calls on the EU Commission to ensure that the 2025 CSR picks up on issues of poverty and inequality, ongoing housing and health crises, and other issues highlighted in this submission.

As the European Semester integrates new processes, including the Recovery and Resilience Plans, the climate and digital transitions and the European Pillar of social Rights, it is critical that it does so with a real balanced approach to policy making, ensuring that economic, social and environmental policy support and reinforce each other, rather than compete or undermine each other. To this end, the Better Europe Alliance supports the proposal by the European Economic and Social Committee to integrate a Social Imbalances Procedure into the European Semester and the corresponding proposed flexibilities to fund allocations².

3. Stakeholder engagement

Despite the importance of social dialogue with all social partners and civil society in the European Semester process, which is underpinned by a legal basis in the [Employment Guidelines](#) of the EU, the quality of stakeholder engagement with the European Semester has been mixed.

In general, the European Commission has adopted a positive approach to stakeholder engagement in the European Semester. Better Europe Alliance members both collectively and individually have had a positive experience of engagement with the European Commission Office in Ireland. This engagement is facilitated through the European Semester Officers based in the Commission offices

² <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52022AE6030>

in Dublin and has included annual meetings with the Commission's fact-finding team on the European Semester.

Up to this point engagement with the Commission has been open, with a sense that we have been heard and an effort made to reflect some of our inputs, particularly within the Country Reports, but recently, as stated above, not within the Country Specific Recommendations.

Engagement on the European Semester process between civil society and the Government, led by the Department of the Taoiseach, has been very limited. Broadly, engagement has been limited to the opportunity to make a written submission to the drafting of the National Reform Programme (NRP). In the past there was an opportunity to comment on the draft NRP, but this has not happened in recent years. There is little indication that the submissions made by civil society have been reflected in the final NRP submitted to the European Commission. The process improved slightly in 2020 and 2023 with a meeting held between the Department and civil society representatives. However, apart from summarising stakeholder submissions, it is still unclear if and how stakeholder input is taken into account in the final NRP.

We would also welcome greater transparency and consultation on how European social funding plans, such as ESF+, are developed and delivered. A number of our members have experienced a lack of clarity on the source of their own funding. It is important for us as stakeholders in the European Semester process to know where the boundaries between national and European funding lie.

4. Better Europe Alliance headline priorities for the future development of the European Semester

Promoting the Union's economic, social and territorial cohesion

The European Semester must be strengthened as a process for ensuring balanced and integrated economic, social and environmental development and bring about a better and more sustainable quality of life for everyone. Each of these elements are interdependent and must support and reinforce each other. While the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) are being monitored through the Semester process, they also provide an integrated approach within which the overall Semester could be developed and monitored. This would also put the commitment and vision of the SDGs to 'leave no one behind' at the heart of the European Semester process. The Better Europe Alliance does not currently see a meaningful prioritisation of the SDGs or EU Pillar of Social Rights in Ireland's NRRP, or in budgetary and policy decisions at a national level. Moreover, ongoing, and sometimes worsening inequalities and an endemic housing crisis have contributed to reducing levels of social cohesion.

The integration of the SDGs and the European Pillar of Social Rights into the European Semester process should also result in greater coherence across wider European and national policy. For example, the priorities of the Annual Growth Surveys should provide greater focus on long-term social objectives, building adequate, effective social systems that include both investment and protection dimensions and are better aligned to the EU Social Investment Package and the European Recovery and Resilience Facility.

EU fiscal governance

The Alliance welcomed the shift in economic policy under the Semester from one of austerity to deal with the economic crisis a decade ago, to one of investment in response to the Covid-19 crisis. It is crucial that this investment approach continues in order to address the decades of underinvestment in public services in Ireland. The need for this investment has been highlighted by the European Commission's Country Reports and Country Specific Recommendations for Ireland up until 2019. Inappropriate EU governance structures that prohibit or inhibit legitimate investment by national governments must be addressed. This is particularly pertinent in light of the significant investment that will be required to meet digital, climate and biodiversity targets and address major deficits in public service provision.

We welcomed that the EU applied the Fiscal Compact's general escape clause on national budget deficits for 2021 to 2023. Despite the positive state of the national exchequer, it is critical to ensure that the return to the rules of the Fiscal Compact in 2024 does not in any way result in a return to austerity policies.

The Alliance is in favour of a Social Imbalance Procedure being incorporated into the European Semester process thereby ensuring that fiscal and economic policies do not have a negative impact on social policies, and in particular the targets set out in the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan.

We must ensure that Ireland's fiscal commitments under the Fiscal Compact and the Growth and Stability Pact do not inhibit Ireland's investment strategy. Ireland must maximise its fiscal space as much as possible as afforded by the fiscal rules.

The fiscal rules should be amended to:

- better accommodate shift level increases in social and physical investment spending and to exclude that spending from the structural deficit target.
- exclude public investment in social infrastructure (in areas such as health, education and training, social housing and childcare) and in Just Transition from the 3% public deficit threshold.

Addressing underlying inequalities and social challenges

The Covid-19 and the ongoing cost-of-living crises has had the greatest impact on those who are on the lowest incomes and experiencing the greatest inequalities. While the rate of inflation has slowed, there has been a cumulative increase of over 20% in the four years to October 2024.³ The inability of households to afford the basic essentials, which was already apparent before the Covid-19 pandemic, has deepened. In 2023 almost half of all households (47.8%) of all households had some difficulty making ends meet, while 6.4% had great difficulty.⁴ Deprivation levels increased from 13.7% in 2021 to 17.3% in 2023. Moreover, deprivation rates for certain marginalised groups are much higher than the

³ <https://visual.cso.ie/?body=entity/cpicalculator>

⁴ <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-silced/surveyonincomeandlivingconditionssilcenforceddeprivation2023/abilitytomakeendsmeetandmaintainthesamestandardofliving/>

national average, including people unable to work due to illness or disability (44.7%), those who are unemployed (37.8%) and lone parent households (45.6%).⁵

For many, food banks have now become a normalised means of addressing the unaffordable cost of living. The numbers of people experiencing homelessness continues to increase every month to new record levels. Those households in consistent poverty have also faced increasing affordability burden and this has worsened since 2020 and Covid-19. At the same time many groups such as people with disabilities, single parents and people from minority groups including Travellers and Roma remain largely excluded from the labour market. It is welcome that the 2024 Country Report acknowledges that *“Disadvantaged groups continue to face significant labour market challenges, even though they are an untapped source of labour”* highlighting also that poverty and social exclusion are challenges also for these same groups. It is disappointing therefore there are no Country Specific Recommendations to address these issues.

Monitoring the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights through the European Semester provides an opportunity for an integrated and structural approach to addressing these underlying inequalities, and ensure that the balanced implementation of economic, social and environmental policy supports this goal. A disbalanced focus only on economic developments will not deliver social progress or support social cohesion.

Country Specific Recommendations must include policy measures and reforms that address underlying and historical inequalities while also ensuring that any fiscal consolidation measures are proofed to ensure they do not undermine this approach.

The wider Semester process, and the national policy that flows from it, must also include an active and explicit focus on the specific and effective measures needed to address the persistent higher levels of poverty and exclusion experienced by some groups in society, including exclusion from the labour market.

The disproportionately negative impact of the pandemic on the social and economic situation of women highlighted an urgent need for a gendered response. The Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) represented an opportunity to put the EU's commitments on gender mainstreaming and gender budgeting, as outlined in the EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025, into practice. In recognition of this, a regulation on the RRF states that Member States should include actions on gender equality in their plans and emphasised the importance of investment in care infrastructure.⁶ However, unlike climate and digital goals, no spending requirement was attached to gender equality goals. Concerns have been expressed about the extent to which States, including Ireland, have fulfilled the requirements of the Regulation in terms of gender equality.⁷ Ireland's plan fails to provide much needed investment in the care economy in particular.⁸ The European Commission is tasked with reporting on how the RRF plans tackle the inequalities between women and men. Further clarity will be needed on how exactly these funds will be measured and

⁵ <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-silced/surveyonincomeandlivingconditionssilc/enforceddeprivation2023/enforceddeprivation/>

⁶ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32021R0241&from=EN>

⁷ [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/698757/EPRS_BRI\(2021\)698757_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/698757/EPRS_BRI(2021)698757_EN.pdf)

⁸ [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/694784/IPOL_STU\(2021\)694784_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/694784/IPOL_STU(2021)694784_EN.pdf)

enforced from the perspective of gender. Without appropriate gender and equality disaggregated data, it will be challenging to scrutinise spending and its equality impact.

Alliance members know that the Irish National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) must be understood within the wider context of the Economic Recovery Plan 2021 and includes measures to address the climate and digital transition as well as the economic and social recovery. However, the NRRP itself does not present an integrated approach to addressing these priorities and is very weak in how it approaches social priorities overall, including the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights. As the implementation of the NRRP and the Semester process progresses, this needs to be addressed while stronger commitments and targeted actions are required to address inequalities in the Irish labour market.

In 2023 the Government completed the Mid-term Review of the Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025, the current national strategy for poverty reduction and social inclusion.⁹ This involved updating and adding targets and commitments and retaining the overall ambition for 2025 to “*reduce consistent poverty to 2% or less and to make Ireland one of the most socially inclusive countries in the EU*”. We welcome that consistent poverty levels fell to their lowest level of 3.6% in 2023, after increasing to 4.8% in 2022, although as we outline below more marginalised groups still have much higher levels of consistent poverty.¹⁰ Also, as the national SILC data and studies by Ireland’s ESRI clearly show, this reduction is linked to the one off cost-of living social protection measures deployed in recent years, and core social protection rates did not increase in line with inflation, meaning that in 2025 without the one-off supports, many groups will experience an increase in poverty.¹¹

The consistent poverty level also does not take account of the impact of inflation. Many of the groups that have experienced higher levels of poverty for many years continue to do so, and at rates much higher than the national average. This includes those who are unemployed (9.4%), those unable to work due to long-standing health problems (16.5%), lone parent households (7.2%), households with one adult under 65 (13%), households with no-one at work (8.9%) and households where someone is renting or living rent free (8.5%), which includes those in social housing or with housing supports. The SILC data also does not capture the levels of poverty for some groups in society such as the Traveller and Roma Communities, people with disabilities and migrants and the increasing numbers of people who are homeless.

Urgent action is needed across Government to deliver the integrated response needed to address the causes of poverty, ensuring an adequate income for all, access to quality services and access to decent jobs. This involves addressing poverty and social exclusion for all groups and communities across society, ensuring delivery of the objectives of the

⁹ <https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/259391/5bcb78ff-a5fd-45db-9e6a-f187980f603c.pdf#page=null>

¹⁰ <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-silc/surveyonincomeandlivingconditionssilc2023/poverty/>

¹¹ See <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-silc/surveyonincomeandlivingconditionssilc2023/impactofcostoflivingmeasuresonpoverty/> and also <https://www.esri.ie/news/budget-2025-tax-and-welfare-measures-will-result-in-small-real-income-gains-for-households-in>

European Pillar of Social Rights and the Sustainable Development Goals to leave no-one behind.

The Action Plan for the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights launched in March 2021 includes a range of legislative and policy changes, and three targets on increasing employment and training levels and reducing poverty and social exclusion. While the Action Plan itself is not an integrated plan to deliver on social rights, it is critical that the Irish Government takes its delivery and that of the wider Pillar principles and rights seriously through a transparent process and clear lines of responsibility. This includes ensuring all other economic and environmental policies are compatible with its delivery.

The Government must strengthen and enhance existing practice and implement a transparent and effective process for the poverty, equality and gender and environmental impact assessment of all relevant policies. If done effectively, this can support a balanced approach to policy development.

While the rate of inflation has slowed down, the cumulative increase in prices in recent years is posing particular challenges for low-income households throughout Ireland. While all households are experiencing significant price increases, the effect of this inflation continues to impact the living standards of those on the lowest incomes the hardest. Given that these lower income households spend a greater proportion of their income, compared to better off households, they have been more exposed to price increases; and they also spend a greater proportion of their income on areas that experienced significant price increases such as food and energy. As highlighted above 6.4% of households had great difficulty making ends meet in 2023, including 28.6% of those who experienced material deprivation. Nearly half of all households had some difficulty.¹² Reducing the drivers of the high cost of living and addressing income adequacy are key to supporting these households.

Income adequacy

Income adequacy, linked to the cost of goods and services, is a key element in addressing poverty. Before the current cost-of-living crisis the incomes of those on social welfare were already inadequate to lift people above the poverty line and provide them with a Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL). Inflation has widened this gap with minimum living costs rising by 16.8% from March 2020 to March 2024. The overall cost of a MESL has increased by 21.2% since 2020.¹³ While Budget 2025 is projected to reduce the level of income inadequacy for households, 35% of household types depending on social welfare will still experience deep income inadequacy in 2025.¹⁴ Despite consultations, there has been no progress on the benchmarking of welfare supports to a level that is adequate, something which would significantly address the risk of poverty. We further note concerning levels of income adequacy among households and individuals in employment, resulting in rising deprivation. In 2023, one third of those in work (33.3%) experienced

¹² <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-silced/surveyonincomeandlivingconditionssilcenforceddeprivation2023/abilitytomakeendsmeetandmaintainthesamesandardofliving/>

¹³ https://www.budgeting.ie/download/pdf/mesl_2024_-_update_report.pdf

¹⁴ https://www.budgeting.ie/download/pdf/mesl_impact_briefing_-_budget_2025.pdf

enforced deprivation.¹⁵ In this regard, we welcome the Government's decision to raise the National Minimum Wage to 60% of the median wage, by 2026.

Employment

Though Ireland is experiencing historically high levels of employment, a more ambitious employment target with sub-targets is required to address the structural inequalities in the labour market. While Ireland enjoys a high employment rate, people with limited participation in education, especially women, experience very low engagement with the labour market.¹⁶ The European Commission's 2024 Country Report for Ireland again highlights the low participation rate of disabled people, single parents and Traveller and Roma - this echoes the concerns of members of the Better Europe alliance.¹⁷ For example, Ireland's disability employment gap - 37% - is much higher than the EU average of 21%, and the CSR also shows that Ireland's disability employment rate is the only indicator (out of a total of 17) on Ireland's social scoreboard marked red (critical situation). Equality proofing must be integral to the development of all activation, education, employment schemes and supports to ensure that everyone who wants to can access a decent job, and the structural barriers that prevent the above groups from accessing, securing and retaining employment must be addressed.

This further requires a significant intervention in the labour market on the part of the state to vindicate '*employment quality*' throughout all sectors as noted in the Government's Roadmap for Social Inclusion which states: '*While it is accepted that employment provides the best means of reducing poverty, it is also accepted that we cannot rely in a passive manner on the market to create quality and sustainable jobs*'. This will involve measures to reduce low-pay, precarious work practices, wage inequality, Ireland's high level of working hours; while promoting workplace health and safety, the 'social wage' (i.e., in-work benefits), and in-work training and career development. A key component of reducing in-work poverty and promoting employment equality will be a transposition of the EU Directive on Adequate Wages that is in keeping with the spirit and letter of the Directive; namely, concrete strategies to reach the target coverage of 80% of employees participating in collective bargaining, along with policies that facilitate that goal such as right of access and protection from victimisation over trade union activities.

Supporting people to access a decent and sustainable job must also be at the heart of the implementation of *Pathways to Work 2021-2025*. Under this strategy's fourth strand, *working for all – leaving no one behind*, the Government notes "*COVID-19 has changed the context. However, we cannot afford to neglect our responsibility to those people within our community who before COVID-19, were already facing significant labour market barriers. Accordingly, we now set out our approach to delivering, during the lifetime of this strategy, a Public Employment Service that works for all.*" (p62)

¹⁵ <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-silced/surveyonincomeandlivingconditionssilcenforceddeprivation2023/enforceddeprivation/>

¹⁶ https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/lfsq_ergaed/default/table?lang=en

¹⁷ https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/publications/2024-european-semester-country-reports_en

Education and Training

In terms of education and training, the Government should adequately invest in the implementation of *Adult Literacy for Life*, the ten-year strategy for adult literacy, numeracy and digital literacy launched in September, 2021. They must begin with the furthest behind first by identifying these groups and putting in adequate resources to identify and respond to their needs.

Housing and Homelessness

The number of people in homelessness continued to rise hitting a new record high of 14,760 people in October 2024, including 4,654 children.¹⁸ In 2023 there were 58,824 households on the Social Housing Waiting list, with 55,758 active Housing Assistance Payments (HAP) tenancies. This means the social housing need is closer to 129,000 households. This is not to mention those individuals and families experiencing ‘hidden homelessness’, or living in overcrowded, insecure, or unsuitable accommodation. This is driven by the ongoing inadequate supply of overall housing, including social and affordable housing. Linked to this there is an inadequate supply of houses to rent, with high rental costs, exceeding the level of support provided by the Government to those on low incomes. In 2023 over 30% of households found housing costs to be a heavy financial burden, up from 23% in 2021.¹⁹ This includes more than half (51.7%) of lone parent households.

While there have been improvements in the delivery of new housing, social and affordable housing targets have been missed the last few years, and it has been widely accepted for some time that the housing delivery targets included in the Housing for All strategy are inadequate to meet the needs of a growing population. The outgoing Government published revised targets, increasing the ambition from an average of 33,000 to 50,500 houses per year up to 2030. It is crucial that these houses are delivered and that this includes an adequate delivery of new social and affordable housing. The Housing Commission has recommended that social and cost-rental housing should make up 20% of the total national housing stock, but social housing will need to be allocated to a much higher proportion of overall annual housing delivery numbers to achieve these goals within the next 6- 10 years. Housing must also be delivered in a way that meets the needs of all. This includes future-proofing Ireland’s housing stock to ensure that it is accessible for all (i.e. ensuring new housing is built to principles of Universal Design and wheelchair liveable) and addressing severe delays in the delivery of culturally appropriate accommodation for the Traveller community.

Health

Healthcare in Ireland remains a two-tier system, despite recommendations from the OECD (in the context of disability and employment issues) that “a much more fundamental and equitable solution... would be to ensure access to universal health care which would allow the government to abolish the Medical Card.”²⁰ The long hospital waiting lists experienced prior to Covid-19 were exacerbated by the pandemic, with the detection of health problems delayed. Addressing these waiting lists must be part of the recovery plan. The full implementation of

¹⁸ <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/8420f-homeless-report-october-2024/>

¹⁹ <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-silced/surveyonincomeandlivingconditionssilcenforceddeprivation2023/financialburdens/>

²⁰ OECD, 2021, p 19, DISABILITY, WORK AND INCLUSION IN IRELAND
<https://www.oecd.org/employment/disability-work-and-inclusion-in-ireland-74b45baa-en.htm>

Sláintecare, which has faced some challenges over the past number of years, should be prioritised. Its implementation should ensure a focus on addressing the health inequalities that exist in our society and result in worse health outcomes and lower life expectancy for the most marginalised and disadvantaged groups and communities. Moreover, many health, social care and community services, including disability supports, have long waiting-lists and inadequate services provided to support community need. Community and voluntary organisations, which provide core supports, are inadequately resourced, and there is an ongoing recruitment and retention crisis in both public and voluntary service providers, due to inadequacy of funding. Multi-annual sufficient funding is required to address this.

Long waiting times for GP appointments are also becoming increasingly common, as are problems with accessing dentistry through Ireland's medical card. It is becoming more difficult to get an appointment or even register with a GP due to a shortage of healthcare professionals. With a growing and ageing population, addressing the shortage of GPs is becoming more urgent.

Early Childcare Education and Care

Lack of affordable childcare is a barrier to low-income families' equal participation in society. Low pay and high staff turnover can also affect the quality of ECEC. A public, not-for-profit, childcare model is the best way to ensure access to affordable, quality childcare for families. In countries, with public early years education and care, services are more affordable, accessible, and of higher quality.²¹ Investment in Early Years Education and School Age Childcare needs to be increased to 1% of GNI* by 2030 to ensure all children can participate in early learning care and education.

Supporting the green and digital transitions

Green Transition

Public investment in Just Transition must be excluded from the 3% public deficit threshold in the Stability and Growth Pact.

The implementation of the European Green Deal is a major priority for the European Commission in addressing the climate and environmental crisis, with the opportunity to direct our economies in a sustainable manner and a clear focus on a socially fair and just transition. The European Green Deal links clearly to the national Climate Action Plan and must be effective in addressing the scale of the crisis we face, while ensuring policies to implement it are consistent with social goals on poverty and inequality and the commitment to 'leave no-one behind'. This includes ensuring that supports and measures put in place to achieve the targets reach the furthest behind first. However, we are already off course in reaching our targets set out in the Climate Action Plan.²² Further, water quality is continuing to decline, with just over half of our waters in satisfactory condition, and our natural habitats and species are increasingly under threat.^{23 24} We are also still waiting for Marine Protected Areas

²¹ Oireachtas Library & Research Service, Heery E., (June 2020) 'Public provision of early childhood education: an overview of the international evidence' [2020-06-16 I-rs-note-public-provision-of-early-childhood-education-an-overview-of-the-international-evidence_en.pdf \(oireachtas.ie\)](#)

²² <https://www.epa.ie/news-releases/news-releases-2023/ireland-projected-to-fall-well-short-of-climate-targets-says-epa.php#:~:text=In%20April%202023%20the%20Effort,the%20EU%20later%20in%202023.>

²³ https://docs.google.com/document/d/1rZr3WWOeiDIXzu0Y-Q2X_Zb3soZPI2sf/edit

²⁴ <https://biodiversityireland.ie/top10/10-species-at-risk-of-losing/>

legislation to be published and enacted, which is years late; Ireland currently has approximately 9% of its waters designated as protected, but lacks clear and robust legislation.

We need to reverse these negative trends with swift action, clear progress indicators and adequate resources if we are to reach the ambition which the European Green Deal sets out to achieve. Business as Usual and hope we can fix it in the future is not appropriate.

Another area of concern, where climate and just transition, and social justice converge, is Energy Poverty. Irish environmental and anti-poverty organisations have made recommendations for addressing this area in recent years, including by addressing income inadequacy, providing Community Energy Advice Services and carefully targeting housing retrofits to support those most in need.²⁵

Digital Skills

All Government departments with responsibility for digital skills must work together to improve digital skills for adults with a commitment to addressing the needs of those furthest behind. Policy must however also factor in the needs of those with low digital literacy, and ensure that all state and other essential services provide non-digital access points and engagement options.

5. Strengthening Stakeholder engagement

Engagement with all stakeholders in the Semester process at national level needs to be strengthened. The Department of the Taoiseach should introduce a process for more meaningful and effective engagement at an early level each year as part of Ireland's approach to delivering its EU Semester responsibilities, including those representing social, equality and environmental concerns. On a wider level, there is a need to build more meaningful collaborative governance to support the development and implementation of effective national policy.

The engagement of the Oireachtas in overseeing the development and implementation of the European Semester process in Ireland also needs to be strengthened, with it having a key role in ensuring the Semester process leads to balanced economic, social and environmental development. Engagement at the level of the outgoing Oireachtas Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform and Taoiseach can play a central role in this engagement and the Alliance welcomes past engagement with this Committee.

The Better Europe Alliance members welcome the continuation of positive engagement with the European Commission in the implementation of the Semester process. The outcome of the engagement must continue to be visible in the Commission's oversight of the process from the setting of priorities in the Annual Sustainable Growth Survey, to the Country Report and Country Specific Recommendations for Ireland. In particular, we strongly feel that it is imperative that Ireland's 2025 CSR return to the earlier focus on social concerns and priorities, as well as economic and environmental recommendations, and that it contain at minimum one social and equality-focussed recommendation, addressing the areas of concern outlined in this submission.

²⁵ <https://www.friendsoftheearth.ie/news/civil-society-coalition-calls-on-next-government-to-take-urg/>