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PRIORITIES FOR IRELAND'S PRESIDENCY OF THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

Catherine Devitt, Ciara Brennan, Caitlin McIlhennon and Alison Hough

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Summary

During Ireland's Presidency of the Council of the European Union (July-December 2026) Environmental Justice Network Ireland calls for leadership to ensure that environmental justice, democracy, and intergenerational fairness are at the heart of EU decision-making. This includes negotiating robust legislative priorities (where the Irish Presidency will chair negotiations and steer outcomes) and developing progressive political and agenda setting priorities (where Ireland can use its Presidency platform to convene debates, frame conclusions, and leave a legacy).

Legislative negotiation priorities



Multiannual Financial Framework (2028-2034) - Uphold climate budget commitments, guarantee ring-fenced biodiversity funding, and secure robust social safeguards for a just transition.



EU 2040 Climate Target - Ensure the Council agrees a Paris-compatible target that strengthens energy security and intergenerational fairness and a strong policy framework to implement the target.



PFAS Restriction under REACH - Defend a strong, science-based ban, resisting exemptions or delays, and support measures for safer alternatives and remediation.



Nature Restoration Law implementation - Protect the integrity of the law against dilution in Council discussions, ensure adequate funding, and promote robust enforcement.

Political and agenda-setting priorities



Fair, Just and Equitable Transition - Champion stronger Social Climate Plans and embed social protections in the Clean Industrial Deal to protect workers, households, and vulnerable regions.



North-South Cooperation on the island of Ireland - Ensure post-Brexit arrangements are working properly and enhancing the conditions for north-south cooperation on the environment.



Future Generations and Intergenerational Justice - Champion intergenerational fairness and embed long-term justice in EU policymaking.



Environmental Democracy - Defend civic space, protect NGO participation and funding, and safeguard access to information, justice, and protest rights against deregulatory or trade pressures.

Introduction

This paper sets out a summary of Environmental Justice Network Ireland's priorities and recommendations for Ireland's Presidency of the Council of the European Union in July-December 2026. Its aim is to inform government, policymakers, and stakeholders about the key environmental justice and environmental democracy issues that should be advanced during Ireland's term. The paper highlights the responsibility and opportunity Ireland holds as Presidency chair to shape EU negotiations, safeguard ambition on climate and social justice, and ensure that the voices of communities and future generations are heard at the heart of European decision-making.

Ireland's Presidency will take place at an important moment in terms of shaping priorities for the new legislative term. There will still be time to put new priorities or initiatives on the agenda. This is particularly relevant in the context of civil society and democracy and has further significance as Ireland's Michael McGrath is currently EU Commissioner for Democracy, Justice, the Rule of Law and Consumer Protection. Crucial discussions on the EU's long-term budget will also mean that the Irish presidency can have an impact not just during the Presidency term, but for many subsequent years.

What does holding the Presidency of the Council of the European Union mean?

The Presidency of the Council of the European Union is a rotating six-month role held by different EU member states, taking the role in turns in a pre-set order. Holding the Presidency of the Council of the EU is an important role, ensuring:

- 'continuity of the EU's agenda
- sound law-making
- cooperation among member states
- cooperation/coordination among the other EU-institutions'

The nature of the role (and why it is so important) is explored in more detail [here](#). It is also important to [distinguish this role](#) from that of the President of the European Council, President of the European Commission, President of the European Parliament – all of which are held by individuals rather than by member states.

Ireland will hold the Presidency of the Council of the European Union from July to December 2026, taking over from Denmark (current holders of the presidency) and Cyprus (holding the presidency from January – June 2026).

Preparations for Ireland's upcoming presidency

As Taoiseach Micheál Martin [made clear](#) in January 2025, Ireland's Presidency will be: "a Presidency defined by action."

Tánaiste Simon Harris provided an update on Ireland's preparations for its upcoming Presidency of the Council of the European Union at Iveagh House, Dublin on 1st July 2025:

- 'We plan to host an extensive programme of meetings and events here in Ireland during our Presidency term, including a meeting of the European Political Community, an informal meeting of the European Council, and up to 22 informal meetings of EU Ministers. These high-level events will be part of an overall programme of more than 250 Presidency events in Ireland.'
- 'Domestic stakeholder engagement will be central to our approach and from the autumn, my colleagues and I will undertake consultations across a range of sectors on our policy priorities.'
- 'I want to emphasise this afternoon that this Presidency belongs to all of Ireland – not just to Government, but to our businesses, our civil society, our communities, and especially our young people. It is particularly important to me that our Presidency is relevant to the youth of Ireland'

and to their needs. Their voices, their concerns, their aspirations must be at the heart of our Presidency.'

Ireland's Presidency will take place at a pivotal moment for the European Union: following the 2024 European elections, with a new Commission and Parliament in place, and amid crucial debates on climate action, competitiveness, digitalisation, security, and EU enlargement.

Indicative Presidency Priorities from Ireland

Tánaiste Harris has [indicated](#) a number of priorities ahead of national level consultation processes with stakeholders this Autumn, as well as consultations with other member states and the EU institutions. These indicative priorities include:

- **MFF:** 'Agreeing a new Multiannual Financial Framework will be a key area of focus during the Irish Presidency and just last week, I met with the EU Budget Commissioner, on this issue. The shape of the new MFF will have enormous implications for the Union – for what it can achieve, and for what it can deliver for EU citizens.'
- **EU Competitiveness:** 'Enhancing European competitiveness will also be a key focus of our work. I want to see unnecessary red tape cut, and to work on initiatives, which simplify EU regulations. The regulatory burden placed on businesses, especially on SMEs, must be addressed. But our agenda will be to deliver better regulation, not deregulation. I believe that this agenda will be crucial, in generating improved EU competitiveness, and in delivering prosperity, for all EU citizens.'
- **Security and Defence:** 'Any bad actor will not hit our strengths. They will hit our vulnerabilities. Ireland is a militarily neutral country, and we will remain so. But, my friends, neutrality does not equate to indifference. Ireland will not stand on the sidelines at this critical juncture for the EU. And I know that our EU Presidency will accommodate and reconcile the needs, perspectives and priorities of our fellow member states, and that includes the security and defence of our European Union.'
- **EU Enlargement:** 'Momentum on EU enlargement must be maintained. There can be no pulling up the ladder. I believe that enlargement is the strongest policy tool that we have at our disposal in the EU – to consolidate peace, security and prosperity – across our continent...Ukraine must be supported on its EU path and Ireland's solidarity with Ukraine remains unwavering.'
- **Communicating Europe:** 'We need to find ways to bring home the realities, and the benefits, of our EU membership to communities across Ireland. Most Irish people accept that we have benefited from our EU membership – but we cannot take that positivity for granted. Communities across Ireland should feel a sense of ownership, and a sense of pride, when it comes to our EU Presidency. As our Presidency approaches, I will be visiting communities across Ireland, to talk directly to people about the EU – not just about our priorities for 2026, but about Ireland's role in the EU, and about what our EU membership means in real terms, and what it has delivered for Ireland.'

Ireland's [Programme for Government 2025](#) also raises the importance of the presidency:

- 'As Ireland will hold the EU presidency in 2026, **protecting farmers and farming at EU level will be an absolute priority for this Government in terms of the new Common Agricultural Policy (CAP).**' (p.23)
- The Government has also committed to 'publish plans for our upcoming Presidency to deliver against strategic priorities for Europe and Ireland; Host an informal meeting of the European Council and a meeting of the European Political Community in Ireland during the Presidency, as well as a programme of between 16 and 20 informal Council meetings at Ministerial level; Seek to bring some of the high-level meetings of our Presidency to cities and counties across Ireland ensuring the entire country benefits from the profile the Presidency brings; Provide for a sustainability policy for the Presidency.'

Eight key priorities from an environmental justice and environmental democracy perspective for Ireland's Presidency of the Council of the European Union

1. Ensuring effective climate and energy policy coordination through the next EU long-term budget (Multi-annual Financial Framework, MFF)

The 2028–2034 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) will be the most consequential file during Ireland's Presidency, shaping EU spending for the next seven years. This moment will be a defining test of Europe's ability to deliver on its climate and environmental commitments. In order to close Europe's climate and environmental investment gap through 2030 and beyond, [WWF has identified three key measures](#) that must underpin the new MFF:

- Mobilise public funds by raising climate and biodiversity spending targets and creating a Green and Social Investment Fund.
- Simplify and target the budget around transition objectives, with effective implementation of the 'Do No Significant Harm' principle.
- Guarantee dedicated funding for nature protection and restoration, recognising its role in climate resilience and adaptation.

However, [analysis of the Commission's draft proposal by E3G](#) shows how steep politics and structural choices risk undermining these aims:

- The overall budget proposal increases only marginally in size (from 1.13% to 1.15% of EU GNI)
- The Commission proposes replacing the recovery fund with much smaller loan schemes that are optional for member states and have no guarantee of supporting climate action. This makes it even more urgent to scale up direct public investment in climate and nature through the EU budget.
- While the Commission proposes to apply Do No Significant Harm (DNSH) principle across the budget and maintain a 35% climate earmark (43% in the new Competitiveness Fund), it also introduces new "partnership plans", i.e., national programmes negotiated with the Commission that would guide how countries spend large parts of the budget. The objectives for these plans are broad and weakly defined, raising concerns about their ability to drive ambitious climate and nature action.
- Climate tracking risks being inflated by questionable spending categories. An evidence-based, policy-driven budget is essential to ensure these new structures do not dilute ambition.
- The proposed absorption of the LIFE programme into competitiveness streams threatens to weaken dedicated support for biodiversity and restoration. This directly underlines the need for ring-fenced funding for nature.
- Social fairness is a major missing piece. E3G warns that the dedicated Just Transition Fund has disappeared, territorial transition plans are now optional, and social safeguards are weak. To be credible, the MFF must integrate strong social conditionalities, protect vulnerable communities, and deliver on the promise of a just transition.

Ireland has highlighted that protecting farmers and farming at EU level will be an absolute priority for this Government in terms of the new Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) during the Presidency. As Ireland's Environmental Pillar has highlighted,¹ current proposals for the reformed CAP 'risk diluting

¹ Fintan Kelly, Observations on the European Commission's legislative proposal for the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) for the period 2028–2034, Submission in response to the call for observations on the European Commission's legislative proposal

environmental ambition, rewarding intensive systems, and undermining Ireland's capacity to meet binding EU nature and climate targets'. Ireland can play a vital role in ensuring that a balance is struck between supporting farmers and farming, while also strengthening the EU's response to climate and biodiversity crises.

Delivering a budget that mobilises sufficient funds, enforces DNSH robustly, safeguards dedicated nature financing, and embeds just transition measures will be critical if the 2028–2034 MFF is to align with the Green Deal and Europe's climate neutrality pathway. The Irish Presidency must:

- *Use its convening role to uphold the 35% climate earmark across the MFF and push for robust, transparent tracking of spending, while resisting attempts to dilute or absorb ring-fenced funding for biodiversity and climate goals into competitiveness or defence budgets.*
- *Champion the integration of strong social safeguards and just transition measures into the MFF ensuring territorial justice, affordable energy, and protections for workers and vulnerable households. This should include:*
 1. *Including a horizontal 'just transition' target across the EU budget*
 2. *Ensuring that the work in territories that was started with the Just Transition Fund does not get lost*
 3. *Incorporating social and environmental conditionalities in the European Competitiveness Fund and other budgets.*
- *As chair of Council negotiations, Ireland should safeguard inclusivity and the role of regions and civil society in shaping and monitoring EU spending, so that climate and energy investments deliver results on the ground and reflect Europe's diversity.*
- *Advance the interests of future generations through embedding long-term impact assessments and foresight into EU and MS decision-making on the MFF (as discussed further below).*

2. Unlocking the full potential of a decarbonised economy, energy security, energy independence and a Paris Agreement compatible pathway to net-zero through an ambitious 2040 target.

A robust 2040 climate target is important because it will help stop environmental degradation, limit the impacts of climate change, ensure the EU meets its international climate obligations and stays on the pathway towards climate neutrality. Importantly, a clear and ambitious 2040 target will deliver on key EU and national strategic priorities:

- **Economic prosperity:** Reduce the cost of energy, the cost of living, create jobs and ensure prosperity and a just transition.
- **Competitiveness:** Provide a certainty to investors, unlock innovation, promote business growth and boost job creation.
- **Resilience and security:** Increase sovereignty through energy security and energy independence and remove vulnerabilities to foreign influence through fossil fuel dependence.
- **Fairness, the future and fundamental rights:** Intergenerational fairness or equity in climate action is increasingly understood not just as an issue of ethics but also as a fundamental rights issue.
- **Alignment between EU and national climate law:** Ireland has already committed to ambitious targets at national level and supporting a robust 2040 target at EU level is an opportunity to 'lead from the front'.

As highlighted by [Carbon Market Watch](#), during the Irish Presidency the Council must work with the Parliament and Commission to ensure that the final legislation:

- *Guides the EU towards domestic climate neutrality by 2040 at the latest, and negative emissions thereafter.*
- *Sets three separate targets for gross emissions reductions, net land sequestration and permanent removals.*
- *Establishes a domestic net 90% reduction target by 2040 as the bare minimum, and avoids that the policy architecture and package to be proposed in 2026 are based on lower ambition.*
- *Is in line with science and avoids reliance on Article 6 credits to achieve the EU targets.*

3. Supporting robust action in files due to come onto the EU legislative timetable e.g. the REACH Regulation regarding PFAS

The EU's plan to restrict per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) under the REACH Regulation is a defining test of whether Europe will put public health and the environment ahead of industry lobbying. With thousands of 'forever chemicals' still in use and contamination already affecting water, soils, and communities, delay is not an option.

The Irish Presidency must ensure that the Council upholds an ambitious, science-based restriction that delivers real protection for people and ecosystems, and safeguards future generations. It should:

- *Uphold ambition and the precautionary principle by ensuring that negotiations on the PFAS restriction remain ambitious, precautionary, and science-based. Resist efforts to weaken the scope, delay timelines, or introduce unjustified exemptions.*
- *Promote a fair and just transition by steering Council discussions towards measures that support a fair transition for workers, SMEs, and communities most affected by the PFAS phase-out. Secure EU-level support for safer alternatives, retraining, and innovation funding.*
- *Promote Council focus on environmental justice and public health by highlighting the disproportionate impacts of PFAS contamination on vulnerable communities, and by prioritising strong monitoring, remediation, and transparency provisions, so that people's health and rights are fully protected.*

4. Safeguarding the Nature Restoration Law

The EU's Nature Restoration Law, adopted in 2024 after highly polarised negotiations, sets binding targets for restoring ecosystems. It is the first EU law of its kind, recognising restoration as essential for both halting biodiversity loss and meeting climate targets. Member States are now preparing national restoration plans, which will determine how ambitious the law is in practice. At the same time, deregulatory "simplification" initiatives and negotiations on the next Multiannual Financial Framework threaten to weaken or underfund restoration measures.

The European Environment Agency's 5-yearly [State of the Environment Report 2025](#) has concluded that: 'significant progress has been made in reducing greenhouse gas emissions and air pollution, but the overall state of Europe's environment is not good, especially its nature which continues to face degradation, overexploitation and biodiversity loss' and that 'the outlook for most environmental trends is concerning and poses major risks to Europe's economic prosperity, security and quality of life'. According to the [country-specific report](#), Ireland has a particularly negative profile - 85% of Ireland's protected habitats and almost one third of protected species of flora and fauna having an unfavourable status, over half of native plant species are in decline and more than 50 bird species are of high conservation concern. Water quality is also assessed as 'poor', with no improvement in the condition of

rivers or lakes over the last five years. It is essential that Ireland now leads by example and begins to properly implement EU environmental law to ensure compliance with environmental targets.

Ensuring that the NRL is implemented with adequate funding, strong enforcement, and meaningful stakeholder participation will be a key test of the EU's credibility on biodiversity and climate action. Ireland should:

- *Use the Irish Presidency to safeguard the Nature Restoration Law's integrity in Council discussions, ensuring it is fully funded, robustly implemented, and not weakened by deregulatory or budgetary trade-offs.*

5. Ensuring a fair, equitable and just transition

A fair transition is essential if the EU is to maintain public support for climate action and ensure that no community is left behind. For Ireland's Presidency, this means making sure that the EU's budget and policies do more than deliver emissions cuts. They must also protect workers, households and regions most affected by change. Yet, the [Commission's draft MFF weakens this dimension](#): the dedicated Just Transition Fund has disappeared, territorial transition plans are now optional, and social safeguards are thin. This risks leaving vulnerable regions and citizens on the sidelines of the green transition. Ireland has an opportunity, as Presidency chair, to champion stronger social protections and fairness in EU decision-making, and to ensure that Europe's path to climate neutrality also delivers equity, resilience, and solidarity.

Two areas will be particularly important: Social Climate Plans and the Clean Industrial Deal. National Social Climate Plans are meant to provide tangible benefits for households and communities most impacted by the costs of the transition. Similarly, the EU's new Clean Industrial Deal (the strategy to boost competitiveness while reaching climate neutrality by 2050) will shape Europe's economic model for decades. However, the Commission's current proposals leave significant gaps in social protections and risk exacerbating inequalities unless strengthened. Without robust and targeted initiatives to support workers, consumers, communities and marginalised groups, the CID [risks](#) widening socio-economic inequalities.

To address these gaps, the Irish Presidency should:

- *Ensure EU-level discussions drive ambition in national SCPs beyond minimum compliance, so that SCPs [deliver tangible social and environmental benefits](#) for the households and communities most affected.*
- *Use its convening role to ensure the opportunities that may arise out of the Clean Industrial Deal and that overlap with the Irish Presidency benefit people and communities and strengthen cohesion across Europe. These opportunities include the [Quality Jobs Roadmap](#), the revision of the [Public Procurement Directive](#) (planned for late 2026), the [Circular Economy Act](#) (due to be adopted at the end of 2026). It is vital that these opportunities are used to:*
 - *Avoid exacerbating regional disparities and ensure that industrial policy generates social benefits by structurally embedding strong social and environmental conditions within the EU's industrial policy framework and by protecting labour rights.*
 - *Ensure synergy between the CID and the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights. This could also include initiatives such as the [European Affordable Housing Plan](#) and the [EU Anti-Poverty Strategy](#) (both foreseen for Q1 2026).*
 - *Align social initiatives linked to the CID with the Council Recommendation on Ensuring a Fair Transition towards Climate Neutrality.*
- *Champion an Affordable Energy Action Plan that benefits the most vulnerable households and develop concrete measures to tackle energy poverty and expands renewable heating and energy communities for low-income households.*

- Ensure that the [EU Climate Resilience and Risk Management policy package](#) has fairness at its centre. This policy package will be adopted during the second half of 2026. The Irish Presidency could play a key role in fostering discussion on just resilience, the concept that the European Environment Agency is now using to talk about adaptation and fairness.
- Continue the work of previous presidencies to advance a Just Transition, initiatives that Ireland could advance during its presidency which would receive widespread support and align with its national focus on Just Transition include:
 - A high level conference on Just transition and social justice, modelled on [an event organised during the Spanish presidency](#) in conjunction with key international actors such as the International Labour Organisation.
 - The Belgian Presidency organised citizen assemblies throughout Belgium, asked a panel of experts to write analyses and recommendations about how to advance a just transition, and organised a conference about a Just Transition in Belgium, as detailed on the [the official website created by the BE government](#).
 - In early 2023, Belgium also requested that the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) produce an [Opinion on advancing a just transition](#). They presented the Opinion at an informal Environment Council meeting in Brussels, where Member State representatives discussed the content of the opinion.
 - In March 2024, the Belgian Presidency held the [European Conference on Just Transition](#) in Brussels, with representatives of Member States, civil society, academia, and other stakeholders. A second European Conference on a Just Transition organised by the Irish Presidency could lead to a ground-breaking Declaration on a Just Transition, a potentially significant legacy point for the Irish Presidency.

6. Ensure post-Brexit arrangements are working properly and enhancing the conditions for north-south cooperation on the environment on the island of Ireland.

There are a number of policy areas (e.g. circular economy, transboundary pollution, access to justice) which are particularly important for north-south cooperation on the environment on the island of Ireland. During the Irish Presidency there is an opportunity to ensure due consideration is given to the impact of legislative negotiations and the political agenda-setting on these areas in the context of the fragile post-Brexit regulatory arrangements for Northern Ireland.

During the Irish Presidency it is vital that steps are taken where possible to:

- *Minimise the impact of regulatory divergence, which [research](#) has demonstrated has potentially significant and serious implications for environmental protection and cooperation on the environment on the island of Ireland.*
- *Continuously monitor the post-Brexit arrangements between Ireland, the UK and the EU given the potential [implications for the rights of citizens](#) across the island of Ireland should divergence or lowering of environmental standards occur.*

7. Protecting the Rights of Future Generations

A Future Generations approach is vital to the EU because its biggest challenges – climate change, biodiversity loss, and resource scarcity – are long-term and intergenerational. Decisions made today on energy, infrastructure, finance, and the environment will shape the rights and wellbeing of citizens for decades. Embedding intergenerational justice in EU governance will guard against short-termism, help meet climate and rights commitments, and ensure policies safeguard prosperity, security, and wellbeing for present and future generations. The recent establishment of a Commissioner for Intergenerational Fairness marks important progress, but this office must be empowered with a strong mandate, resources, and political backing if it is to act as a guardian of future generations.

The Irish Presidency should:

- *Advance Intergenerational Fairness (IGF) as a unifying governance principle, stressing the importance of embedding long-term impact assessments and foresight into EU and MS decision-making, particularly the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF).*
- *Mobilise IGF as a whole-of-society principle to connect pressing economic, fiscal, and social reforms—linking housing, pensions, climate resilience, economic competitiveness, security and other EU priorities and policy issues through a long-term lens, supporting sustainability, fairness, and fiscal responsibility across generations.*
- *Champion a strong and effective EU Future Generations Commissioner, a newly created role within the European Commission tasked with embedding intergenerational fairness and youth perspectives into EU decision-making. The office should be endowed with independence, resources, and a clear mandate to safeguard long-term rights, monitor the intergenerational impacts of EU policies, and act as a guardian for future generations across EU governance. The Irish Presidency should play a leading role in shaping the scope and ambition of this office so that it becomes a genuine watchdog for intergenerational fairness rather than a symbolic appointment.*
- *Secure an interinstitutional declaration on the rights of future generations, committing all EU institutions to uphold intergenerational equity as a guiding principle.*
- *Promote Council support for embedding intergenerational justice in the EU's Better Regulation Guidelines, so that future policy preparation, assessment, and review systematically take long-term impacts into account.*
- *Use the Irish Presidency to convene structured dialogues with youth and civil society across the EU, ensuring their perspectives shape Council priorities and legislative outcomes affecting future generations.*

8. Upholding environmental democracy

Civil society is essential to democracy and is under threat in Europe and globally. Ongoing attacks on civil society and civil society funding at EU level stand in stark contrast to EU policy statements on the issue. Defence of civil society and upholding environmental democracy is not just a policy intention. It is an expression of the core EU values expressed in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU, on EU Values). More broadly, the EU Treaties, and binding EU international law obligations require continuous improvement in democratic participation and engagement. During the Irish Presidency the new EU Civil Society Strategy (discussed in further detail [here](#)) will begin to be implemented and there will be an opportunity to shape some of the new initiatives that will flow from this strategy.

The Irish Presidency should defend civic space, protect NGO participation and funding, and safeguard access to information, justice, and protest rights against deregulatory or trade pressures.