

DECEMBER 2025

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

Catherine Devitt, Ciara Brennan, Caitlin McIlhennon and
Alison Hough

Copyright © 2025 Environmental Justice Network Ireland (EJNI). EJNI encourages reproduction and communication of its copyrighted materials to the public, with proper credit (bibliographical reference and/or corresponding URL), for personal, corporate or public policy research, or educational purposes. However, EJNI's copyrighted materials are not for commercial use or dissemination (print or electronic). The opinions in this research paper reflect those of the authors alone.

Many thanks to all who have collaborated on the preparation of this handbook, in particular to Andrea Casamenti (Solidar), Felipe Bosch (School of International Futures, SOIF), Michael Forte (E3G) and Michael Sicaud-Clyet (WWF).

www.ejni.net



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) - Ensure the EU's long-term budget drives climate and nature ambition by securing a credible climate-environment target, ring-fenced biodiversity investment, strong social fairness safeguards, protection of civic space, and robust environmental governance.



Cohesion and a Fair, Just Transition - Work to ensure that Europe's transition is fair, regionally balanced and socially equitable, with cohesion policy continuing to reduce disparities and support communities undergoing economic and climate-related change. Ireland can promote inclusive governance, protect social and territorial fairness across transition policies, and strengthen political momentum for a just transition that leaves no region or community behind.



EU 2040 Climate Target - Steer Council discussions on the legislative and governance proposals expected in 2026 to ensure the 2040 target accelerates domestic decarbonisation, strengthens energy security, and protects fairness and cohesion.



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



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... 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

Ahead of [national-level consultation](#) concluding in December 2025, Tánaiste Harris [outlined several indicative priorities](#) for Ireland's 2026 Presidency:

- **Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF):** 'Agreeing a new Multiannual Financial Framework will be a key area of focus during the Irish Presidency... 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. I want to see unnecessary red tape cut, and to work on initiatives which simplify EU regulations... Our agenda will be to deliver better regulation, not deregulation.'
- **Security and Defence:** 'Ireland is a militarily neutral country, and we will remain so. But neutrality does not equate to indifference... Our EU Presidency will accommodate and reconcile the needs, perspectives and priorities of our fellow member states, including on the security and defence of our Union.'
- **EU Enlargement:** 'Momentum on EU enlargement must be maintained. There can be no pulling up the ladder... Ukraine must be supported on its EU path and Ireland's solidarity with Ukraine remains unwavering.'
- **Communicating Europe:** 'We need to bring home the realities and benefits of EU membership to communities across Ireland... Communities should feel a sense of ownership and pride in our EU Presidency.'

Ireland's [Programme for Government \(2025\)](#) also outlined the Presidency's national importance, committing to:

- Make protecting farmers and farming at EU level an absolute priority in negotiations on the new CAP.
- Publish plans for the Presidency aligned with Ireland's and Europe's strategic priorities.
- Host an informal European Council, a meeting of the European Political Community, and 16-20 informal Council meetings across Ireland, ensuring nationwide benefit.
- Develop and apply a sustainability policy for all Presidency activities.

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

1. Ensuring the EU's long-term budget drives climate and environmental ambition (the Multi-annual Financial Framework, 2028-2034)

In July 2025, the European Commission published its [proposal for the next Multiannual Financial Framework](#) (2028-2034). The draft introduces a restructured budget architecture intended to provide greater simplicity and flexibility. However, initial analysis indicates significant shortcomings: underpowered climate and biodiversity ambition, weak governance and recentralisation, investment gaps, limited emphasis on social fairness, and reduced civic space.

The MFF will enter its most sensitive negotiation phase during Ireland's 2026 Presidency. As Presidency chair, Ireland will play a decisive role in brokering compromises, shaping Council positions, and safeguarding the ambition and integrity of the EU's long-term budget. Ireland must use this responsibility to ensure that the MFF reflects the scale of the climate and nature crises, protects social equity, and upholds democratic accountability. Ireland should use its Presidency mandate to:

- **Safeguard climate and biodiversity ambition across the MFF** by promoting a credible climate-environment target, ensuring visibility for biodiversity (e.g., a dedicated or ring-fenced share), and ensure tracking rules align spending with the EU's 2030-2050 goals.
- **Shape the European Competitiveness Fund (ECF)** into a climate-aligned, socially responsible instrument by steering Council negotiations so the ECF supports clean-transition investment, includes strong climate and labour safeguards, and closes the green-transition EU's investment gap.
- **Protect cross-border cooperation**, including on the island of Ireland, by ensuring robust cross-border tools support environmental, economic and community cooperation.
- **Protect civic space and enable meaningful civil-society participation** by promoting support for civil society so that CSOs, social partners and communities can participate effectively in planning, monitoring and implementation.
- **Safeguard the rule of law and environmental governance** by supporting strong environmental and DNSH safeguards, transparent monitoring, better regulation as opposed to deregulation and well-resourced independent agencies to ensure the MFF's new architecture does not weaken regulatory integrity.

2. Protecting cohesion and delivering a fair and just transition

The Commission's proposals for the 2028-2034 MFF and the introduction of National and Regional Partnership Plans (NRPPs) represent a significant shift in EU funding governance with risks to regional participation. At the same time, the proposed phase-out of the Just Transition Fund, optional territorial transition plans, and limited social safeguards may weaken the EU's capacity to deliver a fair transition. These changes come just as (delayed) ETS2 is planned to enter into force in 2028, creating potential affordability challenges for households and SMEs.

Unless strong governance and social fairness safeguards are embedded across cohesion policy and NRPP implementation, these reforms risk widening inequalities and weakening the EU's capacity to support vulnerable regions through the climate and industrial transitions. The Irish Presidency can play a leading role in ensuring that cohesion remains Europe's solidarity engine and that the transition to a climate-neutral economy is socially just and regionally balanced. Ireland should:

- **Keep cohesion focused on reducing inequalities** by steering Council discussions on the MFF so cohesion funding remains centred on reducing territorial and social disparities, particularly in regions facing climate and industrial transitions.
- **Promote inclusive governance in the new funding framework** by championing strong multilevel governance and meaningful regional and civil-society participation in NRPP design and implementation during Council negotiations.
- **Embed social fairness across transition policies** by ensuring Council work on the MFF, NRPPs and Social Climate Plans includes robust social and territorial safeguards and adequate support for workers, SMEs and low-income households as ETS2 begins.
- **Ensure coherence with EU social and industrial initiatives** by using the Presidency's agenda-setting role to align Council debates on cohesion and transition governance with the Clean Industrial Deal, the European Pillar of Social Rights, the Affordable Housing Plan, the EU Anti-Poverty Strategy and the Fair Transition Recommendation.
- **Highlight affordability and energy-poverty risks** by promoting Council discussions on measures to mitigate ETS2 impacts including improved energy-poverty responses, targeted heating and building supports, and access to community energy and renewables for vulnerable households.
- **Advance just resilience in forthcoming adaptation policies** by guiding Council work on the Climate Resilience and Risk Management package to ensure distributional impacts and fairness are central to adaptation policy.
- **Build political momentum for a just transition** by using the Presidency's convening power to facilitate high-level dialogue (drawing on Spanish and Belgian precedents) and explore a Presidency-led Declaration on Just Transition.

3. Delivering on the EU's 2040 climate target: Steering Implementation toward a Decarbonised, Secure and Fair Economy

In November 2025, the Council of the European Union and subsequently the European Parliament [approved a new binding intermediate target](#) under the European Climate Law: by 2040, net greenhouse-gas (GHG) emissions in the EU shall be cut by 90% compared to 1990 levels.

However, the deal embeds important flexibilities that weaken the possible domestic emissions reduction to around 85%, with up to 5% of the target allowed via international carbon credits (from 2036, with a pilot from 2031). In response, [WWF stressed](#) that by outsourcing part of the cuts via offsets and credits, what remains may be far from a science-based, 1.5°C-compatible pathway.¹

The adoption of a (compromised) 2040 target under the Commission's climate law shifts the paradigm for the upcoming MFF negotiations and the EU's long-term investment strategy. Although the target is now fixed in EU law, the Irish Presidency will play an essential role in shaping how this target is interpreted, implemented and embedded across EU policy frameworks.

¹ Under the agreed target: Member States may use international carbon credits to meet part of the 2040 target from 2036; a "pilot" phase for 2031–2035 was also included; Domestic permanent removals (e.g. via sinks, carbon removals) remain eligible to compensate for residual hard-to-abate emissions under the EU emissions trading system; The agreement incorporates a biennial review clause, requiring periodic assessments of progress, the contribution of removals, the impact on competitiveness, and the state of energy prices. This leaves open the possibility of revising the 2040 target or associated policies; The entry into force of the planned new ETS for buildings and road transport ("ETS2") was postponed by one year from 2027 to 2028.

In 2026, the Commission is expected to table a series of legislative and governance proposals flowing from the 2040 climate target. During its Presidency, Ireland will chair Council negotiations or early discussions on several core files, including: updates to EU ETS governance; revised LULUCF rules; follow-up legislation under the Clean Industrial Deal to support industrial decarbonisation; strengthened energy-efficiency and energy-system frameworks; and new measures on climate adaptation and resilience. These proposals are anticipated based on the [Commission's 2040 Target Communication](#) and the legal requirement to align 2030-2050 climate legislation with the EU's new intermediate target.

The Irish Presidency must:

- **Ensure the 2040 target is meaningfully reflected in the MFF negotiations** by highlighting the investment implications of the 2040 target, and ensuring the Council's MFF position includes adequate climate and nature investment levels, robust climate-tracking rules, and strong social-just-transition safeguards. The Presidency should also emphasise that offsets must not become a substitute for real investment in decarbonisation.
- **Steer Council discussions on the governance and implementation of the target** by helping to shape the framework that implements the 2040 target, including the post-2030 climate governance architecture; sectoral policy packages proposed in 2026; the functioning of the review clause; and the rules on removals, sinks and the use of international credits. The Presidency should also prioritise domestic emissions reductions in Council conclusions, stressing that credits must be tightly limited, transparent and high-integrity; and encouraging transparency on how removals and sinks are accounted for.
- **Keep fairness, cohesion and social protection at the centre of follow-up discussions** by using Council Conclusions to stress that implementation must be just, affordable and equitable; ensuring Social Climate Plans, the Clean Industrial Deal and the MFF are aligned with the distributional impacts of the 2040 pathway; and promoting early dialogue with social partners, civil society, and regional authorities.
- **Strengthen coherence across related legislative files** by ensuring the relevant files reflect the spirit of the 2040 target (meaning domestic transformation, not accounting shortcuts) and preventing drift toward loopholes that undermine the target and climate ambition.

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

The proposed EU-wide restriction on per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) is a major test of the Union's commitment to public health, environmental protection and the precautionary principle. Following the publication of ECHA's scientific committee opinions in 2025, the file is now moving towards formal Commission proposal and Council negotiations—timed to fall within, or immediately adjacent to, Ireland's Presidency. With contamination already impacting water, soils and communities across Europe, maintaining ambition in the next phase of decision-making is essential.

The Irish Presidency can play a crucial role in steering the Council towards a science-based, socially fair and future-proof outcome. The Presidency should:

- **Maintain ambition and precaution by** ensuring that Council deliberations uphold a strong, precautionary approach, resisting efforts to dilute the scope of the restriction, extend phase-out

timelines, or introduce unjustified exemptions that undermine public health and environmental objectives.

- **Champion a fair transition by** guiding discussions towards a coherent EU-level approach that supports workers, SMEs and communities affected by the PFAS phase-out, including access to safer alternatives, retraining opportunities and innovation funding.
- **Prioritise environmental justice and public health by** highlighting the disproportionate impacts of PFAS pollution on vulnerable communities and promote robust monitoring, remediation and transparency measures so that the restriction delivers meaningful protection for people and ecosystems.

5. Safeguarding the Nature Restoration Law

The EU's Nature Restoration Law (NRL), adopted in 2024 after highly polarised negotiations, is now moving into its critical implementation phase. Throughout 2025, Member States have been preparing their draft National Restoration Plans, which will determine the ambition, scope and credibility of the law in practice. This process is taking place against a challenging backdrop: ongoing "simplification" and competitiveness-driven initiatives, as well as negotiations on the next MFF, have intensified pressure to limit or dilute restoration obligations and the funding required to meet them.

The European Environment Agency's [State of the Environment Report 2025](#) confirms the urgency of implementation. The EEA finds that while Europe has made progress on emissions and air pollution, "the overall state of Europe's environment is not good," with ecosystems continuing to face degradation, overexploitation and biodiversity loss. It warns that most environmental trends remain negative and pose "major risks to Europe's economic prosperity, security and quality of life."

[Ireland's country profile](#) reinforces these concerns. Eighty-five per cent of protected habitats and almost one-third of protected species have an unfavourable status; more than half of native plant species are declining; over 50 bird species are of high conservation concern; and water quality remains poor, with no improvement in rivers or lakes in the last five years. Addressing these trends will require full and timely implementation of EU environmental law, backed by adequate resources and political commitment.

As Council discussions on restoration, biodiversity financing, and the MFF intensify through 2026, the Irish Presidency will have an essential role in ensuring that the NRL is delivered as intended. The Presidency should:

- **Safeguard the integrity of the Nature Restoration Law** by ensuring that Council discussions uphold its binding targets, resist attempts to weaken obligations through deregulatory or "simplification" initiatives, and secure adequate financing for implementation through the MFF and other EU instruments.

6. Ensuring 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 establishment in 2024 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:

- **Support and build on the work of the European Commissioner for Intergenerational Fairness, Youth, Culture and Sport** by ensuring the portfolio is endowed with adequate independence, resources, and a mandate to embed long-term impact assessment, youth and future-generation perspectives, and intergenerational equity across EU policy-making.
- **Use its convening power to encourage cross-Commission and cross-Council coordination so that intergenerational fairness** becomes a universal principle covering cohesion, climate, social policy, industrial transformation, and the MFF.
- **Promote adoption of an interinstitutional declaration on the rights of future generations**, inviting all EU institutions (Commission, Parliament, Council) to commit to intergenerational equity as a core guiding principle.
- **Facilitate structured dialogues with youth, civil society, labour organisations and other stakeholders** during the Presidency to inform policy priorities and ensure the voices of younger and future generations are represented.

8. Upholding environmental democracy

Civil society is an essential pillar of democracy and environmental governance, yet civic space is under pressure across Europe, with shrinking operating support, weakened participation rules and political pushback against NGOs in several Member States. This contrasts sharply with the EU's stated commitments under Article 2 TEU, Article 11 TEU and the Aarhus Convention to protect democratic participation, transparency and accountability.

During the Irish Presidency, the early implementation phase of [the new European Civil Society Strategy \(2024-2027\)](#) will be underway (discussed in further detail [here](#)), offering an opportunity to shape how its initiatives are taken forward in Council discussions. The Presidency should:

- Defend civic space, support strong participation and partnership requirements (including within NRPPs), safeguard NGO funding and operating support, and uphold access-to-information and access-to-justice rights across all relevant files.