

Submission on the Development of the Priorities and Policy Programme for Ireland's Presidency of the Council of the European Union 2026

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and Trade

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**Society of St Vincent de Paul
National Office 91/92 Sean
McDermott St. Dublin 1**



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INTRODUCTION:

The Society of St Vincent de Paul recommends that Ireland use its EU Presidency to revitalise Social Europe, delivering social cohesion and equality across Ireland and the EU. This recommendation is founded in SVP's experience supporting those impacted by poverty. Poverty is not abstract: our members regularly work with people in cold, dark homes, who are sacrificing food or heat to afford basics for themselves and their loved ones. For some we support, their inability to make ends meet is new, brought on by personal crisis or rising energy prices and the cost of living; for others, this experience pre-dates Covid-19, and may be inter-generational.

As the largest voluntary organisation in Ireland, our volunteers support households in every community across the country: lone parents, families and individuals in emergency accommodation, households in Direct Provision, rural households, and urban households. In 2024, we received over 220,000 requests for assistance in Ireland; in 2025, we expect this number to reach a quarter of a million.

We are concerned by rising inequality, loneliness, division, and the pervasive sense among many we support that they are being 'left behind' by the Irish Government and the EU. Through our members' experiences supporting people face-to-face in their homes and communities, we know that the solution to these challenges is social inclusion and equality. Both are key to combatting the rise of the far-right in Europe and to addressing the inequities the far-right exploits.

Our support is founded on social justice, self-sufficiency, and friendship, with the aim of ensuring that the households we support can live with dignity. There is great overlap between our values and the values of the EU: human dignity, freedom, equality, and respect for human rights, among others. We strongly recommend that Ireland uses its 2026 presidency of the EU to focus on these values and deliver a European Union that delivers human dignity as part of a Social Europe.

Poverty in Ireland and the EU

SVP recognises that the Presidency must remain impartial; equally, we understand that during the Presidency, Ireland will take on a major international role both within the EU and representing the EU to the world. In setting the agenda and organizing events, Ireland therefore has an important opportunity to direct focus and attention to major issues facing households across Ireland and the EU.

Ireland's experience of inequality underscores the need for a focus on economic growth and energy security to be accompanied by an equal focus on social justice. Our most recent SILC figures show a rise in consistent poverty, a rise even greater for children, 8.5% of whom are now in consistent poverty¹. Deprivation figures suggest that roughly 807,800 people in Ireland are going without basics: 7.4% of people went without heating at some point last year².

As of November 2025, there are 16,766 people in emergency accommodation – 5,274 of whom are children³. This is an increase of 1800 people in the 12 months to November 2025 and does not include those in 'hidden' homelessness. Our housing crisis has additional impacts on social cohesion: over 5,300 people in IPAS accommodation have received status to remain yet are stuck in direct provision because they lack suitable housing options. Low-income households continue to be most negatively affected by housing insecurity, which directly impacts on their long-term wellbeing and participation in society.

These challenges are not unique to Ireland: in 2024, 21.0% of the population of the EU were at risk of poverty or social exclusion⁴. This risk is higher for women and

¹ Central Statistics Office (2025). Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2024. <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-silc/surveyonincomeandlivingconditionssilc2024/>

² Central Statistics Office (2025). Key Findings on Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC): Enforced Deprivation 2025. <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-silc/surveyonincomeandlivingconditionssilc/enforceddeprivation2025/keyfindings/>

³ Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (2025). Monthly Homelessness Report October 2025. https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/d585a64a/Homeless_Report_October_2025.pdf

⁴ Eurostat (2025). Living conditions in Europe – Poverty and Social Exclusion. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Living_conditions_in_Europe_-_poverty_and_social_exclusion

young adults, as well as households with children. Rising housing costs and shortage are increasingly faced across the EU, with 17% of Europeans living in overcrowded homes⁵.

We emphasise these challenges because they offer a roadmap for where policy-making in Ireland and the EU must go in the coming years. In 2026, Ireland has a unique opportunity to focus attention on these shared challenges through its EU Presidency.

Our recommendations

Throughout Ireland's EU Presidency, we recommend marginalized voices and the voices of young people are included in events and policy discussions. Though we have specific recommendations for young people, for example, it is important that their needs are considered beyond these areas also. Pro-active and meaningful engagement with civil society must be embedded throughout Ireland's EU Presidency, highlighting the importance of civil society to democratic processes and ensuring much-needed viewpoints are fed into policy.

Given the challenges and opportunities facing the Ireland and the EU, we recommend the following areas of focus for the priorities and policy programme of Ireland's EU Presidency in 2026:

Theme 1: Delivering Social Justice in a Social Europe

Theme 2: Revitalising the Just Transition

⁵ Eurostat (2025). Living Conditions in Europe – Housing. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Living_conditions_in_Europe_-_housing

THEME 1: Prioritising Social Justice in a Social Europe

Ireland's experience demonstrates the need to focus on social justice alongside economic growth. This is supported by Article 9 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, which states that "the Union shall take into account requirements linked to the promotion of a high level of employment, the guarantee of adequate social protection, the fight against social exclusion, and a high level of education, training and protection of human health."

The EU employment rate is 75.8% (79.8% in Ireland), approaching the target of 78% as set in the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan⁶. However, action is needed to address poverty and social exclusion, an area where the EU is currently off target.

Targeting Poverty

The European Pillar of Social Rights' Action Plan set the goal of reducing the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion by 15 million by 2030, 5 million of which should be children. This would require a reduction below 76 million people, and children to under 18 million: in 2024, there were 93.3 million people in the EU at risk of poverty or social exclusion, roughly 19.5million of which were children⁷. Concerted, country-level and EU-wide action is required on poverty.

SVP believes the aim should be an eradication, not alleviation of poverty, though we understand reduction as a step in the right direction. For either eradication or reduction, the EU must seriously address the structural drivers of poverty—this is not possible without the inclusion of the voices and perspectives of those living in poverty. Though we advocate for a focus on poverty, we emphasise that this focus must be cross-cutting if it is to deliver meaningful change.

⁶ Eurostat (2025). Employment – Annual Statistics. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Employment_-_annual_statistics

⁷ Eurostat (2025). Living conditions in Europe – Poverty and Social Exclusion. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Living_conditions_in_Europe_-_poverty_and_social_exclusion

The EU Anti-Poverty Strategy

The EU Anti-Poverty Strategy is currently in development, and Ireland must use its presidency of the EU to ensure that Strategy address the structural causes of poverty and is well implemented. Any Strategy must be cross-cutting and must target those groups most at risk of poverty, such as children, minority ethnic groups such as Travellers and Roma, lone-parents, disabled people, migrants, and older people. The Strategy must include clear, time-bound targets.

Child poverty requires additional focus within the strategy. Beyond the Strategy, Ireland may further support reduction in child poverty through monitoring of members states' implementation of the European Child Guarantee.

Adequate Minimum Income and Adequate Minimum Wages

As part of the implementation of the Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan, the Council Recommendation acknowledges the important role of Minimum Income Schemes in social protection schemes. However, the Recommendation is non-binding and lacks concrete measures to target groups such as Travellers and Roma. Many Minimum Income Schemes, including Ireland's, continue to be inadequate to meet actual needs for those relying on social protection.

We recommend that Ireland develop the Council Recommendation into a binding EU Directive on Minimum Income Schemes. Any such Directive must work in tandem with the 2022 Directive on Adequate Minimum Wages.

The Multiannual Financial Framework 2028-2034

The new Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) is currently in development and will amount to nearly €2 trillion. Within this, a key measure in the MFF is the European Social Fund Plus, which is specifically targeted at addressing material deprivation, promoting social inclusion, and fighting poverty and homelessness.

The Irish 2026 EU Presidency is an opportunity to direct negotiations on the MFF toward social investment on issues such as poverty and housing. SVP recommends that attention to social justice not be limited to the Social Fund Plus: poverty is a cross-cutting issue and must be invested in accordingly.

Housing and Homelessness

Given Ireland's own housing and homelessness crisis, Ireland must use its EU Presidency to lead joint EU action to prioritise affordable housing and homelessness prevention. The European Commission has committed to putting forward an Affordable Housing Plan in 2026—Ireland should play an active role in the development of this Plan in association with key stakeholders in housing and homelessness. The Plan must include targeted actions on accessibility for disabled homes and solutions to address housing for ethnic minority groups such as Travellers and Roma. Action on housing during the EU Presidency should include the introduction of a Council Recommendation on ending homelessness that contains. Action on housing in Ireland's 2026 Presidency should be accompanied by investment.

We further recommend that the housing crisis form a major theme in events planned as part of the Presidency and that these events centre stakeholders.

Youth

The needs and voices of young people should be incorporated into the EU Presidency as much as possible during Ireland's 2026 term. As outlined above, SVP recommends that Ireland encourage a focus on child poverty within any anti-poverty measures advanced in this Presidency. This mainstreaming of youth issues is in line with the EU Youth Strategy 2019 – 2027.

Disability

We welcome the July 2025 announcement by the EU Commission that it would *not* withdraw the 2008 EU Directive on Equal Treatment ('Equal Treatment Directive'), a

reversal of its concerning announcement in February. However, we note difficulties with the implementation of this Directive, which has been stalled in the Council of Ministers since 2008. Leadership is therefore needed to advance equal treatment in accessing social protection, housing, education, goods and services within the EU. It is not enough that the decision to withdraw the Directive has been reversed: Ireland should use its 2026 EU Presidency to *progress* the Equal Treatment Directive, which is key to the EU values of non-discrimination, equality, and human dignity.

Additional attention should be given to the European Disability Rights Strategy for 2021-2030, another key piece of the ‘Union of Equality’. The Strategy is due to be updated and enhanced in the second quarter of 2026, during Ireland’s Presidency. Ireland must lead on this to ensure disability rights are embedded throughout EU member states.

Again, SVP advocates that the voices of disabled people be incorporated throughout events and discussions in Ireland’s 2026 EU Presidency.

THEME 2: Revitalising the Just Transition

Though the ‘green transition’ has recently been prioritised by Denmark’s 2025 EU Presidency, it is important that principles of equality and social justice be embedded in the energy transition as a ‘just transition’. The just transition must be prioritised within the EU Presidency agenda to ensure that vulnerable groups and communities are able to enjoy the benefits of the energy transition and are not disproportionately impacted by its costs. This includes attention to existing systemic inequalities that may be exacerbated by the energy transition and therefore require additional investment.

Within Ireland, energy prices have risen by 69% for gas and 102% for electricity since January 2021⁸. Further, Ireland's experience highlights the risk of a two-tier system emerging from the energy transition: more affluent households appear more likely to participate in renewable energy⁹, and key energy efficiency schemes have seen only limited uptake from low-income households¹⁰, with many barriers existing to participation from groups vulnerable to energy poverty.

As a leader in renewable energy, Ireland is well-placed to lead conversations on equality within the transition at the EU level. It is important that as the EU scales up its energy transition, it continues to invest in and implement policies to bridge short-term implications for energy poverty and ensure the just transition achieves equality and dignity for all EU households.

Targeting Energy Poverty

Ireland must use its 2026 EU Presidency to lead on energy poverty and develop existing Directives and Recommendations. Progress in the energy transition must be tied to a reduction in energy poverty.

To this end, the Irish Presidency of the EU in 2026 should build on the 2023 Energy Efficiency Directive, 2023 Recommendation on Energy Poverty, 2024 Energy Performance of Buildings Directive, and the Social Climate Fund to ensure a commitment to eradicating energy poverty is part of the EU's energy transition. SVP recommends that Ireland encourage the active implementation of these measures across EU member states.

⁸ CRU (2025) CRU Decision on Additional Customer Protection Measures for Household Electricity and Gas Customers 2025/26. <https://www.cru.ie/publications/28754/>

⁹ Pobal (2025) *Renewable Energy and Deprivation: Investigating the Relationship between Area-Level Deprivation and Household Renewable Energy Usage using the Pobal HP Deprivation Index* <https://www.pobal.ie/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/250298-Renewable-Energy-Research-Report-2025-FINAL-190925.pdf>

¹⁰ According to the SEAI, only 7700 of the 53,000 homes supported with retrofitting in 2024 were fully funded as part of the Warmer Homes scheme.

<https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-climate-energy-and-the-environment/press-releases/government-supported-nearly-54000-home-energy-upgrades-through-seai-in-2024/>

Further, we encourage Ireland to lead on addressing income and social protection elements of energy poverty, given present emphasis on structural and energy efficiency measures.

Investing in the Just Transition

While SVP welcomes the EU's Social Climate Fund, we recommend further funding toward the just transition be included in the new Multiannual Financial Framework post-2027. Where funds are allocated toward the energy transition within the MFF, provision should be made for measures to address energy poverty. For example, the forthcoming Sustainable Transport Investment Plan should include measures to address transport poverty.