

**Social
Democrats**

BUILDING SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES

*The Social Democrats Manifesto
for Local Government*



#SustainableCommunities



Contents

Contents.....	1
Introduction	3
Building Sustainable Communities	4
Building New Homes – Solving the Crisis.....	6
Community Budgeting – Giving People a Real Say	10
Investing in Play, Sport and Recreation	12
Putting People with Disabilities at the Heart of all Decisions	15
Tackling Climate Change to build Cleaner Greener Communities	17
Promoting Public Transport.....	19
Getting Ireland On Its Bike!.....	21
Tackling Litter and Illegal Dumping.....	22
Investing in Recycling.....	24
The Plastic Problem and how our Councils can help.....	28
Promoting Biodiversity – Green Communities	30
Creating Energy Communities	31
Council Services – Focussing on the Basics.....	34
Unfinished Estates	37
Promoting Enterprise and Strong Local Economies	39
Fair Funding for Local Authorities.....	41
Rejuvenating our Main Streets and Neighbourhood Shops.....	44
Honest and Open Councils.....	48
Directly Elected Mayors	50
Better Policing.....	51
Dogs.....	52



Social
Democrats

12 Pledges

for better local government

As a councillor I will...

- 1 Be a strong voice for our local community
- 2 Promote affordable homes in sustainable communities
- 3 Prioritise recreation, play, and sport
- 4 Improve local council services
- 5 Support better public transport and boost cycling
- 6 Fight climate change and promote better recycling
- 7 Put people with disabilities at the heart of all decisions
- 8 Demand adequate funding for local authorities
- 9 Rejuvenate our main streets and neighbourhood shops
- 10 Tackle local crime and policing issues
- 11 Give communities a real say in how our taxes are spent
- 12 Be honest and transparent as a councillor



Introduction

The work of City and County Councils is central to our lives. They plan our communities; they support our economy; they protect our environment. They cover everything from tree-planting to footpaths, from playgrounds to recycling centres, from safe school routes to litter enforcement. The work of Councils underpins the sustainability of our communities.

Every five years everyone on the electoral register in Ireland gets to vote on the local issues that are important to them. They get a chance to set Councils' priorities and send people to our local Councils who will stand up for their interests and put their communities first. We promise to do just that.

As Social Democrats, our single biggest aim is to improve public services. It is public services that drive equality, promote sustainability, reduce costs for businesses and families, and provide a fair chance for everyone.

This Manifesto sets out how Social Democrats Councillors will approach Council services and projects over the next five years. It is written very much from the point of view of what Councils in Ireland actually do. Some of the areas that we are focusing on include:

- **Housing:** We will prioritise housing. Councils must play a stronger role in ending the crisis in affordability and the scandal of family homelessness. But crucially Councils must also plan for all of the infrastructure that should go with new estates. We just don't want to build new homes; we want to build sustainable communities.
- **Environment:** We simply must prioritise our environment. One report after another warns us of the impending perils of climate collapse. We are living way beyond the means of our planet and in the process we are exacting irreversible damage to our biodiversity. Councils must play their part in addressing this global issue.
- **Youth:** Our Councillors will also focus on our youth. Our youth were left behind in the recession, and community facilities and services have yet to catch up. We want to strengthen social infrastructure for all age levels but with a particular focus on young people.
- **People with Disabilities:** People with disabilities should be at the heart of all decisions. Our Councillors will prioritise the needs of people with disabilities. Accessibility should be a given. Sadly, this is just not the case. We want to put a renewed emphasis on this issue.
- **Doing the Basics Better:** We want to focus on getting Councils to do the basics well. That means being pro-active, open and responsive to our communities, taking enforcement seriously, following through on plans.. There are fine examples all around the country of successful Council projects such as on Community Budgeting, recycling projects, regeneration or community engagement. Councils can learn from one another to provide much better services to the public. Our councillors will ensure that their Councils value honesty, integrity and transparency and set high standards for themselves and their work.

Setting high ambitions, doing things right and putting people first will ensure that our Councillors will lead in building sustainable communities across the country.



Building Sustainable Communities

Ireland has been let down by its planning system. So many of our problems - the high cost of housing, the traffic choking our towns and cities, our lack of basic amenities - can be attributed to the lack of sound long-term planning.

We need to learn from the mistakes of the past.

Planning is the one area that Councillors have a real say. Social Democrats Councillors will not waste this opportunity.

Planning can make a huge contribution to community development and place-shaping. **Social Democrats don't want to build just homes – we want to build communities.** That means making amenities, infrastructure, transport services, schools, retail, accessibility, and environmental sustainability central to every single development that the Council sanctions.

Our priorities on planning are:

Build infrastructure, transport links and public services from the start

Our over-riding priority in planning is that Councils build in infrastructure, transport links and public services into every plan for our communities.

No homes should be built without a credible plan for the array of supports and infrastructure that communities need to thrive. We will ensure that public transport links, cycling, playing pitches, retail and recreation facilities form a central part of all Local Area Plans, Strategic Development Zones (SDZs) and local Master-Plans for all new developments

We will invest heavily in Local Area Plans and site Master Plans so that development is properly planned and is no longer developer-led.

We will ensure that our **communities are aware and have a say** in every significant rezoning proposal affecting their area.

We will put a very strong emphasis on **streamlining the taking in charge process** (see later section on this). Too many new communities have been forgotten by their Local Authority in recent years or have been let down by developers from whom they have purchased their homes.

Development Levies must mean Community Gain

We will seek to ensure that there is substantial community gain from development levies and that levies are clearly spent on **improving social, community and physical infrastructure in the areas in which they are collected.**



We will ensure that development levy schemes capture the existing needs and new needs of local authorities. Too many local authorities do not make enough provision for libraries, playgrounds, swimming pools, and other community facilities as part of their development levy scheme.

Open Planning & Enforcement

We will ensure that there is **on-line access to all planning documentation** in all local authorities, including the minutes of all pre-planning meetings.

We will ensure that the **planning enforcement and derelict sites** functions of our local authorities are active and responsive to complaints from the public and that there is proper follow through.

A Sustainable Future for All

We will ensure that the [UN Sustainable Development Goals](#) form a core part of

and constitute the driving force behind our Local Authorities' County Development Plan.

Public Land for Public Gain

We will seek to use public land for public gain, particularly in relation to housing, transport and recreation.

We will seek to **significantly expand the Council's land-holding**, in conjunction with the Land Development Agency. Assembling public land banks is one of the key tools to addressing Ireland chronic housing problems and will be a key focus of our Councillors.

Promote Local Heritage

We will ensure that our Councils fulfil their responsibilities in relation to protecting and promoting the heritage of their area.



Building New Homes – Solving the Crisis

Ireland is in the middle of its second housing crisis in just a decade. Homelessness is at record levels. If we want to tackle the current crisis and prevent more, then we have to radically change our approach.

The Government is heavily relying on the private sector to deliver the extra homes we need. This hasn't worked. And even if the private sector supplies more homes, they will be at the highest possible price they can sell or rent for. Under the current system, housing supply and housing affordability do not go hand in hand.

We need to change our housing system around so that the clear **aim is to deliver housing at the lowest possible cost to purchasers and renters rather than the highest possible profit to developers and land speculators**. To do this, we need to stop approaching housing and land like they are commodities, and start building homes using the extensive resources of the State. Local Authorities have a crucial role to play in this, especially in building on public land that is at their disposal and working with other Government agencies to plan and deliver new homes.

The over-reliance on Housing Assistance Payment works for no-one bar major landlords. It leads to greater demand for housing, inflating prices for those looking to rent privately. The Social Democrats believes that the best way to move away from HAP is the provision of public housing.

Social Democrats Councillors will make housing a clear priority in their local authority. Our clear overall objective is to tackle the housing shortage and homelessness crisis by ensuring homes are built and are made available at affordable prices to rent or buy.

Here are some of the measures we are committed to:

Build affordable homes

We will use the extensive residentially zoned public land that is available to public authorities to **build homes that are affordable to rent or buy**. We want to move away from a reliance on the

Housing Assistance Payment and **expand the role of cost-rental**, and we are keen to explore how the "Vienna model" could be applied in Ireland. As we set out in our [Alternative Budget for 2019](#), we believe funding from the Rainy Day Fund should



be provided to support the provision of Housing.

We are anxious that the O’Cualann housing model - which has very successfully delivered housing at low cost in Poppintree in Dublin - is rolled out across more Local Authorities. It is a prime example of how local Councils can facilitate and promote affordable housing.

We will **reactivate the Rebuilding Ireland Home Loan Scheme** in each Council area

We will **build the new affordable housing scheme into every Council housing or development plan** and get it up and running in each Council area as quickly as possible.

Ensure Public Consultation

We will ensure that **every significant Council housing proposal is subject to public consultation**, has a proper master plan, has a good social and tenure mix, and that amenities and services are central to all significant plans.

Promote Voluntary Step-down Housing

We will promote the reintroduction of a voluntary step-down housing scheme for older people as previously existed in North–West Dublin and for which there is a considerable waiting list.

Tackle Family Homelessness

We will absolutely prioritise resolutions to the scandal of family homelessness.

We will insist that our Councils agree **new homeless procedures so that children’s rights are included**, and respected in how

Council officials deal with homeless families. Children are not adequately considered as part of current Local Authority procedures contrary to Ireland’s obligation under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Develop Youth Homelessness Strategy

We will further insist on the development of a youth homelessness strategy for each Council that we are represented on.

Partner with Housing Associations

We will work closely with the Housing Association sector to deliver more units and to ensure the **Housing First** programme is fulfilled.

We will expand **choice-based lettings** to the sector and seek to develop opportunities for EU investment in housing delivery.

Address Vacant Housing

We will ensure that every local authority with a significant housing shortage has at least one **full-time Vacant Housing officer** and that the remit of the officers extends beyond the current two years.

We will use this service to bring hundreds of vacant units back into use, with a particular emphasis on publicly owned buildings. We are particularly keen to address **“over-the-shop” vacant units**.

We will seek to use **compulsory purchase orders** where appropriate, and nationally we favour the introduction of **compulsory letting orders** and a vacant unit tax.



End preferential tax treatment of REITS

We are very concerned about the **impact of bulk property purchases by Real Estate Investment Trusts (REITs)** on the planning, availability and, ultimately, the price of housing. Under current arrangements REITs enjoy sizeable tax benefits and are using this position to purchase units in bulk.

New estates that were granted planning permission on the understanding that they were to be a mix of owner-occupied units and tenancies are now being settled as tenant only – this prevents planning for good tenure mix, which should be a strong consideration of every local plan.

In addition, **first-time buyers are deprived of an opportunity to bid for homes in their area**, and the whole process drives up the cost of housing and ensures only supply at the most expensive end of the market is delivered.

The Social Democrats commit to **ending the preferential tax treatment of REITs** and use the savings from this initiative to provide increased funding to Local Authorities.

Our Councillors and TDs will also endeavour to bring about a change in planning practice so that **bulk purchases are prevented by local authorities** if they run contrary to the desired tenure mix.

Radically Improve Rights for Renters

We will continue to campaign strongly for improved rights for renters, including a **rent freeze in every county** in Ireland. [Our](#)

[Bill to reduce the risk of homelessness by extending notice-to-quit periods for renters](#) has been accepted by Government and now forms part of a Government Bill in this area. We will continue to be a voice for renters and to act on our [rental charter](#) wherever and whenever we have the opportunity.

Spend funds on Traveller Housing

We will seek to ensure that funding allocated for Traveller housing is spent by Local Authorities.

Reduce Voids

We will work with Councils to significantly improve the number of days “voids” remain vacant.

Improve Maintenance

We will act on behalf of Council tenants so that there are **good response times to maintenance issues in local authority housing stock**. We will support technological solutions for housing maintenance which will ensure more efficient responses.

Invest in Planning

We will invest heavily in planning so that the **public are properly consulted and know what is being built in their communities**. This will also ensure that construction costs are minimised as there is less planning risk involved.

Use Brownfield Sites

We will ensure that each Local Authority we are represented on works constructively with the **Land Development Agency** so that vacant and brownfield sites that are suitable for



residential development can be brought into use quickly.

We will invest in Suburban Renewal by **utilising unused or under-used brown-field sites across our urban areas.**

Enforce Vacant Sites Levy

We will ensure that our Councils properly engage with the legislation governing the Vacant Sites levy and register, and enforce all relevant sites on their lists. We favour new legislation in this area such as [our own Bill to eliminate loop-holes](#) and ensure that the levy is workable and prevents land-hoarding and dereliction.

We favour the introduction of a public interest test and approval process at the point of significant land transfers to **prevent over-concentration of land ownership.**

Review Social Housing Income Limits

We will review income limits applied to social housing so that more people can qualify.

Remove Constitutional Barriers

We will continue to campaign for fundamental Constitutional change so that **housing rights are made far more explicit in our Constitution.**

Rezoning Industrial Lands

We are open to the idea in principle of **rezoning lands that were formerly zoned for industrial use** – however, we will approach this issue on a case by case basis. We also feel that the correct strategy is for Councils to acquire land before rezoning so that its value is captured by the State and not used to drive up the cost of purchasing it.

For further details of our priorities in Housing please see our [Alternative Budget for 2019](#).



Community Budgeting – Giving People a Real Say

Community Budgeting is the Social Democrats' proposal for the introduction of participatory budgeting schemes in all local authorities.

Building on international practice and the award-winning scheme run in South Dublin County Council since 2016, these schemes will bring control of some Council funds back to local communities with an opportunity for broad public participation in deciding spending priorities.

Community Budgeting will allow local residents and groups to propose ideas for Council spending in their communities using a specially-allocated fund.

Proposed projects which meet scheme guidelines will then be shortlisted for public vote. Project proposals will take place both offline (workshops, public meetings, etc) and online. Similarly, voting will be facilitated both on- and offline.

Establishing Community Budgeting Schemes

Elected Social Democrat candidates will seek the establishment of Community Budgeting schemes in each local authority. They will seek the creation of cross-party Steering Committees with the involvement of both management and Councillors. Social Democrats Councillors will also seek to identify funding in the Council Budget process to allocate to a Community Budgeting Scheme.

The amount to be allocated and the geographic area covered (local electoral area/municipal district/full Council) will depend on the Council circumstances which apply. An exemplar is the successful

€300,000 annual scheme in South Dublin County Council, which has seen projects as diverse as playgrounds, ball skill walls, apple tree orchards and public pianos proposed and voted for by the public and delivered by the local Council. **Everyone locally will get a vote on how this fund is spent, including children.**

Creating a Community Budgeting Fund

Nationally, the Social Democrats will seek the **creation of a Community Budgeting Fund for local authorities** to support these schemes. This could draw on dormant accounts funding and national lottery funding.

Community Budgeting can help promote public participation and enhance democracy at the lowest levels. Similar schemes have been highly successful since the first such one in Brazil



more than 30 years ago, with hundreds of city and local authorities carrying this out in countries such as the US, Spain and Scotland.

Community Budgeting can also **involve those traditionally on the outside of political structures**, such as migrants, schoolchildren, disabled people and other marginalised groups. Councillors and Council management play an important role in establishing and steering the scheme, but guidelines will be put in place to ensure they do not back particular projects and instead ensure the public have their say.



Investing in Play, Sport and Recreation

Social Democrats Councillors are committed to prioritising play, sport and recreation opportunities for all age levels.

Our priorities are:

Provide Playgrounds

Our Councillors will **prioritise the provision of playgrounds** and we are particularly anxious to **provide side by side play opportunities for people with disabilities**. Our Councillors have already delivered a successful model in Greystones, Co. Wicklow that could be replicated.

Playgrounds should be seen as not only an investment in children but as a **great way to bring communities together, foster social interaction and provide a focal point for parents and grand-parents**. We want to see greater provision of playgrounds across the country but particularly in counties with high population growth over the past few years.

We are conscious that the positioning of playgrounds in local communities is an important factor for consideration in order to promote community buy-in, to reduce the risk of vandalism and to minimise anti-social activity. Public consultation will be a vital part of every playground proposal.

Invest in Youth Facilities

Having some down time is vital to our health. But where do teenagers go for this? Our young people spend more and more time in school or online. This

sedentary lifestyle can lead to physical and mental health problems. They are often lonely and isolated – and may feel overwhelmed by the real life and virtual worlds that they occupy at the same time.

One of the biggest priorities of Social Democrats candidates is the **provision of additional community facilities for young people**.

With cut-backs in recent years, there has not been enough investment in facilities and services for young people.

Nonetheless, some Councils have shown that even with limited resources and by engaging in a **genuine partnership with the community**, they can play a key part in helping their local communities provide for this age group.

Social Democrats Councillors are committed to **maximising Council resources in terms of empty or under-used buildings, community/sports support workers**, Council facilities etc. to improve youth services and in particular to **offer alternatives to young people** who don't engage in mainstream sports and activities.

For the sake of our young people's health and well-being they deserve places to be themselves, act like teenagers, entertain themselves and enjoy their limited free time.



Renew Focus on Community Facilities and Shared Spaces

Ireland has poor social infrastructure and were it not for the tremendous success of voluntary organisations such as the GAA and others, we would have very little indeed.

There needs to be a **renewed focus on bringing our communities together and investing in shared spaces.**

The Social Democrats want to set a **general target of a community centre in every significant population base** in Ireland. This can be made available to young and old alike and funded by an enhanced Sports Capital Programme and the two Regeneration Funds earmarked under the National Development Plan.

We can also do so much better with the community facilities we already have or those that are in planning. The model developed in Fingal Co. Council, known as the “**Fingal Schools model**”, is a very good example whereby it was agreed to co-locate new schools with community facilities on sites made available by the Council. We would like to see this model replicated in other areas.

We believe **all schools should be made available for after-hours community use** where this is feasible from a security and residential amenity point of view.

Better Sports Facilities

We should be seeking through the Sports Capital Grants Programme to **provide an open access MUGA pitch in every community** (multi use games area) where that is feasible. These have worked very

well in several communities where an appropriate location was identified and where strong community support was forthcoming.

Social Democrats Councillors will play an active part in **maximising the funding of community facilities, such as swimming pools, skate parks etc through the Sports Capital Programme** and we are committing that if in Government we will maintain a funding programme on an annual basis.

We want to **expand the number of parks with strip lighting** so that joggers can use parks safely after dark.

The Social Democrats also wish to **maximise playing time for local sports clubs on Council pitches.** The upkeep of some Council facilities leaves a lot to be desired. Poor drainage, irregular mowing, poor maintenance, or indeed closing down pitches/facilities at certain times of the year all impact on how active our children, young people and adults can be. This is unacceptable. It breaks very positive routines and is a factor in children dropping out of sport. We will seek to end the practice of Councils shutting down playing pitches during the year (other than for genuine reasons of maintenance or pitch recovery).

Promote Active lives

The emergence in recent years in certain Council areas of mid-night leagues, passports for leisure, and the Park Run phenomenon shows that **Councils can play a huge role in keeping people active** – and at relatively low marginal costs. We will seek to expand these across the country.



We will also seek to **improve access to and expand the number of public allotments and community gardens.**

We believe the Council can also play a strong role in **supporting local Arts groups** and we will look to support such groups in our communities.

Social Democrats Councillors will ensure that there is a **play and activities plan for every age category in every local authority** in which we are represented. We will place an absolute focus on driving up participation in sports and activities for all age groups. We are particularly keen on **driving up and maintaining high participation rates in sports for girls.**

Support Festivals & Culture Events

There are some fantastic examples around the country where Councils have partnered with local communities to deliver superb local festivals, cultural and heritage events. These events **promote a strong sense of place and civic pride in our communities, and drive tourism and economic activity.**

Social Democrats Councillors are keen to promote such activities in our Councils and we will use the resources of our Council as a key enabler for further events. We are also keen to **address the escalating insurance costs** faced by such events.

Put Strong Focus on Libraries

One of the success stories of Irish Local Government has been our libraries. The Social Democrats value the role libraries play and see them as a **key tool in promoting adult literacy, life-long learning and community engagement.** We want to put **libraries as the focal point in our communities.** We welcome recent improvements in relation to library fines and support the national strategy, *Our Public Libraries 2022*. We will ensure that Councils retain a strong focus on libraries and we will seek to expand the number of libraries and range of library services wherever possible.



Putting People with Disabilities at the Heart of all Decisions

Social Democrats Councillors are fully committed to ensuring that people with disabilities are a priority in the Councils in which we serve.

As a Party, we have signed up to the Disability Federation of Ireland's campaign, #DisabilityVotesCount. We are promising that each of our elected Councillors will campaign on much better access for people with disabilities, ensure their voice is heard in all Council decisions, and ensure a plan is in place for each local authority by 2020 for people with disabilities.

The calls by the Disability Federation of Ireland are fully supported by the Social Democrats and include the following:

- **Accessibility** – Make all local public services open and accessible for people who have a disability.
- **Participation** – Ensure the participation of people with disabilities on local decision-making structures.
- **Planning** – Make sure local authorities publish an implementation plan for the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities by 2020.

On a practical level, a Council which adopts these calls will be focusing on issues such as ensuring there is enough housing and parking for people with disabilities, accessible playgrounds, dishing pavements, designing streetscapes so that people with disabilities are not hindered by parked cars, bins, street lights and sign posts, and a thousand other ways to make it easier for people with disabilities to fully participate in their local community.

The Social Democrats believe clear commitments to people with disabilities should be embedded in council strategies and plans, including County Development Plans, and where we have Councillors elected we will lead the charge on this.

We are also making the following specific commitments:



- Ensure that local authority offices meet **universal design requirements**.
- Promote Make Way Day in each Council area.
- Implement the National Disability Authority 'Code of Practice on Accessibility of Public Services and Information provided by Public Bodies' and the NDA **Accessibility Toolkit**.
- Set a **minimum of 7% of social housing to meet universal design standards**, and ensure that every social housing pipeline project demonstrates at Capital Appraisal Stage the inclusion of a **minimum 7 % of fully wheelchair accessible housing** with higher percentages applying for areas of higher need.
- Promote the uptake of **adaptation and mobility aids grants** to enable independent living for persons with disabilities – too many Councils don't spend their full allocation.
- Ensure that local **transport vehicles comply with universal design**.
- Promote the expansion of **accessible taxi vehicles**.
- Ensure that the **infrastructure** for public bus, taxi and rail stops are well maintained and are **accessible for people with disabilities**.
- **Expand the number of playgrounds, pools, gyms, parks and green spaces** and venues that are universally designed. In particular, we want to ensure that all future Council **recreational projects include accessible changing facilities** - accessible toilets which include a hoist, adult sized changing bench and larger space for additional assistants, to ensure the health, safety and dignity of those with disabilities and mobility issues.
- Encourage local businesses to universally design their premises and services, and in particular, **improve access to local neighbourhood shops**.
- Ensure that **people with disabilities are consulted** on every Council decision that materially affects them.
- Ensure that each Local Authority meets national targets to incrementally increase to at least **6% by 2024 the number of people with disabilities that are employed by the Council**. Latest figures suggest some Councils are doing well on this already but some have a considerable way to go.
- Ensure Local Authorities **review their approved social housing lists** and identify the number of people and households who require wheelchair accessible housing, and maintain a register of all wheelchair accessible social housing in their area and occupancy status.



Tackling Climate Change to build Cleaner Greener Communities

Climate Change is the single biggest threat to our environment, to our living standards, to our existence.

The Social Democrats recognise this threat as a fundamental issue facing our country and our planet. Everybody has to play their part in tackling it and preparing for its consequences. We won't be found wanting.

Climate Change is a global issue that can only be tackled by every part of Government doing its bit.

Nationally, we will continue to advocate for **increased support for the development of off-shore wind and other blue energy, electric cars, flood defences**, a fair level of carbon tax that penalises polluters but doesn't push people into poverty, and a new grants scheme for insulating homes that is available to everyone.

Councils must play their part also. Throughout this document we have placed a very strong emphasis on practical environment-friendly policies and actions that our Councillors will take if elected.

In our Councils,

- We will **drive strong long-term planning and sustainable communities**;
- We will **support cycling and public transport**;
- We will **promote biodiversity**, recycling, and strong anti-dumping measures;
- We will **encourage new energy solutions** and put Councils at the heart of delivering them.

We see the new Climate Change Adaptation Strategies that are currently being adopted by Councils around the country as a key part in ensuring there is a workable and actionable plan in place to tackle climate change locally, and we will deliver on these plans. Such strategies are particularly important in respect of coastal erosion, flood defence and extreme weather event planning.



As Councillors, there are hundreds of ways that we can make an impact on climate change.

Some practical measures we are proposing include:

- Councils leading by example in housing design and **energy saving in its own buildings**
- **Designated drop off points** around our urban centres within 1 km radius of schools so students walk on dry mornings
- **Cycling Buses** for children travelling to school
- Promote the use of **surplus heat in district energy schemes**
- Promote **public awareness events on climate change**, energy conservation etc
- **Reduce the energy consumption** of public lighting
- Promote and **expand number of community gardens and allotments** where feasible
- Public recycling bins
- **Better collection opportunity at amenity centres** for mattresses, sofas, large plastic toys etc
- **An end to single-use plastic at council events** and time-lines to end or reduce them in council supported events
- **Bicycle shelters & secure lock-ups** at all public buildings
- **Wild flower gardens**
- **Water fountains**
- Awards for the most environmentally friendly and most-environmentally improved multiple in your area
- **Car-charging points** in every small town and village
- **Car-pool** initiatives
- **Tree-planting** initiatives

Please see the following sections on Transport, Cycling, Litter and Dumping, Recycling and Waste, Plastics, Biodiversity and Energy Communities for further details of actions we are proposing.



Promoting Public Transport

Traffic is choking our cities, towns and villages. Meanwhile, too many Irish communities have no option but the motor car. Ireland has one of the highest rates of car usage in the whole of Europe at 84%.

This didn't happen by accident. It has been borne out of a **longstanding neglect of public transport investment.** Under successive Irish Governments, one abandoned or delayed public transport plan has followed another. Our inability as a country to adopt long-term plans and implement them comes back to haunt us again and again.

The Social Democrats are committed to **significant investment in both urban and rural public transport.**

We believe that the National Development Plan was a missed opportunity with too little provided to this sector. We believe the **National Development Plan should be redrawn so that public transport and cycling are re-prioritised over roads expenditure.** This simply has to happen in order to reduce carbon emissions from the sector and to be able to plan for additional housing and sustainable communities.

In this Manifesto we are setting out a clear commitment that Social Democrats Councillors will **campaign strongly on behalf of their communities for significant improvements in local Public Transport.** We will use every power available to local Councillors to facilitate the expansion of public transport services in our communities.

Here are some of our solutions:

- We are campaigning in favour of **directly-elected mayors for Cork, Dublin, Galway, Limerick,** and Waterford and we strongly believe that these mayors should assume responsibility for transport planning in each of these cities and counties with strong linkages with satellite counties.
- We will put **transport planning at the heart of all significant housing plans.**
- We must end the practice of building homes before we build the infrastructure that new communities will depend on.
- We will ensure that the needs of people with disabilities are heard and responded to and that **universal accessibility** is put centrally in all transport decisions affecting our Council areas.



- We will continue to campaign for **lower fares** so that the use of public transport is encouraged and congestion reduced.
- We would like to see **no/low fare public transport piloted** in Ireland.
- We will work with local public transport service providers to **promote the use of predictive analytics** to determine if extra service provision is needed during adverse weather conditions and major public events (Festivals, Concerts and Sports).
- We will seek to ensure that Council officials are responsive to local traffic concerns and that requests for roads repairs, traffic lights, pedestrian lights, filter lights, yellow boxes, bollards, ramps and all aspects of **traffic management and roads maintenance** are dealt with promptly and efficiently.
- We will invest heavily in **cycling** (see below).
- We will promote **active travel to schools** and ensure that every Local Authority prioritises the provision of **safe walking and cycling paths around every school** in the country, so that those children who choose to walk, scoot or cycle to school, can do so safely.
- We will seek to replicate Dublin's Canal Cordon survey in all Cities and large towns so that Councils have reliable data to work on.
- We will ensure that public transport service providers play a full role in Council Transport policy meetings and we will seek to establish good accountability arrangements at these meetings so that Councillors can raise service issues for constituents. We will further ensure that the National Transport Authority is more responsive to meeting requests from Local Authorities.
- We will ensure that the **public know about every significant transport and traffic proposal** relating to their community and that their voice is heard in the decision-making process.



Getting Ireland On Its Bike!

Ireland is far behind much of Europe in terms of cycling policy. We need to recognise that cycling is a major transport area that can contribute hugely to society.

The benefits of cycling are enormous. And cyclist or not, everyone gains from them.

- With more cycling we get **less pollution, less congestion, less carbon emissions**.
- With more cycling we get **healthier lifestyles** and a more active population.
- With more cycling we get **better mobility** and quicker commuting times.
- With more cycling we get **safer streets and more liveable neighbourhoods**

Cycling saves time, saves money, and saves lives.

We have produced [Safer Cycling for Healthier Communities](#), our 12 point plan for cycling. It sets out clear commitments to cycling including:

- Significantly improved Funding for Cycling
- Proper Segregation for Safe Cycling and Improved Infrastructure
- More Cycling Greenways and Urban Bike Schemes
- Safer Cycling to School
- Better Enforcement
- Improved Cycling Tax Schemes
- Cycling Officers & Training

Our local Councillors will help put cycling at the heart of the thinking and strategy of each local authority we are represented in. **Cycling should be recognised as a core element of transport policy and Social Democrats Councillors will make this happen.**



Tackling Litter and Illegal Dumping

We believe our Councils can play a much bigger role in tackling litter and illegal dumping. As judged by the number of fines issued, there is **significant variance in the level of enforcement activity** by local Councils. And even allowing for population differences, counties such as Offaly, Leitrim, Kilkenny and Kerry are consistently towards the bottom of the list.

Similarly, the level of funding per capita for Local Authorities under the Local Authority Enforcement Measures Scheme varies widely with significantly lower levels in counties such as South Dublin, Galway County, Galway City, Kerry, Kildare and Fingal.

As with general financing of Local Authorities, the Social Democrats believe there needs to be an evidence-based approach to the funding Local Authorities receive to tackle dumping. For instance, why does Longford Co. Council get six times more funding per capita under this scheme than Galway Co. Council?

The Social Democrats will ensure that every Local Authority **adopts a clear strategy on dumping, and takes a no-nonsense approach to offenders.**

In general, our Councillors will take the following approach:

- The Social Democrats favour a **naming and shaming policy** for people found guilty of illegal dumping. Our Councillors will explore all legal avenues to bring this in. We will seek to deploy technology wherever feasible to catch culprits.
- We will seek to **reverse the trend of Councils removing public bins**. We are particularly anxious that bins are provided in areas such as bus-stops and taxi ranks, on approaches to schools, outside neighbourhood shops, ATMs etc.
- We will promote the **expansion of Council furniture/junk collection days** as resources allow.
- We will promote and **support residents' clean-up days** and work side by side with Tidy Towns committees to deliver cleaner environments in our communities.
- **Public facilities for disposal of non-recyclable material should have longer weekend and evening opening hours**. The easier it is to dispose of unwanted goods the less likely there will be a problem with dumping.
- Charges for bringing disposable items to public facilities should be as uniform as possible across the country and should be pitched at a level that discourages dumping.



- We favour **doubling the on-the-spot fines for littering** and further increasing fines for illegal dumping.
- In turn, we want to **double funding to the anti-dumping initiative** so that detection, enforcement and clean-ups can be improved.
- It is vital that **penalties for illegal dumping are actually applied**. Enforcement bodies are too often failing in their duties to apply appropriate penalties. Our Councillors will work to ensure that fines are applied at a level that reflects the risk posed to or damage exacted on the environment.
- An estimated 50,000 households dispose of their waste in an unregulated manner according to the County and City Management Association. We will focus Councils' attention on reducing this figure.
- We want to set **strict enforcement targets for local authorities and the Environmental Protection Agency to deal with the chronic problem of illegal dumping** and infringements of conditions attached to waste licences and permits and we would improve national funding to allow the recruitment of additional staff in this area.



Investing in Recycling

People want to do their best for their environment and play their part by recycling as much as possible. However, we are not making it easy for them.

Our current recycling system is a complete mess. There isn't enough basic information for consumers on how and where you can recycle material, and the recycling system in Ireland can't handle lots of goods that are sold in our shops.

We urgently need national legislation on banning certain single use plastics and micro-plastics, and a new national and EU strategy to tackle unrecyclable packaging. Local Authorities and therefore local Councillors have a key role to play in this.

The Social Democrats want our Councils to start taking the lead again on recycling. Some of them have very committed staff doing a great job in their area but many could do so much better.

The three key points are that

- **consumers must have much better information** so that they can make informed choices on minimising their waste and maximising their recycling, reuse, and repair opportunities
- we need a **completely new waste process** that is much more effective in minimising waste, so that the amount of unrecyclable products reaching our supermarket shelves is vastly reduced and so that recyclable waste that is currently not collected as part of household collection services can be recycled.
- Local Authorities can play a much bigger role **by expanding the number of Civic Amenity Centres, making waste charges affordable, expanding opening hours of bring centres**, and providing better options for recyclable material that is currently not part of kerbside collection.

We are proposing a mixture of practical local and national measures to vastly improve the effectiveness of Councils' work on recycling and promoting the circular economy:



Better Recycling/Repair Options

We believe that **funding for the development of recycling centres should be reinstated** and the number expanded so that there is at least one civic amenity centre close to the population it is meant to be serving. We believe the general target should be to have one in every Dáil constituency at a minimum. Currently there is no civic amenity centre in Co. Longford and only one serving Cork City, one for Galway City and only two covering the City Council part of Dublin.

We will seek to spread best practice around the country. The recycling centre in Bray, Co. Wicklow is a very good example where the **public service has partnered with charity shops** to allow residents dispose of certain unwanted material.

We would like to **end the practice of waste collected in public bins going to landfill** and we will seek to roll-out segregated public waste bins.

The Social Democrats wish to **support the creation of more social enterprises such as the Rediscovery Centre, Food Cloud, and Recreate Ireland**. We will ask the Government and Councils to examine how the tax code or a preferential commercial rates policy could help promote better second-hand markets and repair businesses.

We will explore through the European Institutions the possibility of **reduced VAT rates for the repair of goods** and how better regulation could ensure goods are longer lasting and repairable.

We will **promote local repair options for consumers** – such as for mobile phones and other electronic devices.

Improved Information and Education for Consumers

We need far better customer information on recycling – what can be recycled, where and what bin can it go in. While the development of www.mywaste.ie has been welcome, it is far too basic. If waste can't go in a household recycling or compost bin, then consumers should know where in their area an item can be recycled. Such information is not readily available in many local authorities.

And if it's sold here with a recyclable label on it, then it should be actually recyclable here. There is also much confusion among the public as to what the different recycling emblems on packaging mean. Our Councils can play a much stronger role in such basic information.

We believe education on recycling, reducing and re-using can also be improved in our schools - building on the success of the Green Flag initiative.

New Recycling Targets

We want to see **new targets established for the percentage of domestic households and businesses that have recycling bin and compost bin services**, with a particular focus on apartments and rural areas.

At the last count, the percentage of households with three bins in some counties remained disgracefully low – close to a million houses don't have a brown bin service. For instance, it was as



low as 2% in Donegal, 5.51% in Westmeath, 6.37% in Cavan, 8.9% in Mayo, and 9.86% in Kilkenny. Leitrim, on the other hand, has managed a rate of 64.29%. If such a rate is possible with Leitrim's rural profile then this should be readily achievable for all counties, and we should be aiming for even higher than this.

We also want to see **new specific targets set for recycling in places of employment** – an area that we feel has been badly neglected.

Promote responsible disposal and exploitation of waste

We strongly support the principle that waste is treated/disposed of as close as possible to where it is generated. This is not only in the interests of fairness but it also incentivises waste reduction within regions, and minimises emissions, congestion and pollution risk associated with transporting waste across the country

We will insist on **transparent emissions monitoring for all waste facilities**. We believe current systems are inadequate, especially in respect of waste incinerators.

In some cases, waste licences are being granted on inappropriate sites close to residential homes. We will insist that the EPA and Local Authorities meet their responsibilities in terms of only allowing waste operations on suitable sites and under strict and enforceable conditions. We will insist on proper compliance with the assessment process.

We favour the introduction of **a levy on aggregates such as sand, gravel, and**

crushed stone that are extracted from the ground and used in construction and it should be set at a level to encourage the recycling of construction and demolition waste and to reduce the amount of waste being landfilled. All proceeds should be set aside for the environmental fund.

Set New Waste Structures

We are calling for a **fundamental review of the effectiveness of the Repak Scheme in terms of how we approach waste and the respective roles of producers, retailers and consumers**. In particular, we need to re-examine responsibilities of retailers and manufacturers in terms of reducing the amount of plastics used for the packaging of products, especially loose products. Local Authorities end up picking up the costs of this flawed system.

The waste sector in Ireland is not adequately regulated. There is **still no economic regulator for the sector**. This has meant that several areas of the country have no competition for their waste services. It has also led to a situation where, almost uniquely in developed countries, Ireland has a “side-by-side” competition model for waste services – by far the most cost-intensive model a country can have. The lack of a regulator also makes it very difficult to apply basic standards to waste companies.

The Social Democrats support calls made by the More Power to You campaign but in particular the call that a **regulator be appointed immediately to the waste sector**. The Social Democrats believe the Commission for the Regulation of Utilities should be established as the regulator of the waste industry, and that in the short-term we should transition to a system



whereby competition works on a “for the market” basis. We believe this can **allow for the remunicipalisation of waste services** in certain circumstances and we note the savings that accrued in Lyon and some other cities when this happened.

Ultimately, we would like to see a transition to full remunicipalisation where resources, costs and consumer interests allow. We would also set the new regulator the task of introducing a national waiver scheme.



The Plastic Problem and how our Councils can help

Plastic has become endemic in our culture. It is now almost impossible to avoid purchasing daily necessities without also having to purchase some plastic packaging.

And while plastic brings many benefits, there is a growing problem worldwide of plastic pollution and particularly with single use plastics and our “throw-away” culture - everything from vinegar and shampoo sachets to birthday party goodie-bags and drinking straws. We use them once for perhaps thirty seconds and it can take half a millenium to break down. **It is the very definition of unsustainable.**

The damage to our oceans is potentially catastrophic with some estimates warning that we could have more plastic than fish in our oceans by the middle of this century. And scientists still have yet to confirm what exactly plastic pollution is doing to our food chain and the potential long-term risks to human health.

The Social Democrats recognise that there is an urgent need to reduce the demand for and supply of plastics and we commit to the following measures:

- The Social Democrats welcome and support **EU initiatives** on this issue. However, we believe a 2030 target for the achievement of some of the objectives around plastics is not ambitious enough and we believe Ireland **should go much further** much sooner.
- As an interim measure, we are seeking **a levy on plastics that cannot be easily recycled** in Ireland at the moment. In the medium-term, we would put the **onus back on producers to recover plastics that they produce** or else just stop using plastic in their production. In tandem with this, Local Authorities should take a pro-active approach to ensure the development of further recycling facilities so that a wider range of material (for instance black plastics and some soft plastics) is recyclable right across the country. Our Councillors will take a lead on this.
- We support the introduction of a **ban on all unnecessary single use plastics** such as takeaway coffee cups, knives and forks, and other items.
- We favour the **immediate banning of micro-plastics** – legislation in this area is taking far too long.
- We would introduce a **deposit return scheme for recyclable containers** (and other waste streams where possible)



building on the excellent examples in Norway, Sweden and Germany and Local Authorities can help with the roll-out of such a scheme.

- We would **aggressively promote the development of re-fill options** in retail to minimise the unnecessary production of more plastic containers and we will encourage more local authorities to provide refill water

dispensers so that the demand for plastic bottles is reduced.

- We will promote beach, canal, and **neighbourhood clean-up days** with a special emphasis on removing plastic pollution.
- We will seek to put an **end to single-use plastic at council events** and insist on time-lines to end or reduce them in council supported events.



Promoting Biodiversity – Green Communities

There is growing concern worldwide about the impact of human development on biodiversity on our planet. Depletion of wildlife and insect loss have become very significant environmental issues.

The Social Democrats will ensure that each of our Councils take biodiversity seriously. We will promote a concept we are calling **Green Communities**, whereby Councils would seek to promote biodiversity as much as possible within a given zone.

Under our proposals, the Council would prioritise measures such as:

- The **planting of trees and flowers** in existing and new developments, and on streets.
- Significantly **reduce the use of pesticides and herbicides** in public green spaces and, where possible, in gardens.
- **Create native Woodland Walks and Wildflower Meadows** in existing and new parks.
- Place more bins and **reduce litter to keep parks, waterways and beaches clean.**
- Create **wild picnic bench spots** in developments and near offices, and encourage the creation of rooftop gardens in offices and apartments.

Where feasible we will seek to **recruit biodiversity officers and ecology officers** in the Councils we are represented on or appoint an existing staff member to that role.

We also favour the development of a **national hedgerow conservation strategy** so that a correct balance can be struck between the interests of land-owners, road users and the habitats of our native wildlife.

We will vigorously pursue blue flag status for beaches in our coastal communities.



Creating Energy Communities

The Social Democrats believe that Local Authorities can play a much bigger role in relation to energy.

At the moment, over **a million Irish household overpay for their electricity**. The number of gas customers who overpay is probably over 400,000. A significant part of the problem is that the consumer model that has developed for gas and electricity is based on the capacity, inclination and confidence of customers to keep switching their energy provider. **If you don't switch regularly, you end up paying more**. In some cases, you will pay more if you switch only once than if you never switched at all.

This model doesn't work and a growing body of international research shows that **under this model the most vulnerable pay the highest prices**. For this and other reasons, the UK has brought in price controls for three categories of customers.

Meanwhile, those dependent on oil fired central heating face sporadic fluctuations in their heating bills depending on the international price of oil at the time of purchase and how competitive the local market is. There is no regulator for the sector in Ireland and people who can only afford small top-ups pay the highest prices.

At the same time, the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI) is sponsoring an initiative called **Better Energy Communities**, whereby communities come together to promote energy saving in their communities. This has had some success but most communities in Ireland have not benefitted from it and many have not even heard of it.

The Social Democrats believe that Ireland can do much more to **promote sustainable and affordable energy and that Local Authorities can be significant players in this**.

Too often, the debate on energy pits environmental sustainability against affordability. We have seen this in the debate on higher carbon taxes. This is unfortunate in our view.

Sustainability and affordability should be dealt with side by side. Climate change is a real thing and the role of carbon is undeniable. Equally, energy poverty is a real thing and blindly lumping more taxes on the most vulnerable



in our society is simply creating another problem and undermining public support in the fight against climate change.

The Social Democrats believe that **energy policy should be based on the UN's Sustainable Development Goals**. These goals set us the objective of **tackling climate change and preventing poverty at the same time** – ie: the two go hand in hand.

In that vein, we believe Local Authorities can play a very significant role in promoting a new community-focus on energy policy.

The Social Democrats are proposing the **establishment of an energy unit in multiple Local Authorities on a regional basis**. These units would facilitate the **development of local energy communities** (leaning on resources of the SEAI) and would help roll out pilot energy programmes across multiple Local Authorities.

The new units would facilitate a **new pilot programme of group switching of electricity and gas customers and of group purchase among oil customers**. It would be **open to all residents in the Councils' administrative area** – whether a tenant or owner-occupier.

Such models have already worked well in Northern Ireland in terms of oil clubs, and there are some good examples in England where group switching has been accommodated by either the Regulator or by Local Authorities. **By grouping together, energy customers can enjoy savings from bulk purchasing** and do not have to go through the tortuous ritual each year of switching energy provider just to protect themselves against big increases.

Under our proposal, a condition of participation in this scheme would be that a **proportion of the savings accruing from bulk switching would have to be applied to energy efficiency improvements in people's homes**.

In this way, the Local Authority can play a very significant role in reducing the unit-cost of energy faced by residents, reducing the overall cost of energy by energy efficiency measures, and facilitating the retro-fitting of hundreds of thousands of homes in Ireland.

Other proposals on Energy

- We will heavily promote the **retro-fitting of existing Local Authority Housing** stock to reduce carbon emissions from this sector.



- We will ensure that **housing energy standards** on all new developments is rigorously applied in planning conditions.
- We will use all influence available to the Council to promote, facilitate and grow **community micro-generation**.
- Bodies such as the Tipperary Energy Agency have shown the enormously positive impact communities can make. We will seek to emulate this right across the country.
- We will extend the number of **public charging points** for electric vehicles



Council Services – Focussing on the Basics

The Social Democrats want to **set new standards in how public services are delivered by local authorities** and how local officials engage with local communities. As is evident throughout this Manifesto, **we want to spread best practice across the country.** What works in the recycling centre in Bray or the Community Budgeting in South Dublin can work everywhere else.

As a first step, we want the role of National Oversight and Audit Commission (NOAC) to be expanded. Far more measures of Council activity or lack thereof, should form part of its auditing processes. **Communities should know how well their local Council is doing across every possible measure of service.**

Social Democrats Councillors will vigorously pursue Council management on doing basic public services well and as promptly as possible.

Our Councillors will use the Council’s Service Delivery Plan and our monthly Council meetings to focus Council attention on delivering these basic services and improving Council performance in the following key areas:

Trees – pruning, planting, protection, and leaf collection	Taking in Charge	Road Safety
Roads and Footpath repairs	Location Signage	Public Lighting
Hedge-cutting	Graffiti Removal	Fire Brigade response times and Fire Safety
Drainage	Housing Allocations and Maintenance	Regeneration
Litter Control and Dumping Enforcement	Community Engagement	Promoting Enterprise
Building inspection	Planning enforcement	Derelict sites
Recycling facilities	Parks maintenance	Street-Cleaning



In addition to these, there are specific areas where we feel **Councils generally can do so much better:**

- We would like Councils to **make it as easy as possible for residents to pay their bills** with them – in particular we would like to see a pay-as-you-go book scheme adopted by Councils to **facilitate the payment of Motor Tax** so that low-income households are not faced with very large one-off annual bills that send them into the hands of money-lenders (we believe this model could also improve rents collection). We would also like to see a restructuring of motor tax charges so that people who can only afford non-annual tax discs are not ripped-off by unjustified additional charges.
- We will seek to improve Council **training and other supports** for the establishment of **Residents Associations or local environmental groups**. We will promote active community sections within our Councils and we are keen to **spread best practice around the country such as community days**, street feasts, summer projects, and events for older people.
- We will establish a specific **Council forum for apartment dwellers** so that their concerns can be heard and responded to by Council officials and to facilitate peer learning. Such forums have worked very well in some Councils and have proven useful in advocating the interests of people living in apartments.
- We are keen to promote **customer service initiatives** in our Councils so that there are **strong and regular feedback opportunities for the public** on services that are working well or are under-performing.
- We are particularly keen to explore how **leaf collection** could be expanded by Councils.
- The issue of having **road safety and basic traffic requests** considered is cumbersome and slow in several Councils and we believe can be vastly improved with a better management system.
- We will ensure that Councils meet their obligations under the **Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty**.
- We will work with Councils to adopt an **anti-racism strategy** for each Council area in respect of Council services and duties.
- We will work to improve the relationship between Councils and utility network providers so that the **visual impact of unsightly electricity and gas housing is minimised** and does not present a hazard to people with disabilities. We will also seek to place far greater onus on such providers to ensure that their equipment is kept **graffiti-free**.
- We will use our position on the boards of Education and Training Boards to **promote educational access for all**



and high education standards and to uphold the constitutional rights of children and their parents to not attend religious instruction classes.

- We will support **fair and equal access to Council commissioning processes** and we will work to extend the supports available through Local Enterprise Offices to community and voluntary groups, charities and social enterprises.

- We commit to a **“plain English” approach in all Council material**, and we will be encouraging each of our Councils to work with the National Adult Literacy Agency in executing this approach
- We will use the Council’s role as part of the County Childcare Committee to **promote much better information to parents on childcare options** and to better inform policy in respect of capacity shortages and fee increases.



Unfinished Estates

The communities who are currently worst served by our Councils are those of new and unfinished estates.

The Social Democrats have huge **concerns about how long the taking-in-charge process can be in some local authorities**. Many residents have been left with completely unsatisfactory services such as roads, pathways, public lighting, green spaces, lack of amenities and in particular service connections. This leaves **residents in limbo and in some cases residents end up having to pay for basic public services such as street lighting**, road repairs and liability insurance. In some cases, estates have been waiting since the 1990s.

At the last count, **4,854 housing developments were waiting to be taken in charge**. We are particularly concerned that 834 estates remain who continue to rely on temporary water infrastructure – so called DPI estates.

We are also concerned that a **€10m Local Authority fund dedicated to taking-in-charge was not fully drawn down by Local Authorities** and that three councils, Dublin City, Dun Laoghaire Rathdown and Louth did not avail of any.

Our Councillors will make this a priority issue and **fervently represent the interests of residents living in unfinished estates**. We will ensure that all available funding is applied for.

We will ensure our local authorities have a proper tracking system in place so that these estates are not forgotten and that developers are constantly reminded of their outstanding responsibilities. We will put a particular emphasis on resolving outstanding issues in DPI developments.

We **will not accept sub-standard finishing from developers** and ensure that a robust bonds system is in place so that there are appropriate incentives for developers to finish out estates.

Nationally, we will **seek much stronger protection for residents**, including strengthening the powers of local authorities to be much more pro-active in taking new developments in charge, stronger powers of enforcement for local authorities to pursue developers, and having a dedicated fund to help the



worst affected estates. We will ensure that Irish Water has a much more constructive approach to the problem and that there are clear targets set for it in relation to taking in charge.

We also want to see the Local Property Tax reviewed so that some arrangement is in place for lower charges where estates are liable for the tax but are waiting to be taken in charge. This will be fairer to residents and give every incentive to local authorities to work with developers to get estates finished quickly.



Promoting Enterprise and Strong Local Economies

Councils can contribute hugely to the economic success of their administrative areas by promoting and facilitating strong partnerships with the local business community, and by setting the right conditions for business.

In the context of Brexit and the looming economic threat that this entails it is all the more important that Councils have enterprise at the heart of their strategies.

Each Council must be cognisant of the **key drivers of economic development** in their area, the key industries at the heart of this, and adopt strategies to protect and enhance these sectors. Below we set out some of the priorities for Social Democrats Councillors.

Our Councillors are committed to the following measures:

- We will work with the business community to **facilitate and sustain jobs-rich enterprise opportunities** and to promote economic development.
- We will ensure that **sustainable economic development, job creation, and job sustainment are key goals** of the development plan in every Council we are represented on.
- We will **prioritise tourism and heritage** and believe our Councils can contribute significantly to better offerings on these across a number of their competencies including planning and development, planning enforcement, signage, promotion, litter control, beach and parks maintenance, and in the expansion of festivals, cultural events, eco-tourism and greenways.
- We endorse Chambers Ireland's calls for **greater focus on enterprise training**, through the Local Employment Offices (LEO) and other state agencies, and new strategies that seek to **maximise the participation of everyone currently excluded from the workforce**. We will seek to create local skills censuses and develop complementary training programmes which address local skill gaps.
- We will insist on **fair and transparent public procurement processes** and seek to give stronger weighting in procurement competitions to bids from those with strong labour and environmental protection offerings.
- We are keen to **promote all green economy and social enterprise possibilities** and we will explore all



avenues to fund green energy and enterprise training in rural and regional areas to help people supplement their agri-food income - as proposed by Chambers Ireland.

- We will **prioritise the rejuvenation of our Main Streets** to encourage greater footfall, discourage vacancy, to improve vibrancy, and make them places people want to regularly shop, visit, meet friends and live in.
- We will seek to **expand the shop-front scheme** as it is currently quite limited in scope.
- We will ensure that the **rates regime is fair and transparent and promotes competitiveness**. We will seek to raise collection rates to 97% so that Local Authorities have more revenue and so that compliant businesses are not competing against non-payers. We will seek to use some of this extra funding to lower rates where possible.
- We will **promote the development of Community Hubs** which would provide hot-desks, co-working facilities, hi-speed broadband and

conference and meeting spaces to local businesses and remote workers.

- We will ensure that **adequate rates rebate schemes are in place for businesses facing genuine trading difficulties and for start-ups** – as long as such a scheme would not distort competition between neighbouring outlets.
- Nationally, we are very concerned about the **failure of Government to tackle the high cost of public liability insurance** faced by many businesses, but particularly those with high footfall. Our representatives will strongly push this issue on behalf of local businesses until the excessive court awards for minor injuries (which is at the heart of our very high insurance costs for public liability) are more in line with international norms. We also need to see **far more action by the Government and regulators to promote sustainable competition in the insurance market** – the current competition model has failed.



Fair Funding for Local Authorities

There are four main income sources for Local Authorities.

These comprise of:

- Local Authority Rates (collected from local businesses),
- Local Property Tax Receipts (collected from local home-owners but distributed from a central fund)
- Grants from Central Government (mainly from the Departments of Housing, Transport, and Communications)
- Goods and Services provided by Local Authorities

Under this system Local Authorities depend very heavily on Central Government to fund basic public services.

However, the Social Democrats are **not satisfied that the current system is evidence-based**. There is wide variation in how different counties benefit under this system. In particular, population size, population changes, staff ratios, and infrastructure deficits are not adequately factored in to how grants and the proceeds of the Local Property Tax are distributed to local Councils.

Local Property Tax funding

There are a number of key problems with how funding raised through the Local Property Tax (LPT) is distributed. We set these out in a [submission](#) on the review of the tax in July 2018.

The first issue is that the **Local Property Tax has not boosted Council funding**. Part of the rationale for introducing the Local Property Tax in the first place was to ensure that funding to Local Authorities could be stabilised and improved and, in turn, used to improve local services. This simply hasn't happened. The **financial position of Local Authorities has not significantly improved since before the LPT was introduced**. What gains the LPT

has provided to Local Authorities has been taken away by the withdrawal of Motor Tax funding and a reduction in central Government grants in roads and housing. It is a sneaky element of austerity that has yet to be corrected.

Communities can rightly ask: "what am I getting for my Local Property Tax?" The answer is - not a whole lot more.

Another key problem is that the **allocation of the LPT to our local Councils is not evidence-based**.

Under current arrangements, the equalisation fund redistributes funding from high-revenue counties to low-revenue counties and does so on the basis



of each Council's needs (or so-called "baselines").

This is fine in theory. However, in practice it presents a **severe disadvantage to Councils experiencing significant population growth.**

This is partly because each Council's baseline has not been properly updated since the early 2000s. It means that baselines no longer reflect the true financial needs of each Council.

This results in a transfer that particularly advantages counties such as Donegal, Mayo and Tipperary but means that Councils such as Meath, Kildare, Wicklow, Fingal, South Dublin, Galway City Council, Clare and others lose significant funds.

Some of the Councils with the lowest staff ratios per head of population lose the most out of this process. It is simply unfair.

The Social Democrats believe that the **way in which the proceeds of the Local Property Tax are distributed needs to be overhauled.** It firstly needs to factor in population growth and the needs that clearly arise for Local Authorities from that. It also must allow far greater weighting to the number of staff and skill mix in each county.

The **Department of Housing should go back to the drawing board and re-establish each Local Authorities' true needs.** These needs should be updated regularly to allow for demographic shifts, infrastructure deficits, and other changes. Critically, allocations need to be based on workforce planning so that the Councils with the lowest staffing levels per capita

do not also lose significant amounts of LPT revenue. The **Local Property Tax should then be distributed on a much fairer basis than is currently the case.**

This would mean increased funding for those Councils with the biggest population increases in recent years. It would also mean that the Local Property Tax would be much more of a true "local tax".

We recognise that this will impact on some Councils who rely on the equalisation fund. With that in mind we proposed as part of our Alternative Budget for 2019 that **a transition fund starting with €25m be established** for these Councils. In addition, we sought extra funding to invest in extra personnel to help with the collection of commercial rates in each county. The collection rates in some counties remain too low and a proper system could significantly boost income for some Councils.

Local Authority Grants

The **distribution of Local Authority Grants from Central Government is also not done on a fair basis.** Many of the same local authorities that suffer from the unfairness of how the Local Property Tax operates, for instance Meath and Kildare, are hit with the same unfairness under this grant system.

The Social Democrats are calling for a **complete overhaul of how this system operates so that allocations operate on the basis of an objective resource allocation model.** Population growth and service deficits should be much more central to the value of grants given out.



Collection of Commercial Rates

While there have been some welcome improvements in the collection of Local Authority rates in recent years, there is still much **room for improvement** in many areas.

There is a collection rate of 97% under the Local Property Tax. Disappointingly, the average per Local Authority in Commercial Rates is only 84%.

The most up to date comparative data across Local Authorities shows that while Fingal Co. Council leads the way on 96%, **eight local authorities have collection rates of less than 80%**.

Such a **low collection rate means that compliant businesses are doubly disadvantaged**. They are paying rates while their competitors are not, and the level of the rate struck is higher than it otherwise would be if everyone was paying their fair share. If we want our local Councils to provide all of the basic public services that we rely on, then everyone who can afford to contribute must do so.

The Social Democrats would **invest in supports and expertise to assist those poor performing local authorities** to boost their collection rates so that these Councils can become more self-sustaining

and less reliant on central funds. This would entail reviewing where each authority is falling down and providing them with advice and extra staff to improve rates collection. We also believe there is much scope for peer-learning on this issue.

Vacant Units

Several Councils offer discounts on rates for vacant commercial premises. The Social Democrats believe **significant rates discounts for vacant premises encourages the dis-use of shops and is one of the main factors in why so many of our Main Streets and Town Centres are empty**, run-down or littered with shuttered premises. Indeed, vacant units impact on footfall and impede the commercial interests of neighbouring outlets.

Our Councillors will, over time, seek to **eliminate discounts on commercial rates to encourage occupancy**.

We accept this measure will impact differently on different areas depending on the level of economic activity in the area so we would allow local Councillors apply discretion as to how long a unit would have to be vacant in a given area before the discount would no longer apply.



Rejuvenating our Main Streets and Neighbourhood Shops

Our Town Centres, Main Streets and Neighbourhood Shops are often the centre-points of our neighbourhoods. They are some of the most prominent spaces we share and come together as a community. They significantly contribute to our identity and give a strong sense of where we come from.

Yet, too often in Ireland, they can be the worst kept, worst planned, least loved areas. **We have to rethink how we support businesses and enterprises at local level to ensure the vitality of our towns, villages and urban villages.**

It is no surprise that towns and villages with a vibrant, bustling core, with well-maintained shops, a diverse range of outlets, attractive streetscapes, a strong traffic plan and good access, are often the places where communities are most active. **Thriving, vibrant main streets are central to the sustainability of our towns and villages as places to live and work.**

The Social Democrats want to **put these shopping areas back at the top of the Councils' agenda.** We will prioritise rejuvenation of these parts of our towns and villages to stimulate economic development and local job creation, promote regional economic development, protect the interests of main street traders and give a leg-up to small businesses, innovators and entrepreneurs, encourage re-population of our town centres, while also encouraging community, sporting and arts groups to use our main streets in practical and innovative ways. Alongside our other plans for strengthened local government and stronger communities, we are making the following proposals to boost support to our Main Streets and Neighbourhood Shops:

Promote Regional Economic Development

We should be using the National Development Plan to invest in projects that boost industrial and commercial capacity across the country such as **improved rural broadband, transport, electricity capacity and third level**

technological centres. This will improve local economies, employment opportunities, boost purchasing power and retail possibilities across the country, and help provide economic counter-weights to Dublin.



End Rates Rebate on Vacant Premises

As we have set out earlier, at the moment the owners of vacant commercial premises can claim a refund on commercial rates from their local authority if their premises are vacant. This simply encourages the proliferation of shuttered, empty and under-used premises on many of our Main Streets. **No rebates should be available for premises that remain vacant after a reasonable period is allowed for re-letting or re-use,** to be set by each local authority. We will especially **encourage the use of empty premises by community, sports, social and arts groups.**

Improve Local Authority Funding

Central funding of local authorities must be improved to allow them adjust their commercial rates and street-parking rates to promote the commercial viability of Main Street businesses. Funding should also be provided for environmental improvement works such as street lighting, footpaths, parking, cycling infrastructure, accessibility for wheelchairs and buggies, landscaping and street furniture.

As we have referred to earlier, we would also like to see seed funding provided to local authorities to help improve the collection of commercial rates and apply at least some of these savings to help lower rates overall.

Town and Village Regeneration

A Government scheme, the Town and Village Scheme, currently provides funding to help rejuvenate local

communities. However, many urban pockets in need of such funding cannot currently qualify. This scheme needs to be better funded and to be expanded to allow urban villages to benefit.

In addition, we would ensure that the **shop-front improvement grant scheme is enhanced** and available to all towns and villages.

Each of our Councillors will push for a **specific budget for “neighbourhood shops”** in their Council area to improve the appearance of these key focal points in communities and to make such shops more accessible for people with disabilities, cyclists and pedestrians.

We will support our communities in making bids under the Urban Regeneration and Development Fund and the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund.

Strictly enforce out-of-town shopping centre planning guidelines

A strong set of planning guidelines exists to protect the interests of Main Streets and Town Centres when planning applications for out-of-town shopping centres are being considered.

However, these have not always been well observed or applied by planning authorities.

We are in favour of setting the **new planning regulator with the task of ensuring that planning authorities strictly enforce planning guidelines so that Main Streets are not adversely affected by new developments.**



Tackle Vacant and Derelict Sites and run-down shops

The law needs to change to **give better powers to local authorities in tackling vacant and derelict sites and shops.**

In 2017, the Social Democrats introduced a Bill, the Urban Regeneration and Housing (Amendment) Bill, to the Dáil which would promote the development and activation of vacant and derelict sites in our cities, towns and villages.

We need to see all **Local Authorities take the Vacant Site Levy seriously, apply it to all vacant sites**, and apply a higher vacant site levy the longer a site remains vacant. Such measures would help end the underuse of town centre sites, counter land-hoarding, and minimise dereliction.

We also favour the strengthening of the role of local authority staff, such as Public Domain Officers, to intervene with businesses who fail to maintain their premises to an acceptable standard at the expense of neighbouring businesses.

End Upward Only Rents

Rents are a key part of the cost-base for Main Street businesses and are a major factor in the viability of many independently-owned stores.

Upward-only rents can undermine businesses because their sheer inflexibility does not take account of the ups and downs of the business cycle. We will **seek to amend the Constitution to ensure that legislation could be enacted banning upward only rents.**

Repopulation of Main Streets

We will promote the repopulation of urban centres by **encouraging over-the-shop conversion to residential through new planning guidelines and using existing Government incentives** such as the Repair and Lease scheme, the Buy and Renew Scheme, the Urban Regeneration and Development Fund, the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund and the Town and Village scheme.

Town Website & Local Branding

We will promote the development of a Town website and social media presence with listings of all shops, services, contacts, events, promotions, opening times etc.

We will also push for some **funding for the development of local branding, such as a county flag or other regional branding**, to support indigenous producers and local independent shops.

Promote Community Banking

It is a long-standing aim of the Social Democrats to support the provision of community banking across Ireland.

This would improve the **availability of credit in local communities using Credit Unions and Post Offices.**

It would provide **far better competition in lending to small businesses and in basic banking fees.** Keeping post offices and credit unions viable would also animate town and village centres and increase footfall for local businesses.



Community Hubs

We will promote the development of Community Hubs which would **provide hot-desks, co-working facilities, hi-speed broadband and conference and meeting spaces to local businesses and remote workers**. These could be provided in under-used or disused buildings or as a section of a local library or Council office. The more we can promote a community-centred approach, the greater vibrancy and economic sustainability in our local communities.

Rates Rebates

Our Councillors will ensure that **adequate rebate schemes are in place for community facilities, businesses facing genuine trading difficulties and for those who need assistance in the start-up phase** – subject to a provision that such a

scheme would not distort competition between neighbouring outlets.

Stricter Planning Rules

We will use the Council development plan process to set down **strict conditions in planning applications around delivery times and access points**.

We will set down strict conditions on the duty of take-away shops to have litter control plans in their communities. We will adopt a **“no-fry zone”** in relation to new takeaways proposed close to schools (and seek to restrict advertising also).

We will restrict the proliferation of off-licences and bookmakers. Every Social Democrats Councillor will ensure that a **plan for neighbourhood shops** is a clear objective of their County Development Plan.



Honest and Open Councils

Most Councillors strive to do their best for their communities. Sadly, however, the history of local government in Ireland is also littered with malpractice, corruption, back-handers, and abuse of our planning system.

The Social Democrats want to stamp this out once and for all.

A long-standing aim of the Social Democrats is the **establishment of an Anti-Corruption Agency**. Such an agency is a vital law enforcement tool to help eradicate corrupt practices in politics and business in Ireland. We remain absolutely committed to its establishment.

If we are to build public trust in local democracy, then **transparency, accountability, and integrity must be the defining features of local decision-making.**

At local level, the Social Democrats are putting honesty and transparency at the heart of what we do as Councillors.

- Our Councillors will **proactively publish their annual declarations of interest** online and will work to ensure that this becomes routine practice in all local authorities.
- Our Councillors will also ensure the **highest levels of integrity in dealing with lobbyists** – this includes declaring their status as Designated Public Officials under the Regulation of Lobbying Act 2015.
- We will strive to ensure that all **Council meetings are web-cast.**
- Social Democrats Councillors **will not participate in the “conference culture”** that still affects many Councils and will seek to eradicate this practice from all Councils of which we are a member. We believe that training for Councillors should be provided in-house as much as possible. This must include training for Councillors and council staff alike in their obligations under our ethics laws and related codes of conduct.
- The Social Democrats accept all of the **recommendations for Local Authorities made by both the Mahon Tribunal and Transparency Ireland (TI)** in its report “Integrity Index 2018”. The TI report highlights the good practice and shortcomings in all 31 local authorities in the State. It highlights the strong work on ethics and transparency in Local Authorities such as Galway City, Monaghan, Dublin City, South Dublin and Fingal and the much weaker systems in Local Authorities such as Galway County, Waterford, Wexford and Offaly.



- The Social Democrats will seek to develop and maintain up-to-date, **comprehensive Corruption and Fraud Prevention and Contingency Plans** in every Local Authority on which we serve. We will ensure there are **proper procedures in place for Ethics Registrars**. We will ensure that all consultations that qualify as pre-planning consultations under Section 247 of the Planning and Development Act 2000 (not just formally requested consultations) are adequately documented and published on the Council's website. We also want Councillors' annual declarations of interests published on every Local Authority website.
- We believe the tool-kit set out by Transparency Ireland is a good reference point for Local Authorities to work from and we will strive to improve the position of every Council on which we are represented.
- At national level, the Social Democrats will continue to highlight the government's inexcusable foot-dragging when it comes to implementing **the ethics reforms recommended by the Mahon Tribunal in 2012**. The Public Sector Standards Bill was introduced to the Oireachtas in 2015 and is going nowhere fast because there is simply no political drive behind it. We are determined to have this legislation passed.



Directly Elected Mayors

The Social Democrats **favour the introduction of Directly Elected Mayors in Cork, Dublin, Galway, Limerick, and Waterford.**

In our vision of the role, a directly elected Mayor would **provide strategic leadership and vision for our cities.**

Each candidate for the office would have an opportunity to outline their plans for their city and county over the course of their mandate. This **electoral mandate would provide a powerful impetus for modernisation and change.** It would raise service standards in local authorities and make them far more accountable.

We are particularly keen to see **Directly Elected Mayors take a role in Transport policy.** We believe this could have a hugely positive impact on tackling traffic congestion, promoting cycling, and would help with the championing and implementation of transport plans.

Directly Elected Mayors would **bring stakeholders together** – in particular, the multitude of public service bodies that are active in our cities. They would take the **lead on areas such as economic and tourism development, engaging with Gardaí, and creating safer public spaces.** The Directly Elected Mayor would also lead on waste management, environmental sustainability, housing and homelessness, and social inclusion.

Initiatives and collaborations to **make our cities more inclusive, including an age-friendly strategy and promoting cultural diversity and youth programmes, could be led by the Mayor** and could include public art programmes and cultural events. A directly-elected Mayor would have the mandate to bring people together to lead a safer cities initiative to make public spaces safer and more accessible for everyone. The Mayor could provide a leadership role in co-ordinating actions amongst agencies to meet Climate Change and recycling targets.

We set out our thinking in relation to a Directly Elected Mayor for Dublin last year in [Democratising Dublin](#). and with careful tailoring, we believe this can be the blueprint for all Irish Cities with such an office.

We believe that additional central funding should be provided to pay for this additional office and the election process.



Better Policing

The Social Democrats believe **policing in our community could work so much better** if there was greater co-operation and consultation with communities and local Councillors.

The Joint Policing Committees (JPCs) and especially Community Safety/Policing Forums around the country are good models. They bring together Gardaí, senior Council officials and communities to discuss crime and anti-social activity in the local area. They have been a welcome improvement on making local Gardaí accountable and a good way of exchanging information on local issues. However, we are not maximising output from them.

For a start too few people know about them. Their effectiveness depends far too much on how active individual residents, Gardaí and Council staff are in the given area. Far too few people know how they can interact with them or how to have an issue raised and responded to. There are often unnecessary restrictions on the number of Councillors who can pose questions to them. And the remit of the JPCs is currently too restricted.

The Social Democrats wish to **reform the JPCs**. They have a more formal role in setting local policing plans. All elected Councillors should be able to pose a limited number of questions at their local JPC and Community Safety/Policing Forum. Gardaí should be required to provide information well in advance of meetings to allow for the smooth operation of JPCs. Contact details for the public and minutes of meetings should be clearly available on each local authority's website and in public libraries. We will also seek to further **improve co-operation between JPCs and drugs task forces**.

All Social Democrats Councillors will actively engage with their JPCs and Community Safety/Policing Forums to **represent crime and safety issues arising in their areas and ensure that their communities are well informed as to how the Council and local Gardaí are responding**.

Separate from JPCs, we will promote development designs that promote “**passive policing**”, and seek to ensure that all public parks and public places are well lit and safe for all users.

On a national level, the Social Democrats will continue to seek the restoration of community Gardaí staffing levels.



Dogs

Dog Litter

Dog litter is a real nuisance as well as presenting a verifiable danger to public health – causing some eye diseases and in some cases, sight loss.

The Social Democrats wish to replicate a successful community experiment carried out in Beaumont in Dublin where **dispensers with free doggy bags** were erected at entrances to a park. The experiment has resulted in a very significant decline in the problem and we are keen to expand it to as many areas as possible. The marginal cost for the Council is very low and can be met out of existing funding.

We also wish to expand the number of bins so that dog-owners can easily dispose of dog litter.

On the spot litter fines should be doubled from €150 to €300 to improve the deterrent of dog-owners not picking up after their pet.

Numbers Destroyed and Dog Pounds

There has been a welcome downward trend (PQ: 11332/19) in the number of dogs that are euthanized by local authorities – falling by over half in recent years according to the official statistics. However, some counties continue to have high rates, including Kerry, Tipperary and Wexford.

Our local representatives will be working towards **bringing down these rates across all counties with a clear priority of finding homes for dogs.**

Meanwhile, we remain very concerned that some of the standards at our publicly-funded dog pounds are not at the required level. We will seek to put new standards in place, to improve the regularity and stringency of welfare inspections, to insist on mandatory transparency of conditions in pounds to members of the public, and overall to ensure high standards for dogs that are in the care of the local authority or those contracted to them.

Dog-walking

We wish to encourage the use of our public parks by dog-owners.

However, we recognise that a balance has to be struck between the interests of dog-owners and the interests of other park users, particularly young children. We are committed to adopting **a dog-walking strategy** for each Local Authority that will seek to balance these interests.

**Social
Democrats**

#SustainableCommunities

#LE19