



FINE GAEL

Building a
Republic of Opportunity

The First Iteration



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SECTIONS:

Introduction

- a) What is this document?
- b) Foreword from the Party Leader and Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar TD
- c) Introduction by Richard Bruton TD, Minister for Education and Skills

Chapters

- 1. Enabling opportunity for all and ensuring the next generation a fair chance
- 2. A balanced, sustainable and ambitious economy
- 3. Strong community and balanced regional development
- 4. Making work pay
- 5. Making life easier for families
- 6. Ageing with security, opportunity and dignity
- 7. Northern Ireland – Fine Gael, the United Ireland Party
- 8. Protecting our planet and the environment
- 9. Ireland: an island at the centre of the world
- 10. Security and justice: the party of law and order
- 11. A sporting nation, proud of our language, culture and heritage

What is this document?

This is the first iteration of a rolling political programme for Fine Gael. It describes our ambition for Ireland in 2025 and the major initiatives we believe that need to be taken to achieve that ambition. It will be presented at the Fine Gael National Conference in November 2017. The document will be updated at subsequent Fine Gael conferences. This first iteration was commenced at the Fine Gael Parliamentary Party Think In in September 2017. Following engagement from the Parliamentary Party, a steering group of Fine Gael parliamentarians, chaired by the Minister for Education and Skills, Richard Bruton and including Ministers Brendan Griffin and Damien English, Deputies Hildegard Naughton, Josepha Madigan, Colm Brophy, Peter Burke and Maria Bailey, and Senators Neale Richmond and Jerry Buttimer developed this document.

Each Fine Gael constituency is now asked to take at least one theme of Building the Republic of Opportunity, consider it in depth and bring forward ideas, identify gaps and propose changes. Furthermore, other interested external organisations (think tanks, representative bodies, advocacy groups, etc) are encouraged to do the same. Fine Gael will organise specific consultative events nationally and regionally to facilitate input. These changes will be considered at the future Fine Gael conferences where members shall amend and endorse the document.

This document focuses on a selection of long-term issues. It does not cover all policy areas and will be expanded in further iterations. Given that Fine Gael is part of the Partnership Government with the Independent Alliance and independents, actions in the lifetime of that government are governed by the Programme for Government and by the Confidence and Supply agreement with Fianna Fáil.

Foreword from the Party Leader and Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar TD

Building the Republic of Opportunity

Address to the Fine Gael National Conference on November 10th, 2017

When I was elected leader of Fine Gael, there was an understandable focus around the world on what that said about the Ireland of today. How the son of a father from India and a mother from Co. Waterford – without any family or political connections – became the leader of the largest party in the State. What it said about our respect for diversity, our disregard for prejudice, our willingness to see people as individuals, and our fundamental fairness as a people.

I also took something more from it. It told me what my mission must be as leader and as Taoiseach. Fine Gael is a party of aspiration, a party of enterprise, a party of opportunity, and a party of hope. These are our values and these values guide my ambition for this country.

I want to give hope to individuals and families. I want to reward work and enterprise, encourage aspiration, and remove barriers to progress. And I want the Republic that we founded to provide opportunities for all our people. I learned these values from my teachers and friends growing up. From my mother who worked so hard, running the family business as well as our household. And from my father, the local GP, who kept the community healthy and well. From my sisters who always encouraged me to be the best I could be. I learned the value of hard-work, the importance of community, and also about responsibility.

So, as Taoiseach, I am conscious of the enormous responsibility that I now hold. And that's why – every day – I think about giving everybody the same opportunities and chances in life that I had. It is what inspires and drives me forward in my work. I want to ensure that everybody in this country has an equal chance to be the best person they can be. That every child can grow-up to be the best adult they can be. I want our growing prosperity to be shared in all parts of the country. And I want there to be second chances for everyone who needs one. That is what building a Republic of Opportunity is all about. I know that those to whom much has been given, much is expected. Much is expected of this Government. And I promise that we will deliver.

In October we paid our respects to a man whose entire life was devoted to the service of this State, one of our greatest Taoisigh, Liam Cosgrave. We honour his memory by being true to the principles he lived his life by – cuibhiúlacht, dínit, agus tírghrá. Decency, dignity and patriotism. Earlier in the summer, another great Taoiseach, Enda Kenny, stepped down after leading this country out of the worst crisis in a generation. As a country, he gave us back our future. We thank him for it. And so the torch has passed to a new generation of leaders, born European, steeled by a hard and long recession, and ambitious now for our future.

Not so long ago some people claimed that this country would never get back on its feet again – that we would never get people back working again. Well, they were wrong, completely wrong. Thanks to the hard work and sacrifices of the Irish people, and the right policy decisions we made, we achieved what seemed impossible at the time. So when the same critics and cynics now claim that the housing crisis can't and won't be solved, I don't believe them. Yes, there are major challenges with housing and homelessness, and no, they won't be solved overnight. But we have a plan, the plan is working, and we won't stop until we succeed. Because we believe that everyone should have a home. And we believe that every working person should be able to aspire to own one. These are Fine Gael Values, and we won't stop until they become a reality once more.

A major strength of Fine Gael is that we are working so well with our partners, the Independent Alliance and Independent Ministers. Without them, we could not achieve what we have achieved in the past year. I thank them for it and assure them of our commitment to making this government work and making it last.

Fine Gael is a party that listens to people. We also listen to other parties. What marks us out as different is that we are willing to work with others in the Dáil. The Agreement with Fianna Fáil is working and the recent budget is testament to that. We also took onboard the Green Party's proposal to extend maternity leave to mothers who give birth to premature babies. And we are working with the Labour Party to reduce the gender pay gap. In 2018 as we mark the centenary of women getting the vote, and the election of Constance Markievicz to parliament, it is high time that we had equal pay for equal work, and equality of opportunity in all things.

We work with others because a good idea is a good idea. And a good policy is a good policy. It doesn't matter whether it comes from the left or the right. We believe in putting people first. And we always will. But there are some things that we won't compromise on. In Fine Gael we will never compromise on ensuring that we manage the public finances responsibly. That we keep our economy competitive, and foster an environment in which jobs are created, and new businesses born. It's on these strong economic foundations that we enable progress in all other areas.

The experience of the last thirty years shows that we are the only party that can be trusted on the economy, trusted to put the long-term national interest over short-term political gain. And we are never going back.

So this is my message: tá an Rialtas ar bhur dtaobh. Fine Gael is on your side. In everything that we have done so far we have been guided by a single principle: our desire to create opportunities, and build a better and a fairer Ireland. To build that new Republic of which we speak.

It is why we passed a budget which balances the books for the first time in ten years, and reduced income tax – with better tax credits, new benefits. It is why we have worked to restore pay for public servants – nurses, teachers and Gardai – and implemented a new deal for the self-employed, including farmers. It is why we have supported our businesses and entrepreneurs to create jobs across the country. It's why we've increased the State pension three times in three years and the minimum wage on four occasions. It's why we introduced free pre-school and subsidised childcare to help parents pay the bills. And it's why we increased educational resources for children with learning difficulties. This year, because of this government, every child with a serious disability now has a medical card as a right, regardless of their parents' income.

Our philosophy is clear. It is that every child deserves a childhood. Every woman and man deserves a future. And every older person deserves to be treated with respect and dignity. So let's talk about the future and some of the things we want to achieve next. Over the past few years, we have had enormous success in creating new jobs. We can now aspire to full employment, a job for everyone who wants one. But that's not enough. We want better jobs, secure jobs that pay the bills, and allow people to raise a family and aspire to home ownership. So that means improving the quality of employment. It means continuing to increase the minimum wage and enhancing employment rights. It means ensuring that every worker is enrolled in an occupational pension so that they will have more than the State pension when they retire. It means up-skilling people already in employment so everyone can aspire to a promotion or a better job.

On tax, we've already taken 3 in 10 earners, the low paid, out of the tax net altogether. We will now focus on reducing taxes for middle income earners. It's not fair that people on middle incomes pay income tax at the highest rate. That means the State takes almost 50% of everything you earn above that threshold, including any overtime you get, any pay increase you earn, or any extra hours you work. That's not fair. Fine Gael believes in rewarding work. So in the budget we raised the standard cut-off point, and we will do so again in the next one – and the one after that – and the one after that.

For Ireland to succeed, we need to plan long-term. We must imagine what an Ireland in 2040 – home to 8 million people, north and south – should look like. Our new National Development Plan will set-out how we will invest €100 billion over the next ten years and prepare us for the future. The plan will build an Ireland that is future-proofed: balanced regional development, climate action, quality of life, and continued capacity to grow.

In planning for the future, we must prepare for major changes that are coming. Robotics, artificial intelligence, driverless vehicles, renewable energy and smart grids will change our world in the next twenty years in the way the internet and mobile phones did in the last. Ireland should be an early adopter of new technologies.

Making life easier for families is a priority for me and for this party. I believe greater work-life balance and work-place flexibility must be better supported, particularly in the early years. That is why we introduced Paternity Leave and now we want to go further. Our aspiration is to have paid family leave that can be shared between parents in the first year of their child's life, and we are determined to make it a reality. Because the family is the basic unit of society, we want to improve how we care for seriously ill or dependent relatives. A reformed social insurance system will allow a minimum number of days per year, of sick pay for employees who are also carers.

The recent Budget provided a record allocation for health – €15 billion. This will help reduce waiting times, and improve our hospitals, primary care, mental health, and services for older people. But the next decade must also be about reform as well

as resources. Based on the all-party Slaintecare report, we will implement a ten year plan to modernise and streamline our health service. Because a country that spends the fifth highest in the world on healthcare deserves to have a top-tier health service.

Facing the challenge of Brexit, we need to ensure that the free movement of people, goods and services on this island is protected. There can be no return to the border on our island. We will not accept it. In my conversations with European presidents and prime ministers I have received considerable support for the challenges we face. I want to reassure all border communities that we are listening to you, we hear your concerns, and we promise you that we will safeguard your rights, and all that we have achieved. I know this won't be easy, and that all these matters are not entirely under our control. But remember this: four times in our history we decided as a country to take a different road to the United Kingdom. We did it in 1921, when we became independent and we were the first country to leave the Empire. We did it in 1948, when we became a Republic. We did it again in 1979 when we broke the link with sterling and floated our own currency. And then we did it again in 2001 when we joined the Euro without Britain. While there were challenges on every occasion, we overcame them and emerged stronger and more prosperous as a result. And we approach the challenge of Brexit with the same spirit. There may be tough calls and hard decisions ahead. But one thing is certain. Ireland will always remain at the heart of the common European home we helped to build.

We will also continue to work with the parties in the North and the British Government as they seek to ensure that devolution is restored and Northern Ireland's voice is heard again at this crucial time. We are committed to this work no matter how many set-backs may arise, no matter how long it takes.

Is cuid suntasach, tábhachtach í... dár stair... dár gcultúr agus dár saol... anois agus sa toadhchá. Ceiliúrfaimid Bliain na Gaeilge i dhá mhíle is a hocht déag. Tabharfar deis dúinn go léir chun saibhreas ár dteanga náisiúnta a cheiliúradh... agus níos mó daoine a mhealladh chun í a labhairt ar bhun laethúil. So 2018 will be the year of the Irish language.

Almost one hundred years ago, one of our nation's forefather's said that 'the freedom, strength, and greatness' of our new nation was dependent on our economic well-being. Michael Collins was right then. And he was also right when he predicted that with peace, security and unity, no one could limit the greatness to which our country could aspire. Today a new page of Irish history is being written. If we make the right decisions, if we pursue the right policies we can drive our country forward in a way that is lasting and genuine. Michael Collins believed that with courage Ireland could be a 'shining light unto the world'. **Fine Gael has the courage to take us forward. We have the courage to succeed. So join with me, and let's build the Republic of Opportunity together.**



*Fine Gael National Conference
November 10th, 2017
Ballyconnell, County Cavan*

Building A Republic Of Opportunity

Introduction by Minister Richard Bruton

Ireland is at a watershed. Only now after many years of difficult struggle we are, as a country, in a position to set out plans to shape a future which meets our people's hopes and ambitions.

Too often in the past such an opportunity has been destroyed by bad politics. Fine Gael is determined that in setting out our vision for a Republic of Opportunity we shall plan for the long-term in a sustainable way and ensure that the sacrifices are not squandered.

This time our ambition must be authentic and sustainable. This time it must be built on genuine enterprise and service not on speculation or debt. Our vision will sustain a confident, ambitious, progressive, open and fair Ireland – a Republic of Opportunity.

"A Republic of Opportunity" underpins our vision and our plans for the future. It is being built on solid economic foundations, but aware that those foundations must be constantly consolidated. It is ambitious but is being developed in full recognition of the gathering pace of global challenges which will not relent and which must be met with responsibility and resilience.

Our vision is of an Ireland:

- in which every person is empowered to fulfil their potential and is treated with fairness and dignity throughout their lives;
- in which every institution serves our citizens without fear or favour and is proud to stand over the quality of its work; and
- in which every community knits together its diverse elements with respect for the different paths people have followed providing protection and solidarity for all.

Our economic success cannot be taken for granted. Many politicians who opposed every policy measure which made the creation of 230,000 new jobs possible since the crash, are now scrambling to spend the fruits of that success with little understanding of how it can be sustained.

Policy must recognise that the economic model of today must be able to adapt quickly. The financial reserves and the infrastructure to make that possible will be factored into all our plans. Our successful economic model will have to adapt to shifts in international tax and trading regimes, to the challenge of carbon neutrality, to the challenges of migration flows, to the accelerating pace of technological change (robotics, artificial intelligence, driverless vehicles) and countless other shocks we do not yet know of. We are putting plans in place to be ahead of those changes.

If we are to secure opportunity for every person, every community and every region, we must build it on the foundation of a strong economy. That means:

- **building a balanced sustainable and ambitious economy;**
- **making work pay and rewarding, enterprise, innovation and success in international trade; and**
- **only spending on public services what can be supported by the capacity of the economy.**

We must work constantly to future proof the competitiveness of the economy. This requires continuous reform and improvement in both how private markets and public services perform.

Balanced regional development and strong communities are at the heart of our planning. This can only happen if the State prevents the developer-led patterns of population growth of the past. Our plan will ensure that the pattern of key infrastructural investment underpins this vision of balanced regional development. The arteries of a thriving region are strong connectivity, deep talent pools, support for enterprise and innovation in key sectors. Important public services with appropriate access must be assured and new policies for rural towns and villages. They will be built around people and enterprises who can create sustainable competitive advantage in adaptable sectors.

Developing a strong economy is not an end in itself. It enables the creation of equality of opportunity which is the central driving ambition that underpins this plan. Fairness and justice are not to be found in making everyone the same. Every person must have the chance to shape different paths to fulfil their potential. The role of government is not to run people's lives or to provide everything for free. It is to provide opportunity. It is to help when they stumble by providing a second chance. It is to empower people and to respond to diversity of need with choice and opportunity.

In developing a strong economy, we need a sustainable housing sector. We in Fine Gael believe that one of the fundamental responsibilities of the State is to make sure that there are enough safe and secure homes for everyone living in our Republic.

If we don't have homes that people can afford, young or old, renting or buying, then we limit the possibilities of our people. We can't talk about opportunities when people don't have secure homes.

Fine Gael in Government is taking real action to meet our target of building 25,000 new homes every year. As these new homes are built, from social to affordable to private, we will build them together, in mixed communities. And while we believe everyone should be able to aspire to home ownership, we also believe in providing choice. We will continue to develop incentives for build to rent and while also protecting renters through a new regulator for the sector.

We need to build a new **Social Contract** where throughout their life cycle a person can be confident that they will get the help needed to manage the risks in their lives which mar their opportunity for fulfilment. Such a Social Contract cannot be just funded by the few. It demands that everyone contributes when they can, just as they are entitled to draw down when they need it. It is only in this way shall we be able to develop sustainable funding models for our ambitions for health, for education and for pensions.

It is this vision of the **Enabling State** which runs through our plans:

- **to enable opportunity for all and ensure the next generation gets a fair chance;**
- **to make life easier for families at all stages of life; and**
- **to support ageing in security with opportunity and dignity**

Ireland is changing and the expectation of our citizens is changing rapidly. Public institutions must respond. There have been far too many instances in our history, and not just in the past, where our citizens have not fared well in the face of powerful institutions for whom serving their own interests have won out over their duty of care to the citizen. This will change in the Republic of Opportunity. The accountability of those to whom responsibility to lead is given will be a cornerstone. The progress being made through reforms now underway must be thoroughly embedded. Clearly articulated standards and transparent accountability for their achievement will become the norm. Equally there must be a significant change in the small ways in which large institutions often inadvertently create inconvenience and put difficulty in the way of people accessing service. Choice and diversity and responding to citizens needs must characterise our public service, not the convenience of providers. Successful outcomes for the citizen must be the measure of performance of all our public services.

Ireland is fortunate to attract many of most talented people to the public service. They must be guaranteed the opportunity to work in a results-oriented, evidence-informed organisation, which nurtures and deploys their talent to best effect, where they can be proud to work in an innovative and accountable and client centred organisation, which deliver for all our citizens.

Strengthening Justice, Law and Order is a key pillar of our strategy. The most fundamental obligation of the State is to protect its people from criminal acts. Fine Gael is the party of law and order. Our forebears helped create the institutions of the State and oversaw the establishment of the Civic Guard in 1922.

This will be a priority as we press on with the far reaching reforms in the oversight and management of the Gardai, the creation of a robust enforcement regime against white collar crime, and the recognition of the often overlooked impact on victims and their rights to see justice done.

A sporting nation, proud of its language, culture and heritage is a strong pillar of the plan. The Republic of Opportunity which we plan will take greater care to protect and develop the heritage and traditions which bind together strong communities who are at once confident and proud of their roots, but open and welcoming of the many people from diverse backgrounds building their lives with our communities. Through this we can knit together people of diverse backgrounds in active and engaged community life.

As a small country which has historically struggled to achieve and develop our independence, we recognise the potential to achieve far more working together in an ambitious European Union. As a Republic of Opportunity, Ireland shall be a confident builder of an open and responsible European Union. We shall double our global footprint as we shape new opportunities for Ireland. We will be that island at the centre of the world.

We will play our part in taking responsibility for global challenges including the sustainable use of the planet's scarce resources. Climate action is at the centre of all that we seek to achieve as a party, as we recognise that this is the greatest challenge facing our country and the world at large.

Fine Gael has always been a party that has eschewed short-term convenience and populism when in government. Fine Gael is a party that thinks and plans in decades. This document is about that longer term thinking.

Chapter One: Enabling Opportunity For All And Ensuring The Next Generation A Fair Chance

The State must help create the opportunity for every person to fulfil their potential. In particular, it should deliver early interventions that make a positive, timely impact on a person's life; breakdown barriers to clear away the obstacles that prevent some people from succeeding and provide a second chance when people need it.

Our ambition is that:

- families are supported in parenting and have access to quality education and care in the early years, which promote equality of opportunity for children and facilitate the continuing careers of parents;
- students have an engaging learning environment, well attuned to their need and supported by appropriate curricula, teaching and assessment;
- people of all ages have access to a wide range of pathways to fulfilling careers, and difficult transitions which they may encounter are supported;
- strong public services are in place for early diagnosis of difficulties in a child's development;
- that inequalities of access due to gender, disadvantage or disability are systematically eliminated;
- as the expectations of citizens increase, public services respond in a way that facilitates choice, welcomes feedback, and commits to accountable performance; and
- a reformed health service delivers timely access to care based on need, not ability to pay.

Among the actions that will be brought forward to meet this ambition are:

Supporting parenting and quality early childhood programmes

Family is core to who we are as a society and providing support to parents particularly in the early years is a priority for Fine Gael. Research shows children benefit significantly from parental care in their first year.

It is our intention that the measures below are delivered.

- Shared paid parental leave in the first year of a child's life will be introduced incrementally.
- Parents who choose to opt out of work for a longer period should be able to have voluntary social insurance contributions credited to them and have access to a suite of supports for re-entering the workforce (retraining, work experience etc).
- An affordable childcare scheme that ensures fairness and affordability by having a combination of universal benefits and also subventions based on incomes, targeted to support those who need it most. Childcare will be a key enabler to assisting parents back into the workforce after a period of home caring and also staying in work. As the system expands, the State will also support a parent's choice to avail of a registered childminder in the home.
- Building up the quality of the network of voluntary, private and public services will require a willingness by the State to invest in consistent upskilling supports as well as developing standards and service models (e.g. Early Childhood Provision).
- Afterschool services in schools or community hubs will offer a range of family focused supports, which can involve the provision of PE, homework clubs, speech and language therapy, etc.
- Healthy Ireland guidelines on food and activity will be integrated into early year's settings.
- Increase the Homecarers Tax Credit to recognise the work of parents who stay at home.

Providing an engaging, innovative, learning environment for each student

The Action Plan for Education aims to deliver the best education and training services in Europe by 2026. This will oversee some key actions that ensure each student gets the chance to fulfil their potential.

- Curricula will be progressively modernised strengthening STEM and foreign languages, embracing the potential of digital technology to transform learning, and continuing to evolve better assessment methods. Physical education will be developed as an examinable subject for the Leaving Certificate.
- Schools will be supported to become learning organisations undertaking innovation to develop best practice responses for their students. This will involve investment in leadership, support, evaluation, collaboration and improvement, particularly among clusters of schools working together.
- Build the capacity of every school to support the resilience of students through a structured wellbeing strategy supported by a strengthened National Education Psychology Service.
- Continue to develop policies to support children with special education needs and evolve those interventions that best impact upon their progression.
- Close the achievement gaps between DEIS and non-DEIS schools.

Ensuring early identification and timely interventions

One of the biggest potential barriers to a child achieving their potential is delayed intervention when the benefits of such interventions could have the greatest impact. It is our intention:

- that early identification would become a key priority for primary and community care settings with swift escalation where additional evaluation is needed and timely delivery of intervention in appropriate settings. (particularly in speech and language, and occupational therapy);
- that 24/7 mental health supports will be developed in a consistent way across the country with well understood access and referral arrangements for those at the frontline in Education or Primary Care; and
- that the very successful ABC Programmes of support for parents with nutrition, discipline, recreation, reading and preschool preparation will be extended to all areas of high disadvantage.

Provide access to a wide range of career pathways

The World Economic Forum has stated that in many industries and countries, the most in-demand occupations or specialities did not exist ten years ago. The pace of change is set to accelerate. By one popular estimate, 65% of children entering primary school today will ultimately work in a completely new job type that does not yet exist.

Therefore, higher and further level education must continually improve the environment for learning so that students from diverse backgrounds can develop the competences which they need.

It is our intention that:

- apprenticeships and traineeships grow to offer opportunities for at least 20% of school leavers in high quality certified career paths;
- access to Higher Education by persons from disadvantaged backgrounds will increase by 50%, as will enrolment by students who are at work, with programmes suitably blended to make them easy to use, while still holding down a job;
- Ireland will extend its lead in graduating students in science, computing and engineering to match the opportunities in these sectors closely linked to new opportunity; and
- better pathways for those who have become detached from the workplace are developed – homemakers, persons on disability payments, early school leavers and long term unemployed.

Ensuring opportunity for all by eliminating inequality

We want to remove inequality in all its forms so that every person – young or old – has the opportunity to meet their potential.

We will place a focus on removing gender barriers from all aspects of Irish life. Building on the work done to date, we will establish a Commission on the Status of Women in Ireland to review the effectiveness of existing measures to tackle gender inequality. The Commission will submit a report to Government within six-months setting out a roadmap to achieving greater gender equality in Ireland. Implementation of this roadmap will be monitored by the Office of the Taoiseach.

We will assist every family into employment and remove poverty traps.

Recognising the stain on society that is rough-sleeping, we will continue to improve the health, mental health and addiction supports available to rough-sleepers and people in emergency accommodation. Thankfully there are no families rough-sleeping in Ireland – every family that presents as homeless is housed in emergency accommodation in a hotel or Bed and Breakfast to avoid this. Fine Gael has ensured that families will be moved on from this emergency accommodation into more suitable medium-term transitional accommodation, the "Family Hubs", where families have the cooking and laundry services they need for family life. We are committed to moving all families out of hotels and to finding long term sustainable solutions: that means new homes.

Fine Gael is committed to empowering people with disabilities through the introduction of personalised budgets and supportive measures to make worthwhile and sustainable. These budgets will provide more control and choice over the range of services an individual needs, thereby offering greater independence and transparency.

Fine Gael is committed to the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and has published a roadmap setting out the steps to ratification. We are determined to delivering this. Implementing measures such as those recommended in the Making Work Pay Report to ensure employment opportunities are available to all is something Fine Gael is committed to e.g. raising the Medical Card earnings disregard for people on Disability Allowance or on Partial Capacity Benefit associated with Invalidity Pension.

Responding to changing expectations of citizens

That greater choice and respect for parent's wishes who do not wish for denominational education will be facilitated through new Admissions Policies and diversification of patronage.

(See also section on Families)

Deliver better access to healthcare

We want to ensure that everyone has timely access to the health service and that the service is significantly better.

Fine Gael has supported the idea of developing a plan for health reform that has cross party support and outlasts any single Health Minister or Government. We welcome the opportunity the Slaintecare Report presents to guide the development of that plan.

We are the fifth highest spender on health on a per capita basis in the OECD. Our health outcomes in Ireland are good and continue to improve but we can always do better. We will work to deliver a responsive and reformed health service that prioritises primary and social care. This includes an extension of out of hours services to reduce the need to access emergency services. Ambulatory care, diagnostic treatments and minor surgery will be carried out locally in an integrated manner that ensures patients are seen in a setting as close to home as possible.

Most people in Ireland receive a hospital appointment or operation in six months or less but far too many people wait too

long. It remains an absolute priority to reduce hospital waiting lists in Ireland and we will do this through: utilising the NTPF to secure access in private and public facilities for our patients; continued investment in the public hospital system to increase capacity including theatre capacity and longer outpatient clinic hours; and advancing opportunities to carry out more procedures and appointments in a community setting which also reduces pressure on hospitals.

People must have greater choice of care on the basis of their individual needs no matter what part of the country they live in. Clear and accessible pathways to home help, homecare or residential care should be in place with a fair copayment based on means available to all.

New contractual arrangements with GPs will see more health services provided in the community.

Advanced Nurse Practitioners will be empowered to meet the care needs of our population particularly older people and people with chronic disease.

Major capital projects necessary to serve future generations are currently under construction such as the National Maternity Hospital, the National Children's Hospital and the National Forensic Mental Health Hospital. However, there is a need for further major capital investment and that will be feature of the National Development Plan.

We will continue to implement the Healthy Ireland strategy to ensure everyone at every age has the potential to live a healthy life.

Robust oversight of Direct Provision

Direct Provision is offered to those who come to Ireland seeking international protection while their asylum application is being processed. We will introduce an independent inspection regime to provide oversight of Direct Provision services to ensure that high standards are in place and upheld.

These highlighted measures will build upon the existing work that has been carried out by Fine Gael in Government, in particular:

- By every measure, we have dramatically improved our performance in supporting children with special educational needs. More children with special educational needs (SEN) are participating than ever before and we are investing more than ever before to support this. During the worst years of the recession, when public spending was cut across the board, the previous government rightly not only protected the supports for children with special educational needs, but greatly enhanced them. In 2017 the Department of Education and Skills will invest €1.68 billion in special education, up 32% from 2011, almost one fifth of the entire education budget. The number of Special Needs Assistants will have increased by 43%, from 10,575 in 2011 to 15,081 by September 2018. We will continue to invest in to support children with SEN to fulfil their potential. The largest education budget ever was provided for under Budget 2018, to break down disadvantage. In Budgets 2017 and 2018 investment in education will have increased by over €1 billion.
- Launched the DEIS Plan 2017 where over 100 schools will receive additional supports benefitting 20,000 pupils.
- Plans have also been published to ensure that, for the vast majority of State-funded primary schools, religion cannot be used as a criterion in admissions. At the same time minority religion schools are to be protected.
- We reinstated full maintenance grants for the most disadvantaged post-graduate students, from September 2017. This will benefit approximately 1,100 students who meet the eligibility criteria for the special rate of maintenance grant.
- The health budget was chopped by €1.35bn under Fianna Fáil in 2 years (2009 to 2011), but was protected under the 3 consolidating budgets Fine Gael had to bring in (2011-2014), before Budget 2018 delivered the highest ever health budget of over €15 billion. In addition, 1,800 new frontline staff will be employed in health in 2018.
- Budget 2018 allocates an additional €35 million to develop mental health services in 2018. The overall Mental Health Budget will rise from €711 million in 2012 to over €912 million in 2018, an increase of over €200m, or around 28%, in six years.

- In Budget 2018, the total funding provision of €1.9 billion for housing next year is an increase of 46% over 2017 and it will allow us to meet the social housing needs of 25,500 households. A large element – €1.14 billion – is for the delivery of almost 5,900 social homes through a range of construction (5,000) and acquisition (900) programmes. What this means is that every working day almost 100 new social housing solutions will be supported. Currently, every working day over 80 social housing solutions are found for individuals and families across Ireland.
- An allocation of €116 million for homelessness will help meet the increased demand for emergency homeless services and will assist in supporting homeless households with long-term and sustainable housing solutions. In 2018, more than 3,000 exits from emergency accommodation are expected through the provision of social homes and the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP).
- An allocation of €301 million (+€149 million on 2017) for the HAP will enable 17,000 households to be accommodated and will also support the 32,000 existing HAP tenancies.
- Earlier this year we launched a four year National Strategy for Women and Girls, the new strategy aims to shine a light on equal roles for women and girls in all aspects of society. In August we launched a public consultation on tackling the gender pay gap to provide a clearer understanding of the factors underpinning the gender pay gap so that action can be properly tailored towards effective action.
- We launched the Action Plan for Education 2017 aimed at making Ireland's education and training system the best in Europe within a decade. The Action Plan to Expand Apprenticeships and Traineeships in Ireland 2016 – 2020 was launched in January, aimed at delivering 50,000 apprenticeships and traineeship registrations by 2020.

Chapter Two: A Balanced Sustainable And Ambitious Economy

Economic growth is not an end in itself though it is essential to achieving everything else we hope to do. The economic mismanagement of the 2000s resulted in a lost decade for many Irish citizens, which we are only now emerging from. This cannot be allowed to happen again.

Our ambition is that:

- the State's finances are in balance, and strong buffers are in place against future shocks;
- our national infrastructure is developed so that all parts of the country can grow sustainably;
- the growing capacity of the economy enables better opportunity for all our people, but recognises that new commitments must be developed within the capacity of the economy and a prudent level of debt exposure;
- there is a relentless focus on Ireland's international competitiveness and the importance of our trade and enterprise economy;
- talent based on high skills and innovation is the backbone of economic progress;
- entrepreneurship becomes part of our DNA;
- we have responded successfully to whatever economic challenges are posed by Brexit both in securing the best possible deal for Ireland and Europe, but also in diversifying towards new and traditionally underdeveloped markets;
- we have developed the same reputation for Ireland as a home for world leading indigenous SMEs as we have as a location for FDI; and
- Ireland resolves our housing crisis, but never goes back to the developer-led boom and bust era. In particular that:
 - o housing is available to meet the different needs of families through a balance and sustainable mix of social, voluntary and private supply with good standards and affordable cost; and
 - o that the pattern of housing development is regionally balanced in line with the requirements of sustainable development set out in the National Planning Framework with appropriate facilities and infrastructures delivered in a planned way.

Among the actions that will be brought forward to meet this ambition are:

Continue to balance the books

Fine Gael is committed to, at a minimum, balancing our books. We will also move to a situation where a rainy day fund can be resourced in order to provide a buffer for the country. This will help protect against external shocks and help to ensure the long-term sustainability of the public finances.

We are conscious of the lessons of the past. We will ensure that when the Irish economy is in a period of sustained growth – as at present – the rate of government current expenditure increase will not exceed the rate of economic growth.

In the interests of providing greater clarity to all, we will move to a system of three-year budgets with expenditure ceilings and tax and welfare changes set out over the same periods. This will move us further away from the outmoded and archaic budget process. It will give government departments, agencies and taxpayers greater certainty and capacity to plan ahead.

Infrastructure development based on a plan

By 2040, we will have a population of 6 million. Our infrastructure already lags behind our European peers in areas like housing, roads, public transport, broadband, healthcare, water, ICT, and education. Advances are being made, but due to the economic crash we have not been able to make the investments we needed over the past decade.

Therefore, we will support and implement a National Development Plan that incorporates the National Planning Framework for the period to 2040 as well as our €100 billion 10 year capital plan. This will mean that for the first time in Ireland's history our planning and capital investment plans will be meaningfully aligned. This will help ensure that future population and economic growth is more balanced than was the case in the past. The National Development Plan will also set out the principles under which commercial State agencies will invest into the future, thereby ensuring they play their part as well.

The National Development Plan will adopt a phased approach with sequencing. This will help avoid overheating, the crowding out of private sector investment, or the development of imbalances in the economy as occurred in the past. This approach will allow all parts of our country share in the nation's prosperity, and that this investment is done in a sustainable fashion.

Developing our indigenous SME sector

Our indigenous SMEs employ 70% of those working in the private sector. As the result of cross-governmental effort and consistent and supportive policy making Ireland has developed a global reputation for FDI. We need to develop a similar reputation for our indigenous SMEs, especially those with export potential. We will build on the 170 Government supports from 36 Government Departments and Agencies which support Irish start-ups and small businesses. We will cut the red-tape that ties up so many of our SMEs and improve the training and development opportunities available to their management and staff. In those sectors where Ireland enjoys comparative advantage, we will develop and implement long-term plans such as Foodwise 2025.

A sustained focus on productivity

As we approach full employment the focus of government will be on high quality, secure job creation and that there are continuous and sustainable increases in productivity at a national and sectoral levels. While above average productivity gains have been a feature of Irish economic development in recent years, productivity growth is not even across all sectors. Therefore, government needs to work to ensure that high productivity is a feature of all sectors of our economy. Higher productivity is important in sustaining our competitiveness into the long-term and creates the basis upon which sustainable wage growth can be delivered.

To drive this agenda, we shall establish a National Productivity Strategy. This will set out the optimum economic model for Ireland's future, how to sustain more and better quality jobs and how to ensure we never repeat the mistakes of the past. This will have a high productivity agenda at its core.

We will develop initiatives that will strengthen strategic leadership, management and business skills within Irish companies. This will require that we support the work of Skillnets and other educational bodies that up skill those in employment. Higher and Further Education will be re-profiled to support the up-skilling of those in work to prepare for changed workplace requirements. A particular focus will be placed on developing initiatives to give managers in smaller companies access to business school and management education. We will work closely with employers and the enterprise community to secure buy in and engagement for apprenticeships in a wide variety of traditional and non-traditional areas.

Entrepreneurship as part of Irish DNA

Promoting a national spirit and culture of entrepreneurship is essential to facilitating a strong pipeline of future start-ups. There needs to be a continued focus upon the National Policy Statement on Entrepreneurship which targets doubling the jobs impact of start-ups on our economy over the five years to 2019. In looking to the future, educational programmes to encourage and foster a culture of entrepreneurship are essential. The taxation system will be kept under constant review so that where appropriate initiatives to support entrepreneurs can be put in place, they are.

A global innovation leader, ranking in the top ten countries in the world for scientific research

In this uncertain world, it is clear that innovation will be crucial to Ireland's sustained economic development. We will put the funding and supports in place to ramp up PhD enrolments. This research will be across all areas of academia. It is essential to our long-term international competitiveness.

We will make it a goal of Government that by 2025 we are consistently within the top ten countries in the world for scientific research. Among the measures to achieve this, will be continued prioritisation of the work of Science Foundation Ireland. The Government has provided additional funding to bring the number of Research Centres to 17 up from 12 at the beginning of 2017. We will continue to support the programme, bringing the total number of centres to 20. The new centres will undertake excellent scientific research in partnership with industry to address critical and emerging areas of the economy including advanced additive and smart manufacturing, neurological diseases, and the bio-economy.

Reducing red-tape to ensure that Irish companies are not held back

Red-tape is a major impediment to business, in particular the SME sector. The argument is made that our transposition of EU regulations is 'gold-plated' without good reason. It is however not clear if this is true or not. If it is true though, this would place Irish companies at a disadvantage if they are conforming to higher regulatory standards than is necessary. Therefore, Government will undertake a review of the body of regulation that applies to business when it comes to health and safety, information obligations, the environment, heritage and buildings to establish the level of duplication, compare our requirements with peer nations, and identify in which areas red-tape can be reduced and/or removed.

Diversification is crucial to our long-term economic resilience

Balancing the need to exploit our national competitive advantages in certain areas against the dangers of excessive exposure to certain sectors or export markets shall be a principle of our long-term economic planning. Measures to support the diversification for our exporters to new and underdeveloped markets have been prioritised. This is to prepare for the inevitable consequences of a new relationship with the UK as a result of Brexit. Already, a large number of trade missions are taking place, with targeted supports for our exporters and increased investment in our overseas presence (see also Doubling Our Global Footprint). Government will need to constantly monitor the structure of the Irish economy and take early preventive action to prevent over-reliance on particular sectors in terms of employment, economic contribution or tax revenues. In this regard, tax breaks and incentives introduced for sectors will be time limited and revert to previous levels once their purpose has been achieved as was the case with the commercial stamp duty reduction.

That there is a sustainable housing sector

The uncontrolled property boom of the 2000s was at the heart of Ireland's economic collapse. This sector is proving to be the most difficult to develop on a sustainable basis to meet the needs of families and the economy. Government will continue to give its undivided attention to the delivery of Rebuilding Ireland, which has as its goal to:

- build 25,000 houses per year with affordable options for first time buyers;
- deliver a total of 47,000 Social Homes by 2021, 33,000 of which will be direct build;
- get all families out of emergency hotel accommodation as a matter of urgency;
- develop a rental sector model which is sustainable and affordable, with proper standards and without welfare traps; and
- help families with distressed mortgages find a solution.

Looking to the longer term is it our intention that:

- Social and Voluntary Housing will make up 20% of targeted housebuilding;
- there is a sustainable balance of home ownership and renting in all communities with equitable access to private support for different occupancy patterns;
- high standards in newly built homes and rental property are supported by appropriate enforcement; and
- effective anticyclical policies will prevent instability in property markets undermining economic and social progress.

Higher and further education at the heart of our economic development

The higher and further education sector is at the heart of delivering on massive social and economic improvement, breaking cycles of disadvantage, powering a growing economy with needed skills, and pioneering innovation to help solve the big problems of our time.

We are committed to continuing the increase in the level of State and non-state funding in the decade ahead. We have increased funding in 2017, and in 2018 the State and employers will invest more into the sector. Additional funding for the higher education sector must be accompanied by performance-based funding mechanisms and new targets for improved outcomes for the students and funders of the service. These targets will include:

- increasing the number of graduates in critical skills areas such as data analytics and ICT;
- increasing by 50% the level of participation in upskilling programmes by those in work;
- delivering Ireland's ambition to become a global innovation leader;
- building stronger partnerships with enterprise in research and innovation;
- providing for 50,000 upskilling and reskilling places over the next 5 years to meet identified skills gaps in the economy and to support an increase in lifelong learning;
- increasing the number of students undertaking a work placement or work based project as part of their course by 50%; and
- increasing new research enrolments by 50%.

As committed to in the Programme for Government, the Cassells Report which considered options for how to increase funding to the third level sector was referred to the Oireachtas Education Committee in July 2016. This is an area where broad political consensus is needed on the future direction.

We will facilitate the creation of new Technological Universities to ensure a strong base of skills and innovation in our regions. (See Strong Community and Balanced Regional Development).

These highlighted measures will build upon the existing work that has been carried out by Fine Gael in Government, in particular:

Jobs and Employment:

- 225,000 jobs have been created since we launched the Action Plan for Jobs in 2012. There are 48,100 more people at work since this time last year and our enterprise-based economy is now creating over 900 jobs a week.
- The national unemployment has more than halved; it currently stands at 6% in October from a peak of 15.2% in 2012 and for the first time since late 2010 long term unemployment has accounted for less than 50% of total unemployment.
- The Live Register in September was the lowest since September 2008. We will continue to aim for full employment that is a job for everyone who wants one.

Economic Progress:

- The Irish economy grew by 5.1% in GDP terms last year, confirming that Ireland was the fastest growing economy in the European Union in 2016.
- For the first time in a decade, Ireland will broadly balance the books in 2018.
- The establishment of a rainy day fund will help us deal with future shocks. We will transfer €1.5bn into it from the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund, and then put €500m, per annum, into it from 2019.

- A working group is being established to plan the process of amalgamating the USC with PRSI. It is a complex task that will take many budgets but it will mean having a new European-style social insurance system in Ireland.

Preparing for Brexit

- Our priorities are clear: minimising the impact on trade and the economy, protecting the Northern Ireland peace process, maintaining the Common Travel Area and influencing the future of the European Union.
- Following a major diplomatic campaign, Ireland's unique concerns and priorities were reflected in the EU's Negotiating Guidelines. In Phase 1 of EU-UK talks, Irish issues have been one of the 3 major issues discussed by the EU Task Force and UK negotiators, reflecting the high priority attached to our concerns by the EU and its Member States. This is a direct result of high-level political and diplomatic lobbying. And throughout Phase 1 of the talks, Irish officials - under the direction of the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade - have been in almost daily contact with the EU Task Force representing our interests.
- In tandem with these talks, a wide range of consultations have been organised to get the views of civic society, business, communities, and political parties from across the island. These events have included the All-Island Civic Dialogue, Brexit Stakeholder Forums and a range of sectoral events.

Budget 2018 provides further Brexit related measures such as:

- a Brexit Loan Scheme of €300m to SMEs for short-term working capital needs;
- retaining 9% VAT rate for tourism sector;
- an additional €3 million to enable the recruitment of a further 40-50 staff as part of the Department of Business Enterprise and Innovation's 'Boots on the Ground'. This will bring the total additional Brexit related posts in the Department and across the Agencies to 100 in 2018;
- the opening of six new Missions (4 Embassies and 2 Consulates) in Asia, the Americas and the Middle East to assist Irish companies with trade diversification post-Brexit; and
- a €25m loan scheme for the agri-food sector.

Chapter Three: Strong Community And Balanced Regional Development

Balanced regional development is at the heart of our planning for a Republic of Opportunity. It will be built around people, communities, and commercial and social enterprises that can create sustainable competitive advantage. We shall empower communities to knit together their diverse elements and to sustain the service hubs and community outlets that support a vibrant and supportive environment for those of all ages.

Our ambition is that:

- the pattern of future population growth is balanced between all parts of Ireland, and sees growth in rural as well as urban areas;
- a person's location is not a barrier to fulfilling their potential;
- coherent planning for skills, enterprise and innovation will create the basis for sustainable competitive advantage in adaptable sectors for every region;
- new approaches are developed to buttress towns and villages as vibrant centres for thriving rural hinterlands;
- new ways of meeting the needs of citizens at local level will be developed by harnessing technology;
- the rich tapestry of sport, culture and heritage is woven together as assets that can sustain tourism, as well as active and engaged local life; and
- our local government system is further enabled to support community and regional development.

Among the actions that will be brought forward to meet this ambition are:

Put in place a new national and regional development strategy for Ireland

Ireland's population is expected to increase by 1 million by 2040. Without any State intervention this population growth will result in ongoing shift in population and jobs towards Dublin and the neighbouring counties. This is not in the interest of those counties whose infrastructure is already under stress, and it will result in social disadvantage and inequality perpetuated by geographic location.

Therefore, we will deliver and implement a National Development Plan that incorporates the National Planning Framework for the period to 2040 as well as our €100 billion 10 year capital plan. This will mean that for the first time in Ireland's history will ensure that our planning and capital investment plans are meaningfully aligned.

In terms of overall population and employment, the five cities of Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Galway and Waterford will be targeted to accommodate 50% of overall national growth between them, with Ireland's range of large and smaller towns, villages and rural areas accommodating the other 50%. This is within the context of a better national infrastructure in terms of mobility, communications, energy systems and essential public and community services and facilities.

A more effective balance of growth between Ireland's three regions – the Northern and Western; Southern; and Eastern and Midland (which includes Dublin), whereby the Northern and Western and Southern Regions combined should grow at broadly comparable rates to the Eastern and Midland, as opposed to a continuation of the current long-term trend whereby the rest of country has lagged behind the increasing rate of population, jobs and housing provision rates in Dublin and the wider Eastern and Midland area. There will be a major new policy emphasis on renewing and developing existing built-up areas rather than continual expansion and sprawl of cities and towns out into the countryside, with a target of at least 40% of new housing to be delivered within the existing built-up areas of cities, towns and villages on infill and/or brownfield sites.

To reverse rural decline, a significant proportion of national population and economic growth will be targeted at building up the fabric of our network of smaller towns, villages and rural areas with much of that happening by redeveloping derelict and

under-utilised lands inside small towns and villages. A growth target of 15% for our small towns and rural areas in the period to 2040 will ensure their vibrancy.

While there has been significant investment in transport over the past 20 years, the island's growing population, together with the continued growth in tourism numbers and freight traffic will place further demands on transportation infrastructure. Increased transport connectivity, including bus and rail services, between the main cities, to the north-west region and along the border region allied to development and promotion of cross border blueways, greenways, and walking trails will harness the potential of the island.

Extending the motorway network to link the five cities to each other, and to upgrade key national routes up to and including motorway standard is crucial to achieving balanced regional development. Particular priority is attached to the M20, N4, N5 and A5/N2.

Broadband to every premises, but what then?

Today 65% of all premises in the country have access to high speed broadband (download speed of a minimum of 30 megabits per second). That will increase to 75% by the end of 2018 and to 91% by the end of 2020. Every premise will have access to high speed broadband when the National Broadband Plan is completed soon thereafter. This means that every home, farm, and business in the State will have access to a future-proofed broadband service.

However, while there has been considerable focus on ensuring that the National Broadband Plan is delivered upon for every part of the State, there has not been the same focus on how this major capital and technological investment is exploited. Government must fully exploit this investment and deliver a dividend socially and economically from national broadband penetration to the benefit of all our people.

Regional Enterprise Strategies

Fine Gael was the first to develop a coherent response to the enterprise needs of the regions with the Regional Action Plan for Jobs. Employment is now expanding in all regions.

These multi-annual plans involve exploiting the new investments being made in key infrastructural arteries, in heritage assets in town centres and in educational infrastructure.

At their heart is a strategy for regional initiative that achieves co-ordination across the National Enterprise Agencies and the regional stakeholders. They will continue to be driven by:

- regional jobs targets by IDA and Enterprise Ireland;
- competitive funds for the development of regional sectoral initiatives;
- the strengthening of supports for enterprise start-ups;
- the increased uptake by enterprise for quality programmes for management, lean production, innovation and market diversification;
- a programme of investment in advance facilities by IDA in strategic locations; and
- the promotion of local business networks for collaborative initiatives.

Skills as a Driver of Balanced Regional Development

A rich pool of talent in a region is a magnet for foreign investment and a seed bed for new enterprise. It is our ambition:

- to make multi-campus Technological Universities a core driver of regional development; and
- to strengthen the Further Education options to build the skill base of sustainable regional sectors.

Fine Gael has an ambitious vision for the role which Education and Training can play in delivering balanced regional development. They will provide key resources to support strong enterprises with innovative products and services, capable of building diversified and sustainable markets.

New apprenticeships, traineeships and new blended certified programmes will support enterprises to strengthen their talent base, both of new recruits and existing management and employees.

The new Technological Universities will deliver a wider range of higher skill programmes, develop capacity for applied research, strengthen enterprise hubs and become a spine for regional hubs around key regional sectors, such as ICT, food, software, advanced manufacturing, pharma, engineering, etc.

The new Regional Skills Council will plan a key role in developing a strong bridge between enterprise in the region and the Education institutions. Investment in education at all levels will develop essential arteries to support the proposed pattern of population growth set out in the National Planning Framework.

Expand and extend the tourism opportunities in the regions

Our tourism sector is a hugely significant but frequently forgotten part of our overall economic recovery. A strong and consistent programme of capital investment in our tourism infrastructure is important, particular with regard to encouraging longer stays and extending the tourist season. Investing in and extending our Blue way/Green Way network is important. As we have seen with other Blue Ways and Green Ways they provide a community with a vital local amenity while also attracting increased tourism numbers to the area. Air access is particularly important to our tourism sector, and support for air access initiatives will be provided, as will continued support for our regional airports.

A strong emphasis on supporting the agri-food sector

A strong agri-food and seafood sector is a major part in supporting employment and economic development in the most peripheral areas of the country, as well as in every town and village. Fine Gael has always recognised and supported the importance of the family farm structure and the need to ensure rural and coastal communities receive the investment needed to continue to grow these sectors and provide a livelihood today for the next generation.

This requires a continued focus from government on delivering the targets contained within the 'Foodwise 2025' and 'Harvesting Our Ocean Wealth' strategies. Diversification of markets is hugely important. Expanding our agri-food exports by opening new and emerging markets, growing live exports and focusing on building up the presence of agricultural attachés, Bord Bia/Enterprise Ireland representatives will be central to the Doubling the Global Footprint initiative.

A strongly resourced and well negotiated future Common Agriculture Policy will be fundamental to driving further growth in the agri-food sector ensuring that it is adequately funded and has a fair share for Ireland.

Brexit poses one of the most serious challenges ever faced by the agri-food and seafood sectors. We will continue to prioritise our farmers, food businesses, fishermen and processors in the context of negotiations and continue to rollout supports for the industry in meeting emerging challenges such as fluctuations in currency.

Making sure that farmers are best placed to derive a fair income from the marketplace is also strategically important. We will work with the Commissioner to introduce greater fairness and transparency across the supply chain at an EU level, supported by national legislation, we will continue the rollout of the producer organisation framework in the beef sector to give farmers more negotiation power in the marketplace and continue to invest in areas like knowledge transfer to give farmers the support needed to innovate at farm level and increase profitability. We will also introduce taxation measures and explore other policy tools to protect against income volatility.

Encouraging the next generation of farmers will be vital to securing the future of the agri-food sector. We will continue to rollout taxation measures that are designed to encourage greater land mobility, we will strategically use the National Reserve to encourage new entrants and younger farmers. We will continue to prioritise young farmers with enhanced grants in on-farm investment schemes and we will invest in the next generation through the green cert system, through agri-food programmes at third level and through research.

Develop rural town centre policies and town teams

Rural towns perform as local drivers for their surrounding areas through well-established economic, administrative and social functions. They support clusters of services, have a significant share of homes and jobs, and act as transport hubs for a much wider rural community. We will strengthen rural towns to be a focus for local housing and employment growth and regeneration, to include derelict site transformation and new technology, such as low carbon and renewable heat and digital connectivity.

We will put in place a framework for the development of town centre policies across the country which will allow for clear direction and support. As part of this will examine how some towns, even at times of national economic hardship, thrived and seek to develop a toolkit so that other towns can learn from that experience. We will also continue to develop and support the Town and Village Scheme to allow the rejuvenation of rural towns and villages throughout Ireland.

A particular concern is that technological transformation means that more and more services provided by the State and its agencies will be carried out online. This is to the convenience of the public and will be increased further by the ongoing expansion of the national broadband network. However this does present a challenge whereby the demand for state services to be delivered in person reduces the need for public facing infrastructure. Therefore, we will investigate measures to establish community/town centre hubs to encompass the post office, tourist information, citizen information centre for a focal point of State infrastructure in small towns and villages. We will support local enterprise to get online to take advantage of the opportunities which are offered by online trading.

Allowing communities thrive is often supported and driven by key community teams. Town Teams should be established to ensure a more co-ordinated approach to town and village revival. Town teams will be led by those within the community willing to drive and implement the positive changes needed. These town teams would be supported by the local authorities.

These highlighted measures will build upon the significant progress achieved on balanced regional development already achieved by Fine Gael in Government, in particular:

- The appointment of a Minister for Rural and Community Development is an important element towards ensuring that the challenge of rural development is adequately prioritised and policies in that regard are effectively implemented.
- The proportion of jobs being added outside Dublin has increased since the last quarter. 80% - or 4 out of every 5 jobs - added over the period came from outside Dublin which means we are surpassing our target of ensuring that 135,000 (68%) of the 200,000 jobs we are targeting up to 2020 should come from outside Dublin.
- Earlier this year we launched the Action Plan for Rural Development which is the first all of Government response to the economic and social development of rural Ireland. Ensuring its implementation and that all parts of the country have a chance to share in economic growth is key to the Republic of Opportunity. Of the 276 Actions in the Action Plan, 202 were either due for delivery in the first half of 2017, or highlighted activity taking place in the first half of 2017. Exactly 195 of these 202 actions were either completed on schedule or are in progress.
- The Atlantic Economic Corridor (AEC) proposal will contribute to effective regional development by creating sufficient scale along the western part of Ireland to attract additional business investment, to grow jobs and to support vibrant local communities. A Taskforce is currently progressing the AEC proposal.
- The importance of clear and effective spatial planning is underscored by its absence in our recent history. The forthcoming National Planning Framework ("Ireland 2040 – Our Plan") will address unbalanced development that has seen major growth only in the East.
- €150m fund for low interest loans offering cash flow support for farmers. This scheme provides farmers with a low cost, flexible source of working capital, allowing them to pay down more expensive forms of short-term debt, ensuring the ongoing financial sustainability of viable farming enterprises. All of the €150m is committed and is in the process of being drawn down.

- €12bn has been negotiated by Fine Gael in Government under the current CAP, delivering €4bn in farm gate investment to rural communities. €241m negotiated for the seafood sector under the Seafood Development Programme, more than double the level of previous investment in this area, with over €40m to be invested in 2018 and €25m in additional funding for Areas of Natural Constraint, where farmers are operating on marginal land.
- The Rural Social Scheme supports low-income farmers and fishermen. Under Budget 2017 500 extra places were provided on the Rural Social Scheme, the first increase since 2006. Budget 2018 provides for an additional 250 places on the Rural Social Scheme.
- Fine Gael introduced 'Acorns' – a female rural entrepreneurship programme, aimed at supporting female entrepreneurs in the agri-food sector in rural communities.
- Under the 2016 Town and Village Renewal Scheme, €10 million was allocated to help revitalise town and villages across Ireland. 281 rural towns and villages across the country are set to benefit from over €21 million in funding under the 2017 Town and Village renewal scheme.
- Government recently signed an agreement with Eir to deliver broadband to 300,000 rural premises. The Government's National Broadband Plan (NBP) will ensure high speed broadband access (minimum 30 megabits per second) to all premises in Ireland, regardless of location. By 2020 it is expected that 91% of premises in Ireland will have access to high speed broadband.
- We have increased spending for local and regional roads in 2017; furthermore the reintroduction of the Local Improvement Scheme will support the improvement of non-public rural roads is an important part of the delivery of the Government's Action Plan for Rural Development. Earlier this year the M17/M18 Gort to Tuam motorway opened two months ahead of schedule and the long awaited M20 Limerick to Cork motorway is to be included in the 10 Year Capital Plan.
- We have committed to increasing the number of GPs in rural communities, allowing rural dwellers better access to vital health services.
- We will invest €200m in 11 state of the art projects, in Institutes of Technology around the country. This investment will help drive regional development and meet many of the skills needs that have been identified by the National Skills Council and the nine regional skills fora, which were established earlier this year. These state of the art projects will lead to a step change in STEM-related skills, including ICT, engineering and life sciences across the country. These new facilities will help drive regional development and will be transformative for the individual institutions and the regions they serve.

Chapter Four: Making Work Pay

We must bolster the success created by Irish workers and enterprises by ensuring that all get fair reward for their efforts and for the risks they take. People must be supported throughout their careers so that everyone has the opportunity for full participation in the workplace. Rising living standards will be supported by a growing economy and productivity increases.

Our ambition is that:

- work is the core of the agenda to help every person fulfil their potential;
- that as we move towards full employment, the type and quality of employment opportunities becomes our overriding target;
- the tax system rewards effort and enterprise;
- we give people greater security through a radically reformed Social Insurance system;
- it will be easier to balance the responsibilities and choices of rearing a family with a fulfilling career path; and
- support workers in having the opportunities to up-skill and retrain so people have continued opportunities throughout their working life.

Among the actions that will be brought forward to meet this ambition are:

Introducing a real social insurance system based on the contributory principle

The decision has been taken that rather than abolishing the USC outright, we will merge it with PRSI into a single social insurance payment. The end goal – a social insurance system based on the contributory principle, that delivers real benefits and security to those that pay in - is a goal worth achieving. The benefits of such a system would include improved supports at different life stages and acts as a safety net at difficult times, for example:

- better sick pay entitlements;
- paid parental leave;
- enhanced medical and other treatment benefits; and
- unemployment benefits that are linked to the level of contributions.
- support for re-entering the workforce

In particular this social insurance system will work to provide the self-employed and those in the 'gig' economy with a safety net in circumstances where their business or careers are interrupted. The extension of jobseekers benefit and carers benefit to the self-employed will be a priority.

The social insurance system will move to a Total Contribution Model for State contributory pension entitlement and ensure that a long record of contribution is recognised in entitlement.

Ensuring a fair taxation system that does not penalise work

We shall build on our track record of tax reform. Among our priorities to 2025 will be:

- a medium term tax strategy that consistently raises out the point at which people on modest income reach the top rate of tax in every budget;

- reducing the marginal tax rate;
- completion of tax credit equality for the self-employed and increase the Homecarers Tax Credit to recognise the work of parents who stay at home;
- improving the start-up relief and the relief from Capital Gains Tax for gains from internationally tradeable enterprises to be internationally competitive, with particular relief for serial entrepreneurs;
- reduce the rate of DIRT, Capital Gains Tax and Capital Acquisitions Tax (CAT);
- raise the threshold for CAT below which a parent can pass on assets to their children;
- restore the 100% Mortgage Interest Relief to property owners who let their properties;
- apply Capital Gains Tax to share options rather than income tax; and
- promotion of take-up of the new share option scheme (KEEP) for key workers in dynamic small companies and, if appropriate, extend this scheme for larger companies.

Aspiring to full employment and quality jobs for all

Due to the improvements in the country's economic performance overseen by Fine Gael since 2011, achieving full employment in the next few years is now a realistic aspiration for the country. As unemployment has fallen there have also been sharp falls in involuntary part-time work and precarious self-employment arrangements. As we approach full employment, the focus of Government will be the creation of good jobs with good pay, terms and conditions and pension rights. This agenda will be led by an emphasis on people in developing and updating their skills throughout their working lives, as well as the focus on improving the productivity of the Irish workforce detailed elsewhere. The types of jobs being created and supported, their sustainability and regional spread, will become the overarching goal for the successor for our enterprise strategy and future versions of the Action Plan for Jobs.

Legislation is being drafted to provide protection to people in precarious employment positions and this will continue to be monitored and updated in response to employment practices. Sustainable increases in the minimum wage will occur, so that work really pays. Zero Hour contracts will be outlawed.

We will give people more control over their career path

Fewer and fewer people have just one career and one employer throughout their working lives. Having to change jobs and careers, through choice or requirement, is increasingly the norm. This means that people need to have access to training and up-skilling in a manner that is flexible and suited to their needs. In support of that, we will:

- open up training opportunities related to a person's career and to the ability to access career advice/mentoring based on a person's insurance record without need to become unemployed;
- introduce initiatives to up-skill the workforce particularly in the areas of hospitality, food, retail, childcare and community care using models such as apprenticeship and support traineeship and blended learning suited to those in work, so that those working in those sectors can build their skills and develop better career paths;
- create a stronger system of recognition of prior learning so that a wider portfolio of experience can be certified for people with histories of varied working or voluntary activities; and
- continue to evolve employment law so that vulnerable workers have protection.

Supporting work and family balance

We shall support the balancing of family and work through a variety of measures including:

- shared paid parental leave in the first year of a child's life;
- parents who choose to opt out of work for a longer period should be able to have voluntary social insurance contributions credited to them and have access to a suite of supports for re-entering the workforce (retraining, work experience etc); and
- having an affordable childcare scheme that ensures fairness and affordability by having a combination of universal benefits and also subventions based on incomes, targeted to support those who need it most. Childcare will be a key enabler to assisting parents back into the workforce after a period of home caring and also staying in work. As the system expands, the State will also support a parent's choice to avail of a registered childminder in the home.

Ensuring that everyone who wants to work, can

Fine Gael believe in the value and importance of gainful employment. With the decrease in unemployment we have helped those looking for work. The next step is to help People who have lost connection with the workforce. Unfortunately there are barriers and disincentives to people seeking gainful employment which need to be removed. Therefore to place a whole of Government focus on reducing such disincentives, a target of increasing the worker force participation level from 60% at present to 65% over the next decade will be set. Some of the measures required to improve this are highlighted separately within this document (e.g. supports to access training, childcare, etc) but will also include increasing income disregards for benefits when a person is returning to the workforce as well as allowing them to maintain benefits and entitlements for a period. Delivery of the Action Plan for Jobless Households is important in this.

Currently there are over a quarter of a million people with disabilities receiving a social welfare illness or disability weekly payments in Ireland. Almost half of these are receiving Disability Allowance. Ensuring people with disabilities are supported to achieve their employment ambitions is one of the most significant labour market and social policy challenges. Introducing meaningful reforms, such as those recommended in the Making Work Pay Report to ensure employment opportunities are available is something Fine Gael is committed e.g. measures such as fast-tracking the return to Disability or Invalidity Pension for people where employment does not work out, thereby reducing the 'risk' factor of taking on employment opportunities.

There has been significant progress made already:

- We have removed poverty traps by improving Family Income Supplement introducing Back to Work Family Dividend, reforming Rent Support to make it income-related (rather than dependent on not working) and by allowing retention of certain benefits when returning to work.
- We cut the USC again in Budget 2018; the 4th successive cut under Fine Gael. In addition a working group is being established to plan the process of amalgamating the USC with PRSI. It is a complex task that will take many budgets, but it will mean having a new European-style social insurance system in Ireland.
- A system where those earning an average wage are charged the higher rate of tax is unfair and we cannot hope to remain competitive if someone on a relatively low income and who decides to work a few hours overtime has nearly half that extra money taken in tax. That is why we increased the entry point to the higher rate of income tax by €750 p.a., from €33,800 to €34,550. Together with the USC cut this is worth €500/600 to an average family on two incomes..
- Increased Earned Income Tax Credit to €1,150 over 3 Fine Gael budgets, benefitting over 147,000 self-employed people and helping small and growing business around the country address the challenges arising from the changing international environment.

- The national minimum wage will be increased to €9.55 in 2018, the 4th increase under Fine Gael. Also, the ceiling of the second USC rate band is increasing from €18,772 to €19,372. This ensures that a full-time worker on the minimum wage who benefits from the increase in the hourly minimum wage rate will remain outside the top rates of USC.
- A new Brexit Loan Scheme will make €300 million in affordable financing available to Irish businesses that are or will be impacted by Brexit. This will also help small and medium businesses innovate and create new Europe and international markets other than the United Kingdom. This complements existing measures such as the Credit Guarantee Scheme and the Microenterprise Loan Fund.
- A new Key Employee Engagement Programme (KEEP), to support SMEs to retain key employees by providing for an advantageous tax treatment on share options. KEEP will allow small to medium enterprises to provide key employees with a financial incentive linked to the success of the company.
- We recently announced details of the extension of the treatments available under the Treatment Benefit scheme. The extended optical and dental services under the scheme will be available to qualified PRSI contributors. Currently over 2.5 million contributors, including 450,000 self-employed, may have entitlement to claim Treatment Benefits.
- From December the Invalidity Pension will be extended to the self-employed. This will give the self-employed access to the safety-net of State income supports if they become permanently incapable of work as a result of an illness or disability without having to go through a means test.
- Draft legislative proposals have been approved to tackle precarious work and zero hour contracts, with a particular focus on low-paid, more vulnerable workers.
- In housing we have a plan in place, Rebuilding Ireland, and it is working. Since that plan was launched just over a year ago, planning permissions are up 49% and commencement notices are up 47%. Almost 15,000 new homes were made available for occupation in 2016, an 18% increase on 2015 output.
- As we build homes we are ensuring that new supply is delivered at affordable prices. Measures are underway and working: for example, the rent caps introduced in early 2017 are working, if trends in Dublin continue then rent increases this year will be below 4%, that's a big drop on the more than 8% increase last year.
- An additional €75 million on top of an existing €200 million will be provided to allow for affordable homes as well as affordable housing schemes to be brought forward in the coming years.

Chapter Five: Making Life Easier For Families

Family is the core of who we are as a society. Families must be empowered to overcome the challenges thrown up by life, are helped to manage the periods of peak cost, have fair access to a client-centred public service which offers choice and commit to accountable performance.

Our ambition is that:

- families will be supported to prepare for and share responsibilities of raising a family with wider access to leave where they choose for family purposes, and supported to return to the world of skills development and of working throughout their lives
- families will be supported to take responsibility for a healthy, active and fulfilled lifestyle, supported by easy access to early diagnosis, primary care and a strong network of community supports delivered in an easily accessed manner
- families will have access to fair copayment models where fulfilling their basic needs for accommodation, education and care pose difficulties for them; and
- families are supported in access to public services by strong charters of service for Parents and Children.

Among the actions that will be brought forward to meet this ambition are:

Supporting parenting and quality early childhood programmes

Family is core to who we are as a society and providing support to parents particularly in the early years is a priority for Fine Gael. Research shows children benefit significantly from parental care in their first year.

It is our intention that the measures below are delivered.

- Shared paid parental leave in the first year of a child's life will be introduced.
- Parents who choose to opt out of work for a longer period should be able to have voluntary social insurance contributions credited to them and have access to a suite of supports for re-entering the workforce (retraining, work experience etc).
- An affordable childcare scheme that ensures fairness and affordability by having a combination of universal benefits and also subventions based on incomes, targeted to support those who need it most. Childcare will be a key enabler to assisting parents back into the workforce after a period of home caring and also staying in work. As the system expands, the State will also support a parent's choice to avail of a registered childminder in the home.
- Building up the quality of the network of voluntary, private and public services will require a willingness by the State to invest in consistent upskilling supports as well as developing standards and service models (e.g. Early Childhood Provision).
- Afterschool services in schools or community hubs will offer a range of family focused supports, which can involve the provision of PE, homework clubs, speech and language therapy, etc.
- Healthy Ireland guidelines on food and activity will be integrated into early year's settings.
- Increase the Homecarers Tax Credit to recognise the work of parents who stay at home.

Fulfilling Lifestyles

Significant progress has been made in developing and supporting strategies for Wellbeing, Healthy Eating, Active Lifestyles and Avoidance of Substance Abuse. However, more can be done to empower families and communities to participate and take control of their own health and wellbeing.

- Service networks both public and voluntary will be, wherever possible, supported to offer access through the school or similar community facility. This will involve co provision of PE, homework clubs, speech and language therapy, etc. using some of the capacity of the schools. A pilot in Speech and Language will commence in a number of schools in 2018.
- Schools are a powerful source of leadership in our communities as demonstrated by the adoption of flags to mark commitment to active lifestyle, respect for the environment, healthy eating, tolerance and integration. Support will be provided to extend these drives into the wider family networks and local community
- Primary social care model will continue to evolve with an expanding range of diagnosis, management of chronic care in the community, remote connectivity with patients out of hours using technology, and the expansion of community support for independent living
- Building up the quality of the network of voluntary, private and public services will require a willingness by the State to invest in consistent upskilling supports, and Recognition Systems for Volunteers as well as developing standards and service models [eg. Early Childhood Provision]

Fair copayment

We need to develop sustainable and fair funding models in all areas of Governmental supports. At present there is a patchwork of supports under which the terms of access to supports include medical card-holding, other means-tests, homelessness status, locality, diagnostic assessments, and the eligibility to claim tax relief. This gives rise to anomalies, traps and unfairness in some cases. For example, the all or nothing nature of marginal tax relief for employment of a carer creates unfairness for those who are outside the category to derive benefit.

Our objective should be to have more consistent rules where access and the level of support are offered on a more coherent basis. This will require careful work to develop robust models. The new approach to allocation of Resource Teaching Support is a good example of a fairer, better and more flexible model has been evolved. The reform of social insurance can assist in this respect.

That everyone can aspire to own their own home

Rebuilding Ireland is a clear plan to ensure that our home building reaches sustainable levels by 2021 with 25,000 new homes a year being built. However, while improving supply is a major issue, so too is addressing the challenge of affordability. Fine Gael believes that home ownership should be something that every worker can realistically aspire to, and that a high level of home ownership is positive for society. Therefore, we will look at measures that will support the delivery of affordable housing which do not impact on quality or standards. We will also seek to develop measures to support young couples in particular to purchase their own homes recognising that high rents make it difficult to raise the required deposits.

We cannot continue to so markedly differentiate between those that are eligible for social housing, and so get full state supports, and those who are not and get almost nothing. We want to support lower income households to afford to buy their own home if they so choose. Accordingly, €275 million is being dedicated to providing affordable homes and a new affordability scheme.

While we believe everyone should be able to aspire to home ownership, we also believe in providing choice. People should be able to decide whether homeownership or rental is appropriate to them based on their work and life choices. Therefore, we will continue to develop incentives for build to rent sector. We will significantly enhance protections for renters through a new regulator and better standards for the sector, with stronger sanctions against rogue landlords.

(see also A Balanced Sustainable and Ambitious Economy chapter)

Family-Centred Public Services

There has been a major effort across the Public Sector to strengthen service standards, develop performance accountability and give citizens more say in the service which they receive, Fine Gael believes we can go a lot further.

- Much can be done to remove bureaucratic obstacles to convenient access to services. These can stretch from failure to offer scheduled appointments, to obstacles to change a course. An audit and elimination of unnecessary obstacles will be conducted to make access more convenient by every agency and Department overseen from the Taoiseach's Department
- Parents and Children's Charters will be developed across all key services.
- Service Standards and performance indicators will be published for all citizen-facing services, and wider use of user surveys and feedback opportunities will be developed, so that users experience is constantly shaping the quality of service
- Education will develop new choices for parents who do not want denominational reduction for their children, while valuing the ethos of religious schools
- Parents and students will be embraced as full partners in education, and receive appropriate information about their pupil and their school, have more say over costs in school, and be integrated into the planning and activities of the school
- A stronger focus on outcomes for students will inform Education Policy, particularly in ensuring that cycles of disadvantage are broken down

Fine Gael will develop proposals to address access to, affordability of, necessary aids, appliances and assistive technologies required for everyday living.

These highlighted measures will build upon the existing work that has been carried out by Fine Gael in Government, in particular:

- Two week's paid Paternity Benefit for new fathers was introduced in September 2016. It is payable at a minimum rate of €235 per week for two weeks for employees and self-employed people who are on Paternity Leave from work. It is available for up to 26 weeks after the child's birth or adoption placement, and it is also available to same sex couples.
- From September 2018 all children will be entitled to a full two years of the ECCE scheme or free preschool, as it has become known. This builds on last year's development which extended the scheme from 38 weeks, to an average of 61 weeks for children depending on their date of birth and age starting school.
- A universal childcare subsidy, of up to €1,040 per year, for children aged from 6-months up to starting their free pre-school year at 36 months was introduced in September 2017.
- In addition, families on lower incomes, who qualify by way of a means test, will be eligible for supports worth up to €7,500 per year for children aged 6 months to 15 years of age.
- We expanded the School Meals Programme to benefit an extra 47,000 pupils in 245 schools, on top of the 200,000 children already benefiting. The School Meals Programme makes a real difference. It improves attendance and concentration in school which in turn is good for discipline and improves educational outcomes for children.
- This year the Back to School allowance has been increased by 25% in recognition of the costs faced by parents at the start of every school year. In addition, a range of measures which will require school authorities to adopt practices which will reduce the cost of school uniforms and other costs.
- Following the achievement of free GP care for under-6s, we are continuing to support healthcare for families and all children in receipt of a Domiciliary Care Allowance now get automatic access to a Medical Card, benefiting 9,800 children.

- Budget 2018 reduced prescription charges and reduced the threshold for the Drugs Payment Scheme from €144 to €134
- All Junior Certificate students can take wellbeing classes from September. The introduction of a Wellbeing Programme in all schools at Junior Cycle is part of a commitment in the Action Plan for Education to actively support and develop wellbeing initiatives to promote the development of mental resilience and personal wellbeing in schools.
- The Cost of Insurance Working Group published its Report on the Cost of Motor Insurance on 10 January 2017. Work is ongoing on the implementation of the recommendations by the relevant Government Departments and Agencies; encouragingly most recent CSO data (for September) indicates that private motor insurance premiums have reduced by 14.3% year-on-year.
- Increased Home Carer's Credit by €200 to €1,200 (over Budget 2017 and Budget 2018). This credit is of assistance to over 80,000 families where one spouse works primarily in the home to care for children or other dependants.

Chapter Six: Ageing With Security, Opportunity And Dignity

Life expectancy is increasing as is the average and median age. Yet rather than this be a cause for celebration, it is generally presented as a problem for government and society. Fine Gael believes that this is an opportunity for Ireland that should be embraced. While an ageing population presents challenges that must be dealt the emphasis should be towards the positive. However for those positives to be realised, people must have confidence that as they age and enter retirement, that they will be able to do so with security, opportunity and dignity.

Our ambition is that:

- people enjoy a financially secure retirement, with sufficient savings to replace pre-retirement income levels and have peace of mind of a reasonable standard of living in retirement without being wholly reliant on State supports;
- as people grow older they are secure in the knowledge that supports and services are available to them to help them stay in their home independently and they enjoy real choice in the housing and care options for people as they age;
- there is easier access to further education or training, more flexible models of education that assists older learners when they wish to continue to work and reskill; and
- increased promotion of a healthy and active lifestyle as a person ages to prevent illness and costly treatments.

Among the actions that will be brought forward to meet this ambition are:

Pension reform

Improvement in life expectancy and an increasing time spent in retirement means we must ensure that people do not lose out in retirement and instead are enabled to adequately replace their pre-retirement income level.

Older men and women make a remarkable contribution to Irish society and this should be recognised with sufficient increases to both the contributory and non-contributory State pensions.

We will move to a total contributions approach for State Pension (Contributory) for the newly retired by 2020. This will specifically acknowledge and allow for time spent caring, whether for our children or elderly loved ones. In tandem with that, we will work to resolve the various anomalies identified in the current provision of the contributory pensions.

We will index increases in the State pension to the cost of living as an automatic increase every year. Nobody should fear poverty in retirement.

Currently only 35% of people in the private sector have an occupational pension. The means that 65% are not and are therefore entirely reliant on the State pension. We want to help these people save and prepare for their pension years in good time, so that they are well prepared to enjoy their retirement years.

Therefore, we will introduce auto-enrolment into pension schemes for all workers under the age of 60 who are not already in a pension scheme. Contributions will be made by employees and employers. This will achieve universal pension coverage and act as a major bulwark against pensioner poverty. There will be an opt-out for employees and an opt-in option for the self-employed, homemakers, carers and other.

In doing this, we will ensure that Ireland has the most effective, deliverable and sustainable automatic enrolment model resulting in an increase the wellbeing, financial security and independence of future retirees.

Living Longer, Healthier Lives

Healthier and active lifestyles will be a key health priority. Treating chronic illnesses in the community through increased primary and social care capacity will ensure awareness, early diagnosis, intervention and treatment, better outcomes for patients, and less pressure on our acute hospitals.

Home care services will be developed and placed on a statutory footing for the first time so that there is an alternative to the Fair Deal scheme for those who can live at home and in their communities for as long as possible with appropriate supports.

We will also ensure that the Fair Deal continues to support those who require long term residential care, including seeking to ensure maximum transparency, reviewing the scheme to make sure it remains fair and adequately funded.

Increased intensive home care packages for people living with dementia and to build on awareness campaigns, education and up-skilling of GPs and primary care teams in dementia diagnosis, post-diagnosis support and management, in line with the National Dementia Strategy.

Carers play a vital role and deserve to be supported by the State. Regular respite for carers is a must. This will be supported by the introduction of legislation which will allow employees to claim up to five sick days per annum in circumstances where they are caring for seriously ill or dependent relatives. A changed social insurance system will provide for this.

Carers in receipt of full-time Carers Allowance need additional support from the State. These supports would include provision of the GP Visit Medical Cards to ensure that they are in a position to maintain their own good health.

Helping prevent isolation

We will help older people at risk of isolation to be connected to their communities through technology assisted contact, sharing economy services and access to voluntary or statutory services.

Housing choice in older age

The housing requirements of people change through their life cycle. The housing requirements of an older couple, or an older person living alone, may be different to when they were younger. The development of retirement complexes, or purpose built apartments for older people can be a comfortable and secure choice for some and need to form part of our housing response in the years ahead – both for private and social housing.

We will require local authorities to release their own land or zone land in villages (urban or rural) for sites for secure homes for older people at the heart of their communities. We will revise the tax and/or means test rules to remove the penalties for older people who would like to trade down.

Protecting older people from abuse

We recognise the financial and personal risk of hidden abuse of older people. We will put in place better codes around caring and financial decision making to protect older people when they are making decisions.

These highlighted measures will build upon the existing work that has been carried out by Fine Gael in Government, in particular:

- Since March, over 1.3 million people are benefitting from an increase in pension and welfare payments. Budget 2018 increased the State Pension by €5 per week again, making a total increase of €13 per week over the last 3 Fine Gael budgets, and proportional increases for qualified adults and those on reduced rates of payment.

- The free travel scheme permits free travel on public transport services to all people aged over 66 living permanently in the State. We have increase funding for the Free Travel Scheme to encourage new operators into the scheme and broaden coverage in more remote parts of rural Ireland.
- The extension of the Fuel Allowance to 27 weeks, into the first week of April 2018, will benefit 375,000 households, particularly pensioners, widows, people with disabilities, lone parents and long term jobseekers.
- Pensioners and people with disabilities, who live alone, can face particular challenges and can be at increased risk of social isolation. To combat this, Budget 2018 introduced a new Telephone Support Allowance of €2.50 per week for those in receipt of both the Living Alone Allowance and the Fuel Allowance. This will benefit over 124,000 people.
- We opened a public consultation process on a new home care services. The consultation was carried out in order to help inform the development of a new statutory scheme and system of regulation for home care services. Consultation now closed and we will be able to begin to outline the scheme in 2018.
- We introduced free GP care for over 70s and have cut the monthly cap on prescription charges for over 70s with a medical card to €20, from €25, in 2017. This reduction in prescription fees for those over 70 and their dependents has reduced medicine costs for over 393,235 people.
- The overall funding for Services for Older People in 2017 is €765 million. This includes about €373 million for the direct provision of home care and the HSE's National Service Plan provides for a target of 10.57 million Home Help Hours, 16,750 Home Care Packages and 190 Intensive Home Care Packages.
- We launched the National Dementia Strategy in 2014 with the objective of increasing awareness, ensuring early diagnosis and intervention and developing enhanced community based services. In addition, we have provided the first ever intensive Home Care Packages for people with dementia.
- Carers now receive an extra 12 weeks allowance after the person moves into long-term care. This change means you can continue to receive your Carers Allowance for 12 weeks after the person you are caring for goes into long-term care.
- We recently launched the new Senior Alerts Scheme; €2.3 million has been allocated for the new scheme, which comes into effect on 1 November 2017. The Seniors Alert Scheme provides older persons (65 years +) with a free personal monitored alarm. Over 60,000 people have received the personalised alarm from the Government since 2010.
- Budget 2018 provided funding of €53m for Housing Adaption Grants. It will enable up to 11,000 grants to be undertaken to support people with disabilities and older people to remain at home for longer.
- The Nursing Home Support Scheme will receive a budget of €949.7m for 2018 to ensure that access to funding under the Scheme does not exceed four weeks throughout 2018
- The JobsPlus incentive is designed to encourage employers and businesses to focus their recruitment efforts on those who have been out of work for long periods. We recently announced an enhancement to the scheme to encourage businesses to employ older workers.

Chapter Seven: Northern Ireland – Fine Gael, The United Ireland Party

Bunreacht na hÉireann affirms our national aspiration for territorial unity. Fine Gael, the United Ireland Party, shares that aspiration based on the principle of consent and a clear majority, North and South being in favour. We believe that uniting people is as important as uniting territory.

To achieve this, we want to see the Good Friday Agreement, in all its parts, and its successor agreements implemented in full. We see this as part of our mission in Government as co-guarantor of the Agreement. The Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive are at the heart of the Good Friday Agreement. We look forward to resuming work with the Executive, particularly through the North/South Ministerial Council. We are fully committed to sustaining and developing the work of the North-South bodies. The East-West dimension is an important element of the Good Friday Agreement. We will work to continue build strategic consensus through existing institutional arrangements such as the British Irish council.

We want to further advance co-operation by joint initiatives like cross-border healthcare and education programmes, some of which are already well established. In addition, we will give renewed focus to major cross-border infrastructural projects like the N2/A5, the concept of the Narrow Water Bridge, the Ulster Canal and greenways. We will continue to support the proposed concept of the Derry/Letterkenny city region and other similar projects as they arise.

In relation to Brexit we will establish strong cross-border Brexit management and co-operation arrangements around the full range of areas impacted but with major emphasis on the agriculture, energy and enterprise sectors. We recognise that after Brexit everyone born in Northern Ireland will hold the right to Irish and European citizenship should they chose to avail of it. We will seek to ensure that existing EU funding programmes such as PEACE and Interreg continue to apply on an all-island basis.

In relation to Government engagement, we will ensure a systematic process of engagement on policy development on an all-island basis.

Chapter Eight: Protecting Our Planet And The Environment

Ireland will fully play its part in taking responsibility for the sustainable use of our planet's scarce resources. Ireland will position itself to be a leader in key enabling technologies and techniques to achieve this.

Our ambition is:

- to fulfil our commitments in relation to the Paris Climate Agreement and transition to a low carbon and climate resilient economy by 2050 (i.e. carbon dioxide at least 80% below 1990);
- to ensure Ireland's Government departments and State bodies operate in a carbon neutral manner by 2050;
- to have a robust planning framework in place that allows all parts of the country to develop in sustainable fashion;
- that climate action is embedded in the National Development Plan;
- that in our agri-food sector we move to an approach to carbon neutrality which does not compromise capacity for sustainable food production;
- that we achieve a leadership position in the technologies and technique in sectors where we can establish a competitive advantage; and
- that we have a clean, safe and sustainable supply of drinking water and effective management of waste water, where management of this asset is free from political rancour.

Among the actions that will be brought forward to meet this ambition are:

Continue the existing focus on climate action

An ambitious agenda for reducing our greenhouse gas emissions and achieving our European and international commitments has been set out by the Government through a variety of initiatives including the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development National Policy Position and subsequently the National Mitigation Plan. Fine Gael is committed to achieving the ambition set out by Government and ensuring that consideration of climate action issues is included in all policy making.

To ensure Ireland's Government departments, State and semi-state bodies operate in a carbon neutral manner by 2050

In line with private sector business the Irish Government should introduce legislation to ensure all (non-energy) Irish state and semi state bodies, government department and agencies of the State are operating on a carbon neutral basis by 2050. By using energy efficient technologies and designs, in building construction, supply chain management, logistics, transport and in all elements of delivering state services to the Irish people we must aim to be carbon neutral.

These bodies should be taking immediate steps to reduce their carbon footprint and ensure that any new developments are done on this basis. These organisations should be working towards creating carbon neutral campuses, larger state bodies should ensure that their property portfolio is managed in a way to ensure that all buildings are carbon neutral. This is an area in which the private sector in Ireland has been taking big steps. Ambition and drive is required to ensure that the public sector is ahead of the curve in creating a greener more energy efficient environment in which to operate.

Transport emission reductions led by public transport initiatives

The transport sector is responsible for a significant proportion of our emissions. The target has already been set that by 2030, all new cars and vans sold in Ireland from 2030 will be zero emission capable. Given the size of the Irish market, developments in those areas will though be largely responsive to technological developments and policy initiatives at a European and global level.

However at a domestic level, the promotion of public transport will play a significant part in reducing emissions and making our transport sector more sustainable. Therefore a strong emphasis will be placed on public transport in future Government investment and planning initiatives. Public transport must play a particularly important part in the future development of our cities with the further improvements and expansion of our bus and rail networks. In addition to that, the public transport fleet must set high standards for environmental best practice. A decision needs to be made that all buses procured by the public service obligation fleet should all be LNG or electric vehicles. Furthermore, we will support moving to full electrification of the commuter rail network within a twenty year timeframe.

Make Ireland a global leader in Green-Tech

Ireland needs to dramatically increase its production of renewable energy in line with other EU member states. We will continue to expand support mechanisms for the creation and provision renewable electricity. The Renewable Electricity Support Scheme builds upon the previous REFIT schemes and is designed to provide certainty to renewable electricity providers by giving them a minimum price for each unit of electricity exported to the grid for the long-term. Expansion of this type of scheme will incentivise Green Energy businesses to invest with certainty in Ireland. We will support microgeneration and the ability of homeowners and businesses to sell excess energy and heat.

Smart, green growth in Agri-Food

Ireland's food production systems provide for some of the lowest carbon footprint profiles across the EU. However, we need to continue to introduce innovative policies to meet our long term ambition for the agriculture, forestry and land use sector. This will allow us to move towards an approach to carbon neutrality which does not compromise capacity for sustainable food production. Further developing the Origin Green Programme and investing more in environmental measures under the current RDP and the next CAP to reinforce our sustainability credentials will help meet our environmental goals. It will also result in greater profitability and a stronger position in the global marketplace for our producers and agri-food businesses.

A safe, clean and sustainable water infrastructure

The decision to establish Irish Water as a public utility to replace having 34 local authorities responsible for drinking water and waste water infrastructure and management was right. No reversal of this will be countenanced. Over the next decade, the priority is to ensure that Irish Water has access to the capital investment to ensure an infrastructural network that delivers clean, safe drinking water and supports our economic development.

To make Ireland a hub for R&D in the aviation carbon dioxide emission reduction technology

The aviation industry accounts for roughly 2% of all human carbon dioxide emissions globally. Ireland has traditionally been a big player in the aviation industry, particularly in terms of leasing and financing of aircrafts. The industry contributes €4 billion to the Irish economy and we are seen as a global hub with around 4000 aircraft currently under Irish management. We need to become a hub for Research and Development in emission reduction. We need to ensure investment is in place to enable research and development of advanced technologies which will reduce fuel emissions in aircraft. Working with IDA and Enterprise Ireland to more fully utilise our existing infrastructure and indigenous experience in the sector we can become a leader in this field.

A circular economy programme for Ireland

The lost value of energy, raw materials and products still offers great scope to reduce import dependency, improve competitiveness, and create opportunity. From better labelling, recycling and reuse to energy recovery, local generation and District Heating, every individual, enterprise and community can make a difference in a coherent national policy framework.

These highlighted measures will build upon the existing work that has been carried out by Fine Gael in Government, in particular:

- We strongly supported the Paris Climate Conference (COP21) in December 2015, where Ireland, in partnership with 195 countries, adopted the first ever universal global climate deal and have formally established the Climate Change Advisory Council, an independent statutory body established under the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act 2015.
- Ireland's first statutory National Mitigation Plan (NMP) was published on 19 July 2017. The Plan is an important initial step to enable the transition to a low carbon economy and society, and identifies over 70 mitigation measures and 106 related actions to address the immediate challenge to 2020 and to prepare for the EU targets that Ireland will take on for 2030. In order to debate the NMP in the Houses of the Oireachtas the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act 2015 requires the delivery of a National Annual Transition Statement.
- We are investing €52m per annum in the Beef Data and Genomics Programme, directly targeting climate emissions of over 25,000 beef farms by improving the quality and efficiency of the national herd. We are also investing in GLAS, our agri-environment scheme which now has 50,000 farmers participating, delivering environmental benefits through hedgerow and tree planting, low emissions slurry spreading, protecting biodiversity and improving water quality.
- The rolling out the Origin Green Programme, which measures sustainability on 50,000 beef and lamb farms, 15,000 dairy farms and across 270 companies.
- An economic assessment has been undertaken and a public consultation concluded to inform the final design and implementation of a Renewable Heat Incentive Scheme as part of Ireland's commitment to ensure that by 2020, 12% of our heating demand will come from renewable energy sources. In Budget 2018, €7m was allocated for the proposed Renewable Heat Incentive. The scheme is expected to come into operation in 2018.
- €54m was spent on the Better Energy Programme in 2016, facilitating the upgrading of around 21,000 households. A further 36 community groups received funding for energy efficiency upgrades under the Better Energy Communities programme. An additional €20m has been allocated for the Better Homes Programme for 2017 bringing the budget to €74m.
- A new "Warmth & Wellbeing" pilot scheme to provide deep energy efficiency upgrades to people suffering from acute respiratory conditions and living in poor quality homes and a new Strategy to Combat Energy Poverty sets out how the Government will build on the achievements made to date in alleviating energy poverty.
- The first Public Sector Energy Efficiency Strategy 2017-2020 was published in January providing new governance structures and enhanced supports to assist public sector bodies in achieving the energy efficiency target of 33% for 2020.
- The National Policy Framework for Alternative Fuels Infrastructure has been published to support the deployment of alternative fuels for transport in Ireland and assist in removing any barriers that exist towards greater uptake of low emissions vehicles
- To further incentivise the take up of electric vehicles we have proposed to introduce a 0% rate of benefit-in-kind, BIK, in 2018. This will be introduced for a period of one year to allow time for a comprehensive review of BIK on motor vehicles to inform decisions for the next budget.
- The Office of Public Works (OPW) is delivering a multi-annual programme of capital investment in flood defence measures, with €430 million provided for in the Capital Investment Plan 2016 to 2021. The significant allocation for flood risk management was confirmed in the mid-term review of the capital plan.
- The significant increase in funding for the Department of Communications, Climate Action and the Environment (total allocation of €581m) in Budget 2018 indicates our commitment to deliver a step change in efforts to improve energy efficiency in our homes, businesses and across the public sector and demonstrate the steps necessary to ensure a low carbon, climate resilient and sustainable future.
- Irish Water has eliminated boil notices for 20,000 people, identified 36,000 households with possible lead contamination risks and reduced leakage by 89 million litres of water a day – the equivalent of the water needs of Galway City and County.

Chapter Nine: Ireland – An Island At The Centre Of The World

Fine Gael believes that Ireland should be at the heart of the common European home that we helped build. We brought Ireland into the Single European Act and single market and we are a pro-European party.

Our ambition therefore is:

- the building of a Citizen's Europe that is focused on further integration where that benefits citizens, but also supports greater subsidiarity where appropriate;
- that we have created stronger international linkages diplomatically, economically and culturally;
- that Ireland is offering global leadership on issues of importance to our people.

Among the actions that will be brought forward to meet this ambition are:

We believe that Europe should become more integrated where that benefits citizens, should become closer to citizens through greater subsidiarity and by becoming more democratic. We support the Bratislava process on the future of Europe including the completion of the single market, digital single market, banking union and capital markets union and a common asylum system. We support Irish involvement in PESCO to combat modern security threats like terrorism, cybercrime, drug and human trafficking provided it does not compromise our military neutrality. We support the proposal for a 'subsidiarity taskforce' to examine which powers currently held at European level could be devolved back to member states and local authorities.

Encouraging greater engagement with Europe

Fine Gael wants Ireland to be committed to a future at the heart of Europe. This future will require a greater level of engagement between Irish citizens and the EU. Promoting European education programmes such as Erasmus and Horizon 2020; encouraging more Irish people to work in the EU institutions; and crucially increasing the linguistic abilities of the Irish people will give Ireland more credibility at a European level while offering Irish citizens even more opportunities to live, work and travel across Europe.

Forging new alliances

From the moment Ireland joined the EEC in 1973, we were wedded to the actions and influence of our nearest neighbour, the UK. We therefore did not develop the same level of co-ordination and co-operation with other member-states. Now that the people of the UK have voted to leave the EU, we must forge strong alliances with other member states with whom we share common goals and interests. This includes collaborating with other countries on shared challenge such as the cost of new medicines so that we can ensure continued access to new and innovative drugs for citizens while also achieving good value on pricing.

Doubling our Global Footprint by 2025

The current uncertainty with regard to Brexit demonstrates the importance of Ireland having political, trade, tourism and cultural relationships with as many other countries as possible. Compared to many other western nations of a similar size our diplomatic corps and international agencies are smaller and in fewer countries. Given the acknowledged success our diplomats and State agencies have had, we believe that a doubling of our international presence – which will bring us on par with those peers – will generate a significant political, economic and cultural dividend.

Doubling the Global Irish Footprint by 2025 will mean new or augmented diplomatic missions, as well as significantly increased resources for our investment (Enterprise Ireland and IDA Ireland), tourism (Tourism Ireland), cultural (Culture Ireland) and food presence (Bord Bia and agriculture attachés) overseas. Such an investment needs to be co-ordinated with strong collaboration between the various organisation, and a clear understanding of the intended benefits of this initiative: greater investment, tourism and trade; stronger links with our diaspora, and increased cultural exchange.

Leading on aid

Ireland has a proud history when it comes to the developing world thanks to the historic efforts of our missionaries, our NGOs and Irish Aid. If we are to be serious about being a global leader, we must also lead on aid to show our contemporaries that we are willing to step up to the plate when required. This embodies our values, but also reflects our interests. Our values recognise that preventing war, ending hunger and bettering the lives of those around the world that are less fortunate is simply the right thing to do. Our interests dictate that by doing this, we will be creating the trading partners of tomorrow, addressing the source of Europe's migration problems and demonstrating to our peers in the developed world that we are prepared to give as well as to receive.

We are committed to making incremental, sustainable progress towards the UN target of providing 0.7% of GNP in ODA. Therefore we will continue to increase ODA annually and develop a clear roadmap towards the achievement of the UN target.

Leading on public health

Through innovative policy development that is unafraid to take on powerful vested interests, we can provide positive global leadership on public health matters based on initiatives such as Tobacco-free Ireland, the Public Health Alcohol Bill and the sugar-sweetened drinks levy. These measures will have major positive impacts on the health and wellbeing of Irish citizens and we will share our learning with other countries.

Maintaining our commitment on peacekeeping

Since 1958 Ireland has had a continuous presence on United Nations peace support operations. This is one example of the patriotism and professionalism displayed by members of the Defence Forces, both at home and overseas, that is of great pride to the Irish people, as well as being a real source of international leadership. We will continue to ensure that the Defence Forces have the appropriate resources to maintain that commitment in the time ahead. Utilising this experience and Ireland's position of military neutrality we will actively engage on the international stage and continue to espouse the importance of multilateralism in support of international peace and security. We will also develop a new Institute for Peace Support and Leadership Training in the Curragh in support of this goal.

These highlighted measures will build upon the existing work that has been carried out by Fine Gael in Government, in particular:

- After a major diplomatic campaign with respect to Brexit, Ireland's unique concerns and priorities are reflected in the EU's Negotiating Guidelines and have been a major strand of Phase One EU-UK talks.
- On the Irish issues with respect to Brexit, we welcome that progress has been made in some areas, including the Common Travel Area and the explicit recognition of the unique situation and special circumstances on the island of Ireland. This includes respecting the integrity of the Good Friday Agreement in all its parts and the gains of the peace process.
- Ireland will open new resident diplomatic missions in Chile, Colombia, Jordan, New Zealand, Vancouver and Mumbai as part of the Government's overall Budget 2018 package. Additional funding will be directed towards augmenting Brexit resources, following recent steps to increase staff numbers working on Brexit at HQ and in major European capitals like Brussels, Berlin, Paris and London.
- A new Trade and Investment Strategy, "Ireland Connected: Trading and Investing in a Dynamic World", has been launched providing an overarching framework to diversify into new markets and intensify growth in existing markets for Irish exports, inward investment, tourism and international education.
- Over the St. Patrick's Day period, there were 26 Minister-led visits to 27 countries, promoting Ireland and Irish business. The programmes included in excess of 120 business, economic and trade events, and 100 high-level political meetings. A record 290 iconic buildings and landmarks in over 44 countries around the world were 'greened' over the St. Patrick's Day period, enhancing Ireland's global visibility.

- Earlier this year Ireland signed the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, during a ceremony at the United Nations in New York. Ireland is proud to have played a leadership role in negotiating this ground-breaking treaty, which represents the successful outcome of the first multilateral nuclear disarmament negotiations in over 20 years.
- No part of our contribution to the UN resonates more with the Irish people than our UN peacekeepers. The thousands of men and women who have served under blue helmets represent Ireland, our people and our values. Today, with almost 550 troops in the field, Ireland is the highest per capita European Union contributor of troops to UN peacekeeping with deployments to six UN missions across the Middle East and Africa.
- As part of Budget 2018, the Government announced a total allocation of €707 million to Official Development Assistance (ODA). This represents an increase of some €26 million on the current year. 2018 will see the Government's official aid programme, Irish Aid, increase its budget over €500 million for the first time since 2012.

Chapter Ten: Security And Justice: The Party Of Law And Order

Fine Gael is the party of law and order; our forebears helped create the institutions of the State and oversaw the establishment of the Civic Guard (the precursor to An Garda Síochána) in 1922.

We believe that laws should be respected by everyone. In addition, we realise that one of the most fundamental obligations of the state is to keep its citizens safe. Day to day this covers a spectrum from petty crime to counter-terrorism. Public safety and security will remain a top priority as we press on with the far reaching reforms in the oversight and management of An Garda Síochána, the modernisation of our judicial system, the creation of a robust enforcement regime against white collar crime, and the recognition of the often overlooked impact on victims and their right to see justice done. The effective maintenance of law and order requires strong relationships between Gardaí and communities, with Government support.

As a country, we are rightly proud of the Defence Forces. We are proud of those who put their lives on the line on our behalf, especially overseas. Ireland is the only country with unbroken United Nations service. The Defence Forces have been central to the success of centenary commemorations and consistently provide outstanding ceremonial service, images of which are relayed around the world. Their outstanding contribution is a measure of how serious they consider their role.

Our ambition is that:

- we have a world-class policing service;
- protecting Irish citizens and vindicating their rights through a reformed justice system with improved access and better recognition for victims;
- delivering the ambitions for our Defence Forces as set out in the 2015 Defence White Paper;
- introducing a covenant between the State and current and retired members of the Defence Forces; and
- innovative responses to new and emerging criminal threats.

Among the actions that will be brought forward to meet this ambition are:

A reformed policing service, fit for the needs of a rapidly changing Ireland

For decades in Ireland, there has been a debate about how best to modernise our policing service. The transformation of the RUC into the PSNI as a result of the Patten Commission is perhaps the most well-known transformation of a policing service globally. Seattle Chief of Police and former member of the Patten Commission, Kathleen O'Toole, is now chairing the panel of national and international experts assembled by the Government under The Commission on the Future of Policing in Ireland. The Commission is undertaking a root and branch analysis of policing in Ireland and its major landmark report is due in September 2018. Fine Gael is committed to the work of the Commission and we are committed to delivering a roadmap to implement its recommendations by the end of Q4 2018.

We recognise the damaging impact of recent controversies within An Garda Síochána and the urgent need for reform, oversight and accountability. For this reason that we established an independent Policing Authority which is driving the reform process within the Garda through consistent oversight and through promoting an ethical, accountable and professional model of policing. We support the important work of the Policing Authority.

Sustainable recruitment to the Gardaí and the Garda Reserve

The economic crash had a detrimental effect on Garda numbers as recruitment stopped. In Government, we recommenced Garda recruitment and we are committed to ensuring that the overall Garda workforce reaches 21,000 by 2021.

We will enhance the civilianisation of relevant posts in An Garda Síochána to free up members of the Force to undertake more frontline policing.

The Garda Reform Programme includes a strategic review of the Garda Reserve; our vision is to build a strong Reserve that is rooted in local communities. We will continue to provide policy and financial supports to ensure that the Garda Reserve can become a successful integral aspect of community life in Ireland.

We recognise that criminals benefit from technology and we will ensure that the Gardaí are properly equipped.

Delivering the ambition of the 2015 White Paper on Defence

The publication of the 2015 White Paper on Defence set out a national policy framework for the next decade. This policy framework is flexible and responsive given the dynamic nature of the security environment and enables the Irish Defence Forces to be adaptive to changing circumstances. Fine Gael is committed to ensuring our Defence Forces are in a position to meet the security requirements of the State and to undertake our international obligations that we are all so proud of.

Therefore, funds have been allocated over the next four years, for Defence Forces capital expenditure which will include provisions for replacing air craft (Cessna fleet and both Casa Maritime Patrol Aircraft), final payments for fourth new off shore patrol vessel, LÉ George Bernard Shaw, mid-life refits for LÉ Niamh and LÉ Roisin, upgrading the army's fleet of armoured personnel carriers and commencing the process of procuring a multi-role vessel for the Naval Service.

Developing a Defence Forces covenant

In wearing the uniform of the Defence Forces our soldiers embody the patriotism of our the citizens of our state. That relationship, between soldier and citizen, requires practical and formal expression. Therefore, we will develop a Covenant between the State, citizen and serving and retired members of the Defence Forces.

This will provide a public recognition of the unique role members of the Defence Forces play. The Covenant will be open to Local Authorities, NGOs and others to participate and will be particularly focused on supporting retired members of the Defence Forces through educational bursaries, hardship funds, etc. It will be modelled on similar schemes in other jurisdictions and will allow a way for private sector organisations to support the work of the Defence Force.

Respond to new and emerging criminal threats

Cybercrime is a new and evolving criminal threat which recognises no borders. Given Ireland's leading position as a digital economy it poses a particular threat. This threat extends not just to major companies but to smaller enterprises and to individuals. We will establish a multi-agency Garda led Anti-Cybercrime Bureau which is networked to relevant international agencies to ensure that Ireland is at the cutting edge of combating cybercrime. We will use this model to respond to other major emerging criminal threats.

Update and modernise our justice system

Recognising the difficulty in breaking the vicious cycle of crime we will strengthen parole services and increase the focus on restorative justice so that high risk re-offenders are subject to greater supervision and appropriately supported to diminish the risk of recidivism.

We will also introduce legislative reforms to ensure that our contempt of court laws are modernised to take account of the new challenges in the social media age.

We will modernise court processes to ensure that trials can proceed with greater efficiency; work is underway on the Criminal Procedure Bill to provide greater efficiency and fairness in the trial process and to reduce delays in the criminal justice system.

We will prioritise the establishment of a dedicated family court system which is less costly and more user friendly.

We will improve the accessibility of the legal system by improvements in Civil Legal Aid and the network of community-based legal, education and advice centres.

Giving ample time for future referendums

Any amendment to our Constitution requires careful consideration by the people. They should be given ample time to consider the issues and to take part in well-informed public debate. Therefore, we support the setting of a timetable for referendums to be held over the next two years. This will allow all involved in campaigning on the issues to plan ahead and to facilitate public debate.

The indicative timetable proposes a referendum on the Eighth amendment in May or June 2018, with referendums on blasphemy (Article 40.6.1) and "Woman's life within the home" (Article 41.2.1) indicatively scheduled for October 2018 as has the plebiscites on directly elected executive mayors. Referendums on divorce, extending the franchise at presidential elections to Irish citizens resident outside the State, and reducing the voting age to 16 for June 2019.

These highlighted measures will build upon the existing work that has been carried out by Fine Gael in Government, in particular:

- Fine Gael has introduced major landmark changes to our policing service. We established the Policing Authority as an independent body to oversee the performance of the Garda Síochána in relation to the policing service in Ireland. Its key objective is to promote trust and confidence in policing and to help shape policing services for Ireland in the future.
- We reopened the Garda training college in Templemore in 2014, after Fianna Fáil closed it. By the end of 2017 Garda numbers will reach 13,500. The Government has in place a detailed plan to achieve an overall Garda workforce of 21,000 personnel, comprising 15,000 Garda members, 2,000 reserve members and 4,000 civilians.
- 800 new Garda recruits will commence training in 2018 and up to 500 civilians to get Gardaí out from behind desks. We are also investing in Garda infrastructure and have committed to invest €330m in Garda ICT infrastructure over 2016-2021. In the period 2013 to end of 2017 almost €44 million will have been invested in the Garda fleet with some 2,000 vehicles coming on stream in that period.
- The expert Commission on the Future of Policing in Ireland has been set up to conduct a "root and branch" review of every aspect of policing in Ireland. Its work will change the face of policing in Ireland and its establishment and mandate makes clear this Government's commitment to delivering a world class policing service for the people of Ireland.
- The Policing Authority has also been established and was allocated additional resources in Budget 2018. The Policing Authority is an independent body to oversee the performance of the Garda Síochána in relation to policing services in Ireland.
- Since the inception of the anti-crime strategy, Operation Thor, in late 2015, there has been in the region of 5,541 arrests and 6,156 charges covering a range of offences which, in addition to burglary, have included handling stolen property, possession of firearms and drugs offences.
- We are totally committed to tackling white collar crime and have published a major package of measures including, the Criminal Justice (Corruption Offences) Bill - a major piece of legislation which will repeal and replaces the seven previous Prevention of Corruption Acts 1889 to 2010 and introduce a series of major new legislative offences. The Department of Justice and Equality is undertaking a major review of the effectiveness of State bodies in tackling white collar crime and piloting a Joint Agency Task Force that will address specific varieties of white collar crime. The pilot will focus on payment fraud. Following the pilot process and review, the Joint Agency Task Force model, if deemed effective, will be extended to tackle other areas of criminality.
- We are tackling gangland crime; in 2016 a Special Criminal Taskforce and a dedicated Garda Armed Unit were established, the Criminal Assets Bureau has been provided with extra powers and reforming legislation has been introduced to strengthen the operation of the bail system and provide for electronic tagging. Live training exercises have also been carried out in Dublin City Centre to demonstrate the robust Garda capability in responding to critical incidents.
- A modern, fit for purpose judicial system is vital for the functioning of any healthy democracy. To assist in this regard the Judicial Council Bill has been published and will be debated in the Seanad shortly. The purpose of this Bill is to establish a Judicial Council which will be independent in the performance of its functions and will promote and maintain excellence and high standards of conduct by judges.

- We will also modernise court processes to ensure that trials can proceed with greater efficiency; work is underway on the Criminal Procedure Bill to provide greater efficiency and fairness in the trial process and to reduce delays in the criminal justice system.
- We recognise the damage crime has on individuals, both emotionally and psychologically, for this reason we brought forward the Criminal Justice (Victims of Crime) Bill 2017 to enhance protections for crime victims, this marks a change in the approach to criminal law in Ireland, providing for the first time, a comprehensive framework of statutory rights for victims of crime. Furthermore the Domestic Violence Bill 2017 will improve the protections to victims of domestic violence abuse and the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act 2017 enhances and updates laws to combat the sexual exploitation and sexual abuse of children.
- A new round of community CCTV schemes to combat rural crime was launched in addition to investment in the Seniors Alert Scheme. We have continued to support the Neighbourhood Watch and Text Alert Schemes to support and prioritise community crime prevention.

Chapter Eleven: A Sporting Nation, Proud Of Our Language, Culture And Heritage

Our culture, heritage, language and sport define us as a people. They bring us together, are central to good physical and mental health, and give us great pride.

Our ambition is that:

- every child has the opportunity to take part in sport, the arts and to appreciate our national heritage;
- that gender, background or location is no barrier and that every community has access to cultural and sporting facilities and enjoyment;
- use and enjoyment of the Irish language is increasing in Gaeltacht and non-Gaeltacht areas alike;
- that the majority of our population, at every age level, are partaking in regular sporting activity (be it casual or organised); and
- our heritage is properly protected, promoted and to the greatest extent possible accessible.

Among the actions that will be brought forward to meet this ambition are:

Doubling investment in culture, heritage, the Irish language and sport

Across culture, heritage, the Irish language and sport we will double the budget by 2025. Within the arts sector, expenditure in the first instance will be aimed at delivering the aims articulated in Culture 2025 and the Creative Ireland programme, while the Irish Language 20 Year Strategy will guide investment in that area. In relation to the areas of sports and heritage, investment will be subsequent to the developing of comprehensive policy programmes. As with all areas of expenditure there will be a need for the tax-payer to see and understand the impact of their investment in these activities, and public engagement will be a major part of all activity.

Delivering Creative Ireland

Creative Ireland is the legacy programme arising from the hugely successful 2016 Centenary Programme. We will work to ensure that this ambitious five year strategy which places culture and creativity at the heart of public policy is implemented in full.

Developing our cultural infrastructure

One of the key pillars of Creative Ireland is enhanced investment in our cultural infrastructure. As a nation we are rightly proud of the role of our National Cultural Institutions in our country's development. The National Gallery of Ireland re-opened its doors to the public in June 2017 following a €30 million renovation of its historic wings. We now want to build on this success by developing an extensive capital investment programme for all our National Cultural Institutions. At a local and regional level, we will ensure the highly successful Arts and Culture Capital Scheme, introduced by Fine Gael, will be continued on an annual basis.

Supporting linkages between the arts and schools

Our schools have a huge role to play in ensuring that children can achieve their potential in culture. As part of the Creative Children initiative, we will work to ensure that every child in Ireland will have access to tuition and participation in art, music, drama and coding by 2022. The first phase of this programme will be launched later this year.

Achieving the ambition of the 20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language

Delivery of the 20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010-2030 will drive our approach to the Irish language. We support language planning at community level which is central to the new definition of the Gaeltacht. We also support giving areas located outside the existing statutory Gaeltacht the opportunity to achieve statutory recognition as Irish Language Networks or as Gaeltacht Service Towns. In that regard we recognise the need to provide public services in Irish to speakers of the language, in particular to Gaeltacht communities, but also in statutory Irish Language Networks and Gaeltacht Service Towns.

The traditional Irish language education policy has not been a success. New approaches are now being adopted and must be encouraged by all stakeholders. Support will be given to the total language immersion approach within Gaelscoileanna and Naonraí. Innovations within Irish language education need to be supported. The new curriculum for Junior Cycle emphasises spoken Irish within the classroom group, developing projects that engage pupils and build communities of language use within the school and the wider community. New Irish-medium schools and streams will be provided where communities outside the Gaeltacht demonstrate that there is a demand for same, while specific education policies, from early years to 3rd level, reflecting the linguistic needs of Gaeltacht communities is supported.

Recognising the importance of our national and built heritage

Our natural and built heritage contributes significantly to the Irish economy through increased tourism opportunities particularly in rural areas. We will build on successful community led programmes such as the Built Heritage Investment Scheme and the Structures at Risk Fund which provide grant aid to protect and maintain important historic buildings in our local communities throughout the country. In addition, we will work to progress flagship national projects such as the restoration of the Ulster Canal.

Provide funding for national, regional and local Sporting Facilities

There is a need for regular and predictable funding streams for sport at a local, regional and national level.

There is also the need for the creation of a funding stream for national sporting organisations to bid for State support for national sporting infrastructure. Within both there is a danger of an excessive focus of national facilities in Dublin and therefore, at least one-third of capital funding for national schemes should be reserved for investment outside of Dublin with the ambition that this could reach a level of 50% for investment post 2025.

At a local and regional level, Fine Gael has ensured that there has been significant investment in facilities through the Sports Capital Scheme, which Fine Gael restarted. This investment will be continued.

To ensure that the best impact and value for money is being achieved in this capital expenditure, there will be every 5 years an audit of our sporting infrastructure, both public and private, at a national, regional and local level, to inform capital expenditure decisions.

The role of the education system in supporting physical activity

The curriculum for PE at primary school needs to be overhauled, while a funding stream for capital investment in PE facilities should be established. At second level, PE will be made an examinable subject, available at all schools and to all students. The first students to study PE for the Leaving Certificate will commence their studies in September 2018.

Placing an emphasis on improving sporting activity across all sectors of society

The health benefits of lifelong sporting activity are obvious. Some sporting activities are particularly suitable for participation across a person's lifespan such as swimming, cycling and running. A strong emphasis needs to be placed on these activities from an early age, particularly through PE, so that people have the foundation skills to continue with them throughout their lives. Across these three sports in particular, schemes to support older people partaking in such sporting activity will be

developed and supported by central and local government (e.g. Parkruns). In particular this will require the development of a new investment programme for swimming pools.

Research has consistently shown that women are less likely than men to continue sport through their teenage years and into adulthood. To deal with this, there needs to be a major focus on encouraging female sports participation at all ages. This will require a culture change among a wide variety of stakeholders. The State needs to lead on this and therefore all Exchequer funding for sport, be it in capital investment or current expenditure, should be allocated on the basis that the totality of funds across all sports will be used equally for male and female sporting activities. This does not mean that each sporting organisation should be required to allocate equal funding to both male and female sporting activity, as different sports will appeal to a greater and lesser extent to men and women. Rather, it means that across all State funding for sport, an equality should be achieved in the totality of that funding. By 2025 the goal should be the eradication of a gender gap in sporting activity for the population under 30.

For a wide variety of factors, the take-up and participation in sport is lower for those that are disabled. Increasing participation levels in this cohort of the population is especially important. More so than in the others, research as to the most appropriate measures to take is needed and should be prioritised. By 2025, Sports Ireland should be tasked with increasing the level of sporting activity by those with a limiting disability to 40% from the current level of 29%.

Supporting high-level sporting performance

Increased investment in high performance sports should be focused on improving Ireland's relative performance in elite competitions, in particular the Olympics and Paralympics. In that regard, our performances should be benchmarked against leading peer nations i.e. New Zealand and Denmark. Funding should be moved for an annual funding cycle to a multi-annual basis so that elite athletes have higher degrees of planning certainty. Furthermore, there will need to be a greater emphasis on identifying sports to focus elite investment upon where we have the greatest opportunity for success.

These highlighted measures will build upon the existing work that has been carried out by Fine Gael in Government, in particular:

- A hugely successful Ireland 2016 Centenary Programme to mark the centenary of the Easter Rising, which included more than 3,500 events nationwide and 1,000 internationally. In addition, as part of the Decade of Centenaries, a number of commemorative events were held to mark the centenary of the Battle of the Somme.
- Launched the Creative Ireland Programme, the legacy programme from Ireland 2016, which is an ambitious 5 year arts and cultural strategy. Culture Teams have been established in every Local Authority to drive the delivery of the Creative Ireland Programme at community level.
- The National Gallery of Ireland re-opened its doors to the public in June 2017 on completion of a €30 million investment project to provide much-needed environmental upgrades and new exhibition spaces.
- The €10m redevelopment project at our National Library is also underway and €4m has been spent on acquiring a significant element of the Yeats family collection, ensuring that the National Library now has the largest Yeats collection in the world
- Killarney House reopened to the public following a multi-million euro restoration and work is underway on the first stage of the Ulster Canal restoration, a flagship cross-border project. Emerging from the recession, since 2014 significant additional funding was provided to the Arts Council (up 20%), Film Board (up 29%), Culture Ireland (Up 38%) and Cultural Institutions (up 18%).
- Budget 2018 saw the announcement of a funding package of over €300 million in 2018 towards the development of our cultural and creative heritage, including:
 - an additional €3 million for the Arts Council, a 5% increase in its annual budget bringing it to €68 million
 - an increase of €1.5 million for the Irish Film Board, a 9% increase in its annual budget bringing it to €18 million
 - additional capital funding for a further round of the highly successful 'Arts and Culture Capital Scheme' in 2018;

- The introduction of the €10m Arts and Culture Capital Scheme that has supported over 120 Local and Regional Arts Centres in 2017 and over 500 projects across the country have been supported under the 2017 Built Heritage Investment Scheme.
- They will also be a priority in terms of the additional €90 million for culture, heritage and the Gaeltacht for the period between 2018 and 2021 and further details will be announced in due course.
- Support of the Irish language and the sustainable development of our island communities remain key priorities for Fine Gael as does the 20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010-2030. Additional funding of €2.5 million, which was announced in Budget 2018, will focus on further assisting the delivery of the 20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010-2030.
- The Sports Capital Programme has transformed the sporting landscape of Ireland with improvements in the quality and quantity of sporting facilities in virtually every village, town and city in the country. A new round of the programme was launched earlier this year and we have secured significant additional resources for this round of the programme.
- The official opening of the new Páirc Uí Chaoimh took place in October. The Government provided €30million towards the redevelopment of the stadium.