



CHURCH OF IRELAND

Church and Society Commission

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Department of the Taoiseach
Merrion St Upper
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Dear Sir/Madam,

The Church and Society Commission (CASC) of the Church of Ireland has prepared the attached submission in relation to the recently published Programme for Government.

CASC is an advisory group, serving the Standing Committee of the General Synod, and engages with legislatures and governments on a variety of issues, including legislation. CASC provides oversight and direction for the Church of Ireland's work, in respect of social theology in action. CASC's views only become representative of the Church of Ireland after being approved by its General Synod.

Yours sincerely,

The Most Reverend Dr Michael Jackson
Archbishop of Dublin and Chair of the Church and Society Commission

Church and Society Commission (CASC) response to the RoI Programme for Government

03 March 2025

Introduction

The Church of Ireland is the largest Protestant minority on the island of Ireland serving as an all-island body in both urban and rural communities across eleven dioceses, and over 450 parishes. In common with other Christian denominations, the Church of Ireland witnesses the full range of socio-economic challenges confronting people. The Commission offers these views with the aim of embracing the aspirations of all. If some commentary is challenging, it is done in the spirit of being constructive and supportive.

The Church and Society Commission (CASC) was developed in 2013 to provide oversight and direction of the Church of Ireland's work in respect of social theology in action. Part of its aim is to identify, contribute to, encourage and challenge areas of living today where the mission of the Church can be active, and the love of God shared more widely than solely inside the Church. As such the Commission welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Programme for Government 2025.

The Commission welcomes the publication of the Programme for Government and commend the Government's commitment to outlining its strategy and vision for the coming years. The priorities identified in the Programme reflect important challenges and opportunities facing the country, particularly in the areas of housing, health, industry and business, agriculture, the urban-rural divide, tangible support for communities, education, children and young people, the elderly and vulnerable, and climate. While the overarching goals of the Programme are positive and ambitious, there are several key areas that the Commission believes require particular attention and emphasis to ensure that these ambitious objectives are met.

Overview

The Commission welcomes the Programme for Government 2025, and its recognition of important economic, sectoral and societal imperatives. The Commission noted that some of the objectives laid out are aspirational in tone and has identified points where the Commission would ask Government to prioritise more tangible outcomes within an identified time frame, alongside comprehensive project details and costings. The Commission noted that while the commitment to funding is welcome, an assurance of sustained expenditure is needed.

The Commission is keenly aware that the Programme for Government needs to consider the newer realities of life in Ireland. Some of these are positive and encouraging (population and economic growth, increasing ethnic diversity). Others (more evident social divisions, inequality and the experience of vulnerability) will need to be taken into positive policy making.

In overall terms, this Programme for Government sets out investment and reform intentions which the new Government states are ‘backed by ambitious and credible actions.’ Major changes on the geo-political stage suggest there could be stiff headwinds ahead with unpredictable factors such as international trade tariffs and retaliatory action, wars and market upheavals, all capable of derailing the best of Government intentions. In a real sense, the Commission recognises that Ireland is not immune to potentially harmful international developments. It is, therefore, imperative that the state adopts a position that is not isolationist or narrow in focus, but rather realistic and frank.

Housing

The Commission welcomes the prominent status of housing within the Programme for Government. The Commission is planning to undertake research among Church of Ireland people in the coming year, having discovered through informal feedback that the subject of housing and the related subjects of homelessness, fuel poverty, cost of living increases, loneliness, isolation and generally social participation levels were all considered to be a cause of anxiety. The Commission recognises that many tens of thousands of people are seeking a roof over their heads. They are worried and fearful. Priced out of an inflationary market, they are left to rely on family and friends in what is an intolerable situation. Sadly, for too many, homelessness is the result. They feel abandoned, devalued and relegated in our society, and that is a situation that must be addressed with commitment and determination. Furthermore, the prevalence of the urban-rural divide is something that is particularly striking and encountered in the work of the Church from day-to-day. The disintegration of rural Ireland must be stemmed, and the financial and infrastructural support offered to rural communities intensified. During the disruption of Storm Éowyn, it was evident that the residents of many rural towns and villages relied heavily upon their local community centres when their homes were without water and electricity. The Commission would ask the Government to consider how it currently supports initiatives like community centres, and how that might be improved upon during the life of the Government.

The Commission is pleased to see that the Programme for Government has set a target of building 300,000 homes by the end of 2030. The Commission recognises that this is a demanding target. The unfortunate fact that the repeated target for last year was not met has both compounded the problem and left a credibility gap with the public which will also need to be positively addressed. The Commission would like to draw the attention of the Government to its publication on homelessness from 2024, which is appended to this submission.

In general, however, the Commission is supportive of the Government’s approach in terms of addressing planning issues and removing barriers to secure additional housing. While the Government is considering infrastructure for new housing, the Commission would ask that consideration is given, not only to the pragmatics of sewage, water, and the provision of sustainable energy for these homes, but also that the planning also allows for schools, community centres and a place for churches and faith bodies who continue to provide a framework for community, cohesion, care, and inclusion within Irish society. The Commission would suggest to Government that consideration is also given to ensuring that there are sufficient people with the requisite skills in the workforce to deliver this objective.

Such is the extent of the challenge facing the Government that the Commission would welcome:

- An official register of qualified and approved house builders to prevent profiteering and exploitation, alongside the work of a regulatory house-building body
- Ring-fencing of resources capable of addressing the infrastructural shortcomings that are evident before construction work gets underway
- A public-private approach to project managing the building programme with strict adherence to cost, house-building standards and delivery

Health

The Commission also welcomes the focus on health and what the Government believes must be achieved in areas of general practice, primary care, mental health, sexual health, dentistry, cancer care, end-of-life palliative care, disabilities, older people and dementia. The support for adequate palliative care to those nearing the end of their life is key in helping to address the physical, emotional and spiritual needs of individuals and their families. In this context, the Commission would like to draw the attention of the Government to its recent publication on end-of-life issues, which is appended to this submission.

Fostering collaboration with Northern Ireland on healthcare, research, training and education will deliver tangible outcomes and is to be commended. The Church of Ireland, as an all-island body, is particularly aware of the existing collaboration in border areas between the two health services, and the benefits that can be achieved for individuals and families. The Commission is also aware that the lack of mutual recognition of professional qualifications, post-Brexit means that doctors from the Republic can no longer avail of temporary or occasional licenses but must need full General Medical registration to carry out work in Northern Ireland and suggests that this might be an area to be addressed via the consultative mechanisms of the Windsor Framework.

The acknowledgement that steps are required to tackle waiting times, recruit additional doctors, nurses, dentists and social care professionals signposts a desire to grapple in a determined and meaningful way with what confronts the sector and the people it serves. The scale of public investment in health reflects the importance of a healthy population to a well-educated, well employed and well-connected society. However, the Commission believes that this also points to a moral responsibility not to be over reliant on private providers who will be out of the reach of many citizens, and to least the neediest, and to develop policies and pay levels which will help stem the flow of so many Irish trained nurses and doctors relocating to countries like Australia and New Zealand.

The Commission welcomes the reference to new and refurbished hospital beds and the intention to increase ICU bed capacity. Furthermore, the planned investment in four new elective hospitals and six surgical hubs alongside the undeniable need to provide better cancer care and increase the number of consultants by a further 50 per cent will give solace and hope to many. It is important that such promises are not allowed to become either white elephants or forgotten wishes, widening yet further the credibility of political promises. The completion

of the new National Children's Hospital will be an important step in enhancing paediatric care, although great concerns remain over the delivery and rising costs of this project. The Commission is mindful of the difficulties many families face in obtaining the necessary appointments for their children; particularly issues surrounding the scheduling of paediatric spinal surgeries.

Similarly, issues facing the provision of mental health supports to children and young adults must be addressed as a matter of urgency. The Commission is keenly aware of the increasing demands and expectations placed upon young people today. In many instances, the Church provides the first line of support to many who are struggling in society. In this regard, the Commission would welcome much more concrete commitments in the support of services like CAMHS.

Reducing overcrowding in Emergency Departments and a new GP Contract will have a major positive impact. To make commitments to healthcare more than a re-statement of desired objectives, the Commission felt it required some hard numbers to give it additional weight. For example, how much of the multi-year budget will be allocated to health and how many, doctors, nurses, dentists and health care professionals will be recruited?

Agriculture

As the Programme acknowledges, the agricultural industry forms the backbone of community in rural Ireland with some 130,000 family farms. This is a reality which is seen by many members of the Church in rural Ireland, where farming is much more than an economic or commercial activity. In many ways the pattern of small farms is what gives the Irish countryside its unique look and characteristic spirit. Once lost this look and spirit would be gone forever. Therefore, we welcome the Government's commitment to ensuring a Farm Succession Scheme that will support generational renewal, as well as encouraging younger people into the sector.

The Commission is reassured with commitments to protect this vital sector at EU level with emphasis on the new Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). The Commission also welcomes (p. 26) what is said about the elimination of barriers to women working in agriculture and the re-establishment of a Minister of State for Fisheries/Marine.

While these developments are progressive, and are welcome, the Commission is concerned at the lack of specific financial commitments provided. However, even in cases where money is not required to make progress clear courses of action and implementation will be needed together with clarity of accountability.

Education

Church of Ireland clergy and appropriately trained lay people enjoy the immense privilege of pastorally visiting families in their homes throughout the island of Ireland and are keenly aware of intergenerational needs. The Commission welcomes the education commitments set out in the Programme for Government. While noting that a portion represent a continuation of policies and schemes already in place in schools, there are several new commitments, such as

a focus on inclusion and a stronger prioritisation for special needs supports, which are particularly welcome.

Continued funding commitments feature strongly in the Programme for Government. This is particularly the case with capitation increases, building projects, a lower Pupil-Teacher ratio and funding for schemes such as the free schoolbook scheme, all of which is welcomed by the Commission. As running costs in schools continue to rise, such as for electricity and other services, the Commission would like to see a commitment to both an increase in the school's 'ancillary' grant funding and a review of services efficiencies. In conjunction with the Church of Ireland Board of Education the Commission will be taking these aspects up directly with the Department of Education. Similarly, the Commission would welcome further support for special educational needs departments in schools, a service that provides a dignity of life within society for those with learning and intellectual disabilities. Support in this regard should be viewed as investment rather than resentment.

The provision of a well-educated workforce is a pre-requisite to attracting scarce Foreign Direct Investment. The population is expected to exceed 6 million by 2030 (p. 32) and to promote Ireland as an ideal European location for high-end industry, yielding well-paid employment, the country must continue to demonstrate nimbleness and responsiveness to persuade potential international investors. In this regard, the support of communities with no immediate access to tertiary education should be reviewed, with a view to seeing educational support for rural communities as an investment in society.

The Commission welcomes the plan to expand and improve the Free Hot School Meals programme, which provides thousands of schoolchildren with a hot meal daily. These plans, combined with the new School Meals Holiday Hunger pilot project aiming to commence from summer 2025, are particularly welcome, as many young families face childhood poverty and hunger daily.

Children, Young People and Families

The Commission would like to acknowledge the work that the Church of Ireland does in providing and fostering a sense of community for many families and young people across Ireland. The provision of youth clubs, community halls, and social spaces are just some examples of the way in which the Church of Ireland supports children, young people, and families. The Commission would welcome any collaboration with the Government on how it can assist the Government in continuing and growing upon this work.

The Commission recognises the strain that is placed upon families to provide childcare. In this regard, we welcome the Government's plans to "progressively" reduce the cost of childcare to €200 per month per child through the National Childcare Scheme. This is something that will benefit many families across Ireland and is to be commended.

The Commission also recognises the plight of childhood poverty in Ireland today. The CSO Survey on Income and Living Costs (SILC) for 2023 showed that that over 21 per cent of children in Ireland experienced enforced deprivation. This means that these children "might go to bed hungry in a week or do not have clothes or shoes that fit for school." As the future of

our state, it is essential that investment to quickly alleviate childhood poverty is ramped up. While the Commission welcomes the Government's desire to tackle this issue, it is concerned at the lack of funding specifics and tangible objectives set out in the Programme for Government.

Climate

The Commission is acutely aware that climate change is one of the most pressing issues of our generation, and something that cannot be ignored or delayed in confronting. If not solved it will have a devastating impact on our way of life and the integrity of our earthly home.

The Commission accepts that necessary detail associated with individual items outlined in the Programme for Government may be forthcoming in subsequent Departmental papers and strategies. Achieving net zero 'no later' than 2050 is such a fundamental issue in the context of global warming and climate emergency that we are disappointed it received such passing reference (p. 50). At the end of 2022, the Church of Ireland completely divested from companies that extract fossil fuels. This was an important step that took a number of years to achieve but highlights our commitment to climate preservation and protection.

The Commission also realises the challenge faced by many parishes around Ireland that struggle to become energy efficient, especially within the confines of maintaining historic heritage properties. There is a great desire across the church, as seen in the work of organisations like Eco-Congregation Ireland, to support initiatives that will reduce carbon-footprints, and allow church properties to move away from carbon-based energy systems. The Commission would welcome further guidance from the Government on how it can support the churches and parish communities in effectively dealing with such cases. We would also like to draw the Government's attention to the following video, focusing on the theme of climate change from a young person's perspective. It was created by young people in the Mullingar Union of Parishes - [Lighten our Darkness - Climate Change Awareness](#).

Shared Island

The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement established the cross-border structures that have served the island well. Now that the NI Executive and Assembly are functioning the Commission would urge the North South Ministerial Council to work to strengthen relationships (which is the key factor for meaningful reconciliation) across the island.

The Commission welcomes the commitment to add a further €1bn to the Shared Ireland Fund up to 2035. Although road, rail and air projects will boost connectivity and with that will come increased all-island connectivity, trade and engagement it is vital that the carbon neutral targets which will mean so much to the health and wellbeing of our young people are not forgotten in our infrastructure policies.

As an all-island body, the Commission welcomes the generosity of the Government to fund students from Northern Ireland in the Erasmus programme in Ireland and to put the case for the re-entry of the UK into the Erasmus+ student exchange system are commendable. The Church of Ireland has supported many projects to pursue reconciliation and development of

better relations within the island of Ireland and its communities. It is the hope of the Commission that all may benefit from mutual understanding, and a shared sense of belonging.

Equality and Inclusion

The Commission recognises the ineffaceable dignity of the human person and of each individual, particularly in relation to social cohesion, integration and not least on interracial and interfaith solidarity. This would include a proper system for asylum seekers and an effective means for the education of migrant workers. Churches play a significant role in society, assisting those in need, providing education and contributing through participation in practical community projects to ensure that newcomers to the island can find a helping hand within the local community. In the Church of Ireland, an example of this work is seen in the Dundrum Churches Together initiative in Dublin. This is an ecumenical forum, involving the different denominations based in and around Dundrum. They have worked hard to support several refugee centres in the area, providing those in need with winter clothing, bedding, and toys for children at Christmas.

The Commission welcomes the Government's proposals to eliminate racism and promote inclusivity. However, the Commission feels that the Government's proposals do not recognise the role played by faith organisations in ensuring that all individuals and groups are treated in an equal and fair manner.

War and Global Conflict

The Commission welcomes the focus in the Programme for Government to continue advocating for a ceasefire and a surge of humanitarian aid in Gaza, and Ukraine. The importance of the full supply of humanitarian aid to relieve extreme suffering now, and the healing of physical and mental wounds, cannot be stressed enough. While the attention of the World is undoubtedly focused on the establishment of ceasefires and cessation of hostilities, it is important to acknowledge the enormous rebuilding effort that will be needed across both conflict zones. This effort will require a quick, yet caring response. The Commission hopes that this work will help to achieve a just and lasting peace in both Eastern Europe and the Middle East.

The Church

Across the Church of Ireland there are many examples of ways in which faith communities have supported their wider communities. In this context there are several examples worth highlighting. Firstly, 'the Evergreens' in Limerick City Parish, a support group for older people focusing on education, health, financial awareness, security, legal affairs, and cyber-security. Similarly, Holy Trinity Church in Rathmines have a specific 'Men's Ministry' group, which has identified two strands in which it can support men in its locality. The first strand concerns providing men with a space in which to socialise, discuss issues around their mental health, as well as how they can support their families and communities, and reduce isolation. The second strand focuses on prayer and scripture. The Carraig Centre, operated by the Carrigrohane Union of Parishes in Co. Cork, is another example of how the Church of Ireland supports communities across Ireland.

The Commission is disappointed by the omission of any mention of the role of churches generally in society and the positive effects and influences they can have on communities. They are a force for good and ought to be regarded as valued partner when it comes to recognising and addressing shortcomings and deficiencies in the delivery of public services.

The Commission recognises that we live in an increasingly secular society. Too often, that is interpreted as meaning that the role of Churches is of less consequence and relevance. What is overlooked is the daily interaction clergy have with parishioners which gives them invaluable insights into peoples' needs and signposts where, despite best intentions, the State falls short because of structured if somewhat inflexible schemes and services. The Commission would encourage the Government to collaborate with the Church of Ireland on the issues outlined throughout this response.

The Church is a force for good and seeks to be a closer partner with Government at all levels. Input from our clergy – the voice from the ‘coalface’, as it were, would benefit the construction and delivery of elements of the Programme for Government. We would encourage Government, both at national and local levels, to engage with our clergy to encourage collaboration and partnership on the issues outlined here. The Church and Society Commission stands ready and willing to play a proactive and constructive role as the work of this Government takes shape.

Conclusion

While the Programme for Government 2025 sets out an ambitious and necessary vision for the future, success will depend on the implementation of clear, detailed, and measurable strategies, and clear means of accountability. The Commission understands that success is not possible by the Government acting alone. The Church of Ireland can help in promoting good community relations and providing our communities' viewpoint on new structures. The Church and Society Commission would welcome any such opportunities which are presented to the Church of Ireland, so that we can all work together to see a future with a healthy Ireland benefitting all members of the community.

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