

Response to planned Programme for Government

Climate & Health Alliance

The proposed Programme for Government agreed between Fine Gael, Fianna Fáil, and the Green Party after weeks of negotiations has been devised to address the two most pressing global challenges facing us – the Covid-19 Pandemic and the escalating climate and biodiversity emergency. Although the programme must be approved by internal party members before a government can be formed, the Climate and Health Alliance broadly welcomes large aspects of the programme.

Climate change is the defining crisis of our times and the Programme for Government recognises this, outlining essential measures that will simultaneously address Ireland's status as a climate laggard and unlock the significant health benefits by tackling global warming. The commitment to an average 7% per annum reduction in overall greenhouse gas emissions from 2021 to 2030 and the ambitious target to achieving net zero emissions by 2050 has the unequivocal support of the Alliance.

The 2050 target that will be set into law under the Climate Action Bill and the introduction of legally enforced powers, carbon budgets and sectoral targets will keep us in line with our EU neighbours and contribute to the reversal and halt of the climate crisis. However, meeting these ambitious targets and bringing about a real transformation of our economy and society will require political buy-in, public support and properly matched resources.

Poor air quality is responsible for an estimated 1,500 premature deaths in Ireland every year so the introduction of a National Clean Air Strategy to address air pollution is long overdue. While we welcome the measures included in the programme such as the investment in local monitoring stations to provide real time localised air quality information, we believe much more needs to be done in order to protect the public from the dangers of air pollution which the WHO has described as the world's 'single biggest environmental health risk'.

This includes a Clean Air Act delivering greater urgency in achieving a nationwide smoky fuel ban, more stringent air quality standards and sufficient resources to ensure strict air quality enforcement by local authorities. Air pollution is a killer that cannot be contained by borders and therefore requires an all-island approach to tackle the issue. Existing cross border institutions such as the North South Ministerial Council could be utilised to ensure effective collaboration to the benefit of air quality on the island.

Air pollution can be reduced further by shifting the number of trips made away from motorised transport and towards active travel modes of walking and cycling. In this context, the annual allocation of €360 million to pedestrian and cycling projects, and a commitment to apportion 10% per cent of the total transport budget for cycling and 10% for pedestrian infrastructure under this programme can potentially transform Ireland's physical built environment for the better. These measures, along with widening the eligibility of the bike to work scheme, increasing allowances for e-bikes, and developing an integrated national greenways strategy, can reduce air pollution, increase physical activity, and improve mental health, all major health co-benefits of climate action.

Furthermore, the aim to "dramatically increase the number of children walking and cycling to primary and secondary school" by mandating the Department of Transport to work with schools and local authorities across the country is hugely positive and creates the opportunity to instil a culture of active travel and physical activity into a whole new generation that will pay dividends for decades to come. This goal can only be realised though if pedestrians and cyclists feel safe enough to travel by these means, so it is welcome that the programme directs local authorities to carry out a review of their road network to determine how road space could be reallocated for walkers and cyclists.

Decarbonising the road transport fleet will be an enormous challenge as Ireland has been slow in the take up of electric vehicles (EVs). The Programme for Government is vague on detail on what kind of incentives will be implemented to encourage the shift away from petrol/diesel vehicles and towards EVs. While it commits to ban the registration of new fossil-fuelled cars and phase out these vehicles from Irish cities from 2030, we believe more immediate measures should be explored to prohibit certain fossil fuelled vehicles from entering major urban city centres.

Our city streets are clogged with traffic, creating a toxic environment for active travel users. We would urge this government to implement clean air zones and explore the possibility of introducing a congestion charge in Dublin and other urban areas badly impacted by heavy traffic. It could act as an additional impetus towards active modes of travel, help reduce air pollution, and generate much-needed revenue at this moment in time.

The Alliance recognises that the agricultural sector has a unique role for the rural economy and society, supporting livelihoods and communities by traditional means for decades. However, both the IPCC and the EAT Lancet Commission have highlighted the shift that must take place in our diets away from red meat and sugar to more plant-based foods. Shifting the sector in Ireland away from an over-reliance on animal products, developing a more sustainable system for both human and planetary health, and reducing its level of CO2 emissions is not without its difficulties.

In this regard it is welcome that the Programme for Government will aim to expand the Agriculture Sustainably Support and Advisory Panel, provide a greater emphasis on producing a more diverse range of food for our domestic needs, and transform the scale of organic farming with the delivery of a fair price for farmers at its heart.

The public health impact arising from climate change is too often overlooked but the majority of measures included in this Programme for Government can create the groundwork to achieve a healthier, more sustainable, and greener Ireland. Although a myriad of fiscal and political challenges lie ahead before any of these policies and commitments can be implemented, the Climate and Health Alliance welcomes vast swathes of this Programme for Government and the ambitious targets it has set. We look forward to working with this new government.

Climate & Health Alliance

Established in 2019, the Climate and Health Alliance is a broad alliance of public health NGO's, professional bodies, and academic institutions that share a common goal in advocating for urgent government action in addressing the issue of climate change, its direct impact on public health and the significant co-benefits which will accrue from climate action.

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Irish Cancer Society



Children's Health Ireland



RCPI



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RCSI



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Irish Doctors for the Environment



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