

Statement to the parties in government negotiation

Climate & Health Alliance

Climate change is the defining crisis of our times and it is happening even more quickly than we ever feared. No country will be unaffected, and every aspect of our lives will change. However, we are far from powerless in the face of this global crisis. The national response to the Covid-19 pandemic has shown the strength of the country's health community. As a society we have demonstrated that we can undergo huge transformations for the benefit of public health.

Although we are only beginning to emerge from the first stage of this pandemic that is set to change every aspect of our economy and society for years to come, it is imperative that we do not lose sight of the even more pressing environmental health crisis that looms over us. Moreover, the long term Covid-19 restrictions reinforces the need to develop sustainable communities and will likely result in unforeseen environmental benefits that must be harnessed and maintained. Going forward, it is vital that a more integrated approach is taken to effectively manage both climate change and Covid-19 planning.

The recently established Climate and Health Alliance is calling on the parties in government negotiation to put the climate crisis at the very core of its program for government. We support the negotiating parties' commitment for an annual 7% reduction in carbon emissions each year that will help reduce and halt the worst effects of the climate crisis.

Climate change and human health is interconnected in a myriad of complex ways that is often overlooked. Although climate change impacts many of the social and environmental determinants of health, addressing it can also produce very positive outcomes that must not be disregarded.

By implementing the following measures, this new government can take massive strides in combating climate change while simultaneously unlocking multiple public health and economic benefits, making our society a healthier, greener place to live.

1. Introduce a Clean Air Act

Fossil fuel and transport emissions accelerate climate change, but they also pollute the air we breathe. Air pollution has been described by the WHO as the 'single biggest environmental health risk' and is attributable to over 1,500 premature deaths in Ireland every year mainly due to cardiovascular disease, lung cancer and acute respiratory infections. Research linking air pollution and Covid-19 further underscores the urgent need for the following measures to be introduced:

- An immediate nationwide ban on burning of all smoky solid fuel.
- Granting local authorities' powers to close roads or divert traffic, particularly near schools when air pollution limits are exceeded.
- Introduce clean air zones around all schools and other sites where young people congregate.
- Implement a daily congestion charge on all private vehicles entering Dublin city centre and examine the feasibility of extending to other major urban centres.
- Explore models to prohibit certain diesel and petrol vehicles from entering major urban city centres on different days, such as using car registration number plates as in Paris

- Provide new incentives for the use of both e-bikes and adaptive to ensure more people use active travel, to reduce the number of cars on our roads and offer a safe, easy-to-use alternative, especially for older adults and people with physical impairments
- Invest in financial incentives for individuals and companies to switch to electric vehicles
- Improve monitoring of air pollution, identify sources of breaches and rigorously pursue polluters.

2. Triple the numbers walking and cycling to school, work and any journey made, and expand public transport options

According to Census 2016, only 14.4% of the population walk, 2.8% cycle and 13.4% take public transport to work, school, or college while the percentage driving accounts for 59.8%ⁱ. In contrast, in the Netherlands walking and cycling accounted for 18% and 27% of all trips madeⁱⁱ. Facilitating a shift away from motorised vehicles to active travel will benefit the economy and increase levels of physical activity, thereby reducing noncommunicable diseases including heart disease, stroke, and some cancers, improving mental health and lowering vehicle fatalities.

To achieve this:

- Allocate 20% of national funding earmarked for transport infrastructure to walking and cycling, and two-thirds of remaining budget on inclusive public transport
- Ensure local government mirrors this with specific walking and cycling budget allocations
- Ensure the safety of pedestrians and cyclists through segregated cycle ways, properly constructed foot paths, reduced speed limits, and removal of dangerous junctions
- Expand the Green-Schools Programme to all schools in the state
- Provide safe, secure, and well-lit bicycle parking in towns, cities, and transport hubs.
- Make the current proposal to reconfigure streets to reallocate road space to pedestrians and cyclists to facilitate social distancing, permanent as in Milan and other cities
- Implement a daily congestion charge on all private vehicles entering Dublin city centre and examine the feasibility of extending to other major urban centres.
- Implement the BusConnects projects, in conjunction with communities to optimise layout and expand rural bus links between and within rural towns and villages
- Progress the appraisal, planning and design of the Luas extension and support the development of a light rail system for other urban cities
- Establish more Park and Ride and Park and Cycle facilities on the outskirts of urban areas
- Pilot car-free days in urban areas

3. Transformation of the built environment to promote healthier lives

The share of population of Ireland's urban areas is predicted to reach 75% by 2050 so the need to create sustainable, liveable cities has never been greaterⁱⁱⁱ. Redesigning our urban areas around active travel, open green spaces with energy efficient buildings in line with appropriate housing density models will improve physical and mental health while minimising air pollution and our carbon footprint.

To achieve this:

- Introduce sustainable urban development models and prioritise urban renewal in line with a 'town centre first' model
- Enable citizen-led initiatives in community green transition schemes, for example improving urban green spaces

- Implement a national urban tree planting scheme and expand the number of urban green spaces, sports facilities, and amenities in consultation with youth-focused organisations
- Conduct national audit of inner-city urban streets where pedestrianisation could be feasible
- Pilot programmes where only pedestrians and cyclists can access streets around school times
- Conduct national audit to establish most polluted urban areas and introduce schemes to support disadvantaged communities living there, focusing on children and older people
- Introduce strict new planning regulations on new builds and developments in most polluted areas, ensuring access to green public spaces and amenities

4. Creating a sustainable agri-food sector

Transformation of the food system to deliver safe healthy food, regardless of where people live or what they earn. To consider changes that would ensure the food system is.

- Robust in the face of future shocks
- Restores and enhances the natural environment for the next generation
- Is built on resilient and sustainable agriculture
- Is a thriving contributor to rural and urban economies, delivering well paid jobs and supporting innovative producers and manufacturers

5. Introduce a 'Just Transition' scheme to support those most impacted

Delivering a strong Just Transition, which ensures that no citizen or region is left behind is paramount. Measures that equalize the economic impact on the communities most disadvantaged must be implemented.

To achieve this:

- Deep retrofit programme targeting fuel poverty communities
- Establish targeted community renewable energy schemes and electric vehicle grants for disadvantaged groups worst hit by pollution and carbon taxes
- Encourage and incentivise home and remote working where possible across the public and private sector
- Expand public transport in and between Dublin, secondary cities, and regional towns.
- Pilot free provision of rural public transport

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.

Irish Heart Foundation



Irish Cancer Society



Children's Health Ireland



RCPI



Safefood



Irish Medical Organisation



ICGP



RCSI



UCC School of Public Health



Irish Doctors for the Environment



British Heart Foundation Northern Ireland



Association for Health Promotion Ireland



Stroke Association Northern Ireland



ⁱ Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport. (2019). Sustainable Mobility Policy Review. Background Paper 9 Statistics and Trends.

ⁱⁱ Harms, Lucas and Kansen, Maarten. (2018). Cycling Facts. Netherlands Institute for Transport Policy Analysis.

ⁱⁱⁱ United Nations Population Division, World Urbanization Prospects 2014 Country Profiles: Ireland