



Submission to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's Consultation on the 'Development of the Priorities and Policy Programme for Ireland's Presidency of the Council of the European Union 2026'.

12<sup>th</sup> December 2025.

## Introduction

Fórsa trade union welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's consultation on the 'Development of the Priorities and Policy Programme for Ireland's Presidency of the Council of the European Union 2026'.

As the largest public sector union in Ireland representing over 90,000 workers across the public and civil service including health, education, and local authorities, as well as staff in the commercial state sector, state agencies, private companies and the community and voluntary sector, our union is uniquely placed to provide an informed perspective into the experiences and issues facing Irish workers and wider society.

Our membership engagement, including annual surveys that gather tens of thousands of responses, provide essential data on the priority issues for workers and their families<sup>1</sup>. Our research reflects not just personal experiences, but widespread concerns around over-stretched and under-resourced systems.

The Irish Presidency policy programme must be informed by the perspectives and priority issues outlined in this submission as they offer an evidenced insight into how Ireland can best fulfil its Presidency role.

Fórsa's 2025 membership survey revealed that workers across Ireland share the same frustrations<sup>2</sup>. These are centred around housing, healthcare and the rising cost of living. When compared to broader European data, it is evident that workers in Ireland and across the European Union, share the same problems and struggles. For this reason, we have proposed three thematic priority areas for Ireland's Presidency of the Council of the European Union.

The cost of living continues to erode wages, while housing remains out of reach for far too many. Essential public services are also stretched to a breaking point, with staff utterly exhausted.

The cost-of-living crisis, rising housing costs, and pressures on essential public services have left many struggling to make ends meet. With 84% of Fórsa members advocating for a real pay rise that goes beyond the rate of inflation as part of the next public sector agreement, the demands and concerns of Irish society could not be clearer. Beyond pay and working conditions, Fórsa members have also outlined targeted investment in healthcare as their top priority, followed by housing, with care for older people notably following close behind<sup>3</sup>.

The three key themes and priorities outlined below highlight the shared problems of Irish and European workers and represent some of the most pressing issues facing Ireland's Presidency at this moment in time.

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<sup>1</sup> Fórsa (2025) *Survey results show workers must organise to set the agenda*. Fórsa News Bulletin (Nov. 7, 2025), Available at:

<https://forsatradeunion.newsweaver.com/designtest/tdkwnhfb3pr1og63u5gpx?email=true&lang=en&a=1&p=66105691&t=30063868>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

## Priority Areas

The below sections provide a brief overview of the priority areas the Government should focus on to best fulfil its Presidency role, along with specific recommendations for Ireland’s policy programme on each of the issues.

## Housing

Access to adequate and affordable housing is an issue affecting millions of Europeans. The issue is so significant that the European Parliament (EP) established a Special Committee on the Housing Crisis in the European Union. This special committee has been given a clear mandate:

*“to thoroughly examine the root causes of the current housing crisis and propose concrete, actionable solutions at the European level<sup>4</sup>.”*

In 2018, the Taoiseach Leo Varadkar told an Oireachtas Committee that the national housing and homelessness crises were a national emergency<sup>5</sup>. Both issues have markedly deteriorated since that statement.

Figures from the Central Statistics Office (CSO) in January 2025 showed that 69% of people aged 25 were still living with their parents, and 85.8% were “very concerned” about the housing crisis<sup>6</sup>. In 2023, figures from Eurostat showed that 68% of people aged 25-29 in Ireland were still living with their parents<sup>7</sup>.

Across Europe, affordability is a significant concern for those seeking to purchase their own home but specifically for Ireland, the figures are most stark. According to Eurostat, house prices in Europe have increased by 57.9% since 2010<sup>8</sup>. This compares to an 80% increase in the same period in Ireland<sup>9</sup>. The cost of renting is also a significant problem. Rents in Europe have increased by 27.8% since 2010<sup>10</sup>. This compares to an increase of 115% in Ireland<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> European Parliament. (n.d.) *Committee on Housing and Landmark Urban Issues (HUOS) – About the committee*. Available at: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/committees/en/hous/about>

<sup>5</sup> The Journal. (2018) ‘Taoiseach: “We must act now to tackle homelessness”’, TheJournal.ie, 13 March. Available at: <https://www.thejournal.ie/taoiseach-homelessness-3930398-Mar2018/>

<sup>6</sup> Central Statistics Office (CSO) (2025), *Growing Up in Ireland: Cohort ’98 at Age 25 – Main Results (Press Statement)*. Available at: <https://www.cso.ie/en/csolatestnews/pressreleases/2025pressreleases/pressstatementgrowingupinirelandcohort98atage25-mainresults/>

<sup>7</sup> RTÉ News (2023) *Many Irish adults still living at home, survey finds*, 15 August. Available at: <https://www.rte.ie/news/ireland/2023/0815/1399853-ireland-living-at-home/>

<sup>8</sup> Eurostat. (2025) ‘Housing cost over-burden and arrears statistics, first quarter 2025’, *Eurostat News Release*, 4 July. Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/ddn-20250704-4>

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

<sup>10</sup> Ibid

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

CSO figures from 2024 show that the median household income is €58,922<sup>12</sup>. The CSO figures from February 2025 show that the average cost of a new home in the 12 months to February 2025 was €360,000<sup>13</sup>. It is imperative to note that this is six times the median wage. Figures from Myhome.ie and Bank of Ireland in October 2025 suggest homes sold in 2025 are eight times above average earnings<sup>14</sup>.

Median annual incomes for people aged 25-29 (€34,482)<sup>15</sup> and 30-39 (€41,999.88)<sup>16</sup> mean that homes are ten times and eight and a half times higher than their incomes respectively. In these cases, even allowing for dual incomes, the cost of housing well exceeds the purchasing capacity of prospective buyers. All aspects of housing have become more expensive and are now increasingly out of reach for large cohorts of society.

People in Ireland overwhelmingly want the Government to prioritise affordable housing and to be more involved in the provision of housing. Polling research commissioned by the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) through Ireland Thinks in May 2024 shows that 88% of respondents favour government prioritising the delivery of homes that are affordable for all and 90% believe local authorities and the State must play a far greater role in the building and provision of homes<sup>17</sup>.

Beyond the obvious impact, building and strengthening our public services also depends upon the recruitment of young people, but rising rental costs and house prices are significantly impacting the younger generations across Ireland and Europe.

The stability of our public services will require the incoming Presidency to prioritise the delivery of affordable public housing.

This will be essential in returning confidence to young people that it is possible to afford a home, live independently from their parents, and maintain a good quality of life where accommodation costs do not make up an unsustainable proportion of their wages.

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<sup>12</sup> Central Statistics Office (CSO) (2025) *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2024 – Household Income*. Available at:

<https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/psilc/surveyonincomeandlivingconditionssilc2024/householdincome/>

<sup>13</sup> Central Statistics Office (CSO) (2025) *Residential Property Price Index – February 2025*. Available at:

<https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-rppi/residentialpropertypriceindexfebruary2025/>

<sup>14</sup> TheJournal.ie (2025) 'myHOME IE: New report shows what's behind Ireland's housing crisis', *TheJournal.ie*, 16 October. Available at: <https://www.thejournal.ie/myhomes-ie-new-report-6838740-Oct2025/>

<sup>15</sup> Central Statistics Office (CSO) (2024) *Earnings Analysis Using Administrative Data Sources 2023 – Age*. Available at:

<https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-aaads/earningsanalysisusingadministrativedatasources2023/age/>

<sup>16</sup> Ibid

<sup>17</sup> Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) (n.d.) *New poll finds 88% of voters want government to prioritise delivery of homes that are affordable for all*. Available at: <https://www.ictu.ie/news/new-poll-finds-88-voters-want-government-prioritise-delivery-homes-are-affordable-all-90-want>

## Recommendations for Ireland's Presidency and Policy Programme

At present, Irish and EU data indicates that housing is the single most destabilising issue impacting people, often exceeding even general inflation<sup>18</sup>. As such, affordable housing must be made a core EU priority in the Irish Presidency.

Following are some recommendations to achieve this:

- **Implementation of the European Affordable Housing Plan:** December 2025 will see the publication of the European Affordable Housing Plan. On the 1<sup>st</sup> of December Denmark presented the conclusions of the plan as part of their Presidency. It is incumbent on Ireland to continue this work and to recognise the significance of the issue of housing at home and across Europe and to prioritise the delivery of affordable housing as part of our Presidency<sup>19</sup>. The Irish Presidency must carry forward the implementation and recommendations of the European Affordable Housing Plan proposed by Denmark.
- **Cost rental models of accommodation:** Fórsa has consistently advocated for affordable cost rental models of accommodation at the core of any sustainable housing model. In practice, this will mean changing the financial, rental, letting and maintenance model for public housing provision and making this new model the primary vehicle for delivering public housing<sup>20</sup>.
- **Future housing needs planning:** Through its Presidency, Ireland can implement a new programme with accurate projection models that take account of existing population as well as future population projections, to plan for housing needs and delivery mechanisms.

## Healthcare

Healthcare challenges are increasingly affecting millions of people across Europe. Like housing, it is an essential pillar of social and economic wellbeing for any nation. But at present, healthcare structures across Ireland and Europe suffer from severe underinvestment, increased privatisation, and a complete failure to plan for the demographic reality of the near future.

Fórsa represents workers across health, social care and community care services and has consistently highlighted the systemic issues affecting the sustainability of our healthcare services, particularly in the face of an aging population.

These pressures are also not uniquely Irish but reflect system-wide stress point for several Member States. The concerns raised by Fórsa members across the health services are widely

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<sup>18</sup> Eurostat. (2024) *Housing in Europe — interactive publication*. Available at:

<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/interactive-publications/housing-2024>

<sup>19</sup> Council of the European Union (n.d.) *Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council (Employment and Social Policy)*. Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/council-eu/configurations/employment-social-policy/>

<sup>20</sup> Fórsa (2019) *'More Power to You'*. Available at: [https://www.forsa.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Case\\_statement.pdf](https://www.forsa.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Case_statement.pdf)

reflected in national and EU data and must inform the priorities of Ireland’s Presidency with regards to healthcare. Ireland’s Presidency will be a chance to overhaul the European approach to healthcare and create a pathway for a model that prioritises targeted investment, public provision, quality care and services and a valued workforce at the core of it all.

Public health care and quality long-term care are cornerstones of the European social model, and a sustainable and equitable European framework of healthcare that is grounded in the principles of social solidarity must be advanced under this new Presidency <sup>21</sup>.

Below we highlight some of the current key challenges facing healthcare delivery in Europe today, before outlining priority policy programmes and recommendations for the term of the Irish Presidency.

### **An ageing population and long-term care**

In February 2025, Minister for Health in Ireland, Jennifer Carroll MacNeill said: “Our population is growing, and we are living longer healthier lives. With our average life expectancy now at 82.6 years, the fifth highest in the EU, we need to continue to focus on the future demands for health care<sup>22</sup>.”

Principle 18 of the European Pillar of Social Rights stresses:

- the right to affordable long-term care services of good quality, in particular home care and community-based services<sup>23</sup>

As Europe is aging, the demand for long-term care is rising sharply. According to Home and Community Care Ireland (HCCI) there were 5,556 older people on national waiting lists for HSE home support in 2024<sup>24</sup>. As of March 2025, over 4,800 older people were waiting for a carer after being approved for help, demonstrating a critical shortage in home care workforce and support too<sup>25</sup>.

This chronic shortage is forcing many older people to rely increasingly on private operators, raising serious quality and access concerns<sup>26</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup> Department of Health (2025) *Health in Ireland: Key Trends 2024*. Dublin: Government of Ireland. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-health/collections/health-in-ireland-key-trends-2024/>

<sup>22</sup> Ibid

<sup>23</sup> European Commission (n.d.) *European Pillar of Social Rights: Building a fairer and more inclusive European Union*. Available at: [https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies-and-activities/european-pillar-social-rights-building-fairer-and-more-inclusive-european-union\\_en](https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies-and-activities/european-pillar-social-rights-building-fairer-and-more-inclusive-european-union_en)

<sup>24</sup> Health Care Charities Ireland (HCCI) (2025) *Home Support Waiting Lists in 2024 – HCCI Home-Care Data Series*. Available at: <https://hcci.ie/home-support-waiting-lists-in-2024-hcci-home-care-data-series/>

<sup>25</sup> Irish Examiner (2025) *Over 4,800 older people waiting for carers amid staff shortage*, 18 August. Available at: <https://www.irishexaminer.com/news/munster/arid-41688813.html>

<sup>26</sup> Department of Health (Ireland) (2025) *ESRI’s Health Service Capacity Review report on future capacity requirements for older people’s care*. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-health/press->

New projections by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) predict Ireland will require at least an extra 15,000 new nursing home care beds by 2040 to meet rising demands from an ageing population<sup>27</sup>. This will have to be supplemented by major expansion in community and home-based care to sustain the growing demand and to reduce pressures on hospitals with already strained capacities.

Despite being approved for care, many older people continue to wait for services, undermining community-based healthcare models such as Slaintécare and their efficiency, an issue not only unique to Ireland. If this demand is not met, it will further push people, particularly those requiring elder care into hospitals and private arrangements that they cannot afford.

The Department of Health and ESRI's capacity review of 2025 revealed that the population of Ireland aged 65 years and over is projected to increase from 0.78 million to over 1.3 million between 2022 and 2040, with the overall proportion of the population aged 65 and over projected to increase from 15% to 21%. Additionally, the population aged 85 years and over is projected to more than double between 2022 and 2040<sup>28</sup>.

The ESRI report projects that the number of long-term residential care beds will need to increase by at least 61% by 2040; short-term residential care beds will need to increase by at least 72% by 2040; and home support hours will need to increase by at least 57% by 2040<sup>29</sup>.

These Irish demographic shifts also mirror broader European trends. Very similarly, the number of people requiring long-term care in the EU is projected to rise to 38.1 million in 2050, due to an increasingly ageing population and improved life expectancy<sup>30</sup>.

### **Workforce shortages and future planning**

Healthcare workforce shortages are also expected to become a more significant issue across Europe. A 2023 World Health Organisation published report concluded that Europe would have a

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[releases/ministers-for-health-welcome-publication-of-esris-health-service-capacity-review-report-on-future-capacity-requirements-for-older-peoples-care/](https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-health/press-releases/ministers-for-health-welcome-publication-of-esris-health-service-capacity-review-report-on-future-capacity-requirements-for-older-peoples-care/)

<sup>27</sup> Walsh, B., and Kakoulidou, T. (2025). *Projections of regional demand and bed capacity requirements for older people's care in Ireland, 2022–2040: Based on the Hippocrates model*, ESRI Survey and Statistical Report Series 135, Dublin: ESRI, <https://doi.org/10.26504/sustat135>

<sup>28</sup> Department of Health (Ireland) (2025) *Ministers for Health welcome publication of ESRI's Health Service Capacity Review report on future capacity requirements for older people's care* [Press release]. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-health/press-releases/ministers-for-health-welcome-publication-of-esris-health-service-capacity-review-report-on-future-capacity-requirements-for-older-peoples-care/>

<sup>29</sup> Walsh, B., and Kakoulidou, T. (2025). *Projections of national demand and bed capacity requirements for older people's care in Ireland, 2022–2040: Based on the Hippocrates model*, ESRI Research Series 214, Dublin: ESRI, <https://doi.org/10.26504/rs214>

<sup>30</sup> *The 2021 Ageing Report: Economic and Budgetary Projections for the EU member states (2019–2070) (2021) Economy and Finance*. Available at: [https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/publications/2021-ageing-report-economic-and-budgetary-projections-eu-member-states-2019-2070\\_en](https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/publications/2021-ageing-report-economic-and-budgetary-projections-eu-member-states-2019-2070_en)

healthcare workforce shortage of 4.1 million workers by 2030<sup>31</sup>. Eurofound also published a study in 2023 which reported health and social care as one of the EU sectors with the most evident structural labour shortages.

The Framework of Action on Retention and Recruitment, jointly developed by the social employers and the European Public Service Union (EPSU), estimates that up to 7 million job openings for healthcare associate professionals and personal care workers will be created by 2030, and more than 1.6 million long-term care workers will need to be recruited by 2050 to maintain current care coverage levels<sup>32</sup>.

These findings mirror a pattern of vacancies across the health and education sectors in Ireland highlighted by Fórsa and TASC research previously and have been identified as leading to worse outcomes and even unsafe conditions for service users as well as worsening conditions for staff, leading to a vicious circle whereby staff are disincentivised from staying in their post<sup>33</sup>.

These workforce challenges of persistent staff shortages and high turnover are reported across most EU countries compromising care quality, with causes including low wages, physical and mental exhaustion and demanding working conditions<sup>34</sup>. Without targeted intervention these shortages will likely worsen.

The anticipated demand growth cannot be met without significant workforce expansion and retention. Without it, healthcare systems across the EU risk declining quality or even collapse.

Further, the growing reliance on agency staff and private operators may also lead to inequity, fragmentation and inconsistent care, and ultimately higher costs for both individuals and States.

The healthcare pressures facing Ireland such as staff shortages, burnout, turnover and reliance on agency staff mirror a systemic problem across the EU. Other Member States, similar to Ireland, will struggle without strategic investment in public infrastructure and workforce development, and targeted policy intervention.

No Member State can meet these labour market challenges alone, and there must be a collaborative approach to sustain the growing health demands. Addressing the recruitment and

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<sup>31</sup> World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe (WHO/Europe) (2023) '*Health and longevity in Europe: The challenge of an ageing population*', *Eurohealth*, 29(1), pp.6–10. Available at: <https://iris.who.int/server/api/core/bitstreams/488b01ab-a066-4558-a345-476570fe2802/content>

<sup>32</sup> European Commission (2025) '*EU social partners commit to tackle workforce challenges in social services*'; *Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion* [Online News], 26 June. Available at: [https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/news/eu-social-partners-commit-tackle-workforce-challenges-social-services-2025-06-26\\_en](https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/news/eu-social-partners-commit-tackle-workforce-challenges-social-services-2025-06-26_en)

<sup>33</sup> Fórsa trade union and TASC (2025) *TASC report - The future of the Irish state: 2025 and Beyond*, Fórsa. Available at: <https://www.forsa.ie/tasc-report-ireland-2025-and-beyond/>

<sup>34</sup> Almeida-Meza P, Ledden S, Dempsey B, Smith A, Croak B, Bhundia R, Lamb D, Malik A, Raine R, Redlich C, Wessely S, Stevelink S, Greenberg N. *Futureproofing the healthcare workforce in Europe: understanding and addressing psychological distress and occupational outcomes*. Available at: <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC12541638/>

retention crises across EU states must be central to any EU healthcare strategy or workforce planning.

### **Recruitment and retention issues**

The recruitment and retention of staff continues to be a significant issue of concern across our health services. The recruitment and retention crisis in the Irish health service mirrors the affordability crisis in the housing market outlined at the start of this submission, as both issues reflect systemic failures in long-term planning, investment and infrastructure.

Staff shortages are one of the most acute barriers to meeting current as well as future healthcare needs, and currently present one of the biggest bottlenecks in Irish and European healthcare delivery.

Fórsa's latest survey, of almost 3,800 health and social care professionals, has revealed critically low staff morale in the Irish health services<sup>35</sup>.

Almost half of respondents (48%) said the situation had worsened over the last two years, while over half (53%) said low morale is negatively affecting the quality of care.

The research shows high levels of dissatisfaction with opportunities for career development (63%), and a significant number of staff continuing to work despite feeling unwell, while 68% of respondents reported feeling unwell – due to work-related stress – over the previous two years.

The research identifies factors like understaffing, a sense of 'disconnect' between senior management and staff, a 'lack of recognition and underappreciation' of staff, alongside increasingly negative public perceptions of health and care systems, as being responsible for the continuing decline in morale. This diminishing morale also leads to burnout, placing strain on an already overwhelmed group of staff and services, and representing a very significant loss of skills.

These challenges also have a pronounced gendered effect. Women make up a majority of care workers as well as carry a disproportionate burden of unpaid family care. Low pay, precarious contracts and chronic understaffing further perpetuate gendered economic disadvantage, impacting labour-market participation for women, their income and ultimately their pension outcomes too.

### **Threat of Privatisation**

Another key concern for Fórsa is the increasing shift towards privatisation and outsourcing in our health services. The increased reliance on agency staff in hospitals, instead of addressing growing staffing and structural concerns within the health services, reflects a mounting problem. This two-fold model hampers accountability and increases inequality of care, particularly for vulnerable elder populations.

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<sup>35</sup> Fórsa (2025) *New research reveals critically low staff morale in health services*. Available at: <https://www.forsa.ie/new-research-reveals-critically-low-staff-morale-in-health-services/>

Recent HSE figures show that the cost of hiring agency staff for Irish hospitals increased by almost 50% between 2021 and 2024, with some hospitals showing much greater increases<sup>36</sup>. This means Irish hospitals spent on average €379.7 million on agency workers in 2024 alone. With a reported preliminary spend of €170 million for the first five months of 2025, this year's annual spend is set to increase as well<sup>37</sup>.

### **Recommendations for Ireland's Presidency and policy programme**

Ireland's Presidency presents a pivotal opportunity to shape a European agenda that will place accessible, high-quality public healthcare and provision of quality long-term care at its core. Fórsa strongly believes ambitious, coordinated action must be taken to strengthen European public healthcare systems, support the essential staff that are the backbone of these services and provide high quality healthcare across all Member States.

This Presidency must highlight and address the systemic challenges facing not only the Irish health service, but all care systems across the EU as we face shared issues of an ageing population, recruitment challenges and the breaching role of private agency operators in essential public health services.

Fórsa has consistently stressed that without health care staff, there is no health service, and their concerns should be prioritised in any health reform plans. Failure to address workforce sustainability will have extremely damaging long-term consequences for the delivery of quality services and the wellbeing of health and social care professionals.

It is important to safeguard Europe's healthcare systems for future needs and uphold its commitments to the European Pillar of Social Rights as well as the Sustainable Development Goals in providing universal health care to all its people. The development of a long-term care action plan will be essential for the future of European social policy, to ensure the well-being of all its people. But it is vital to place the concerns of health care professionals and their representatives at the core of the development of this model, if it is to be sustainable.

Fórsa strongly supports an EU-wide policy focus on improving pay, job security and working conditions for health and social care professionals as part of the European Pillar of Social Rights. As such, specific recommendations for inclusion in the policy programme are:

- **Strengthened implementation of the 2022 European Care Strategy:** The 2022 EU Care Strategy already commits to quality affordable and accessible care services across the European Union and to improve the situation for both care receivers and the people caring for them, professionally or informally. While the strategy is widely endorsed by Member States, the implementation has been weak so far, and a renewed delivery mechanism can

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<sup>36</sup> Irish Times (2025) *Cost of hiring agency staff in hospitals hit €380m last year*, 8 August. Available at: <https://www.irishtimes.com/health/2025/08/08/cost-of-hiring-agency-staff-in-hospitals-hit-380m-last-year/>

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

be implemented through the new Presidency. Ireland must drive the implementation of this strategy to relieve pressures on health services.

- **A 2030 European Workforce Plan:** A collaborative EU workforce strategy to address shared recruitment challenges can also be progressed. This would benefit from shared forecasts and staffing targets to plan for rising demands across Member States. Further, improved career pathways, pay and conditions for health and social care professionals and fair recognition of qualifications across Member States to stabilise labour supply and improve mobility of qualified workers would also be important to any workforce plan. An opportunity also exists to progress EU-wide minimum (weighted) standards for pay, staffing ratios and working conditions. Failure to fill frontline vacancies will continue to place severe pressure on healthcare workers, as they work to deliver safe services, most prominently in community health services, mental health, services to older people and disability services.
- **Private and Agency operators:** There exists an opportunity to establish a new framework on accountability and quality of providers to address staffing issues, oversight, and governance of private and agency operators. The Presidency must implement a review of the role of private and agency providers across European healthcare systems and develop greater reporting requirements on public institutions for use of private or agency staff and services.
- **Strategic and targeted investment:** The Presidency must champion a collaborative European approach which will establish quality long term care as a fundamental public good. Fórsa believes this can be achieved through targeted investment in publicly delivered health care services and strategic re-direction of budget and resources from agency spend to recruitment and retention efforts within public health systems. Furthermore, significant investment in preventative care is required. With an ageing population and a growing number of people with complex conditions, we need substantial investment in preventative care, and a multidisciplinary approach looking at new models of care.
- **Pathway for Quality Jobs Act:** Fórsa believes the Quality Jobs Act also has a significant role to play in alleviating healthcare related challenges. Improved collective bargaining has long been established as a key factor in improving job satisfaction, pay and conditions and work-life balance. The progression of collective bargaining coverage will have positive implications for job security, access to skills and career development and social cohesion. It will also be a step forward in the right direction to address persistent structural weaknesses in the European labour market and strengthen the European social model.
- **Expand cross-border health information sharing:** On 28<sup>th</sup> November 2025, the European Union launched its latest plan to strengthen preparedness for cross border health crises through the Union prevention, preparedness and response plan for health

crises<sup>38</sup>. This plan provides policymakers, crisis managers, and stakeholders with practical tools, such as exchanging information, expertise and technical assistance when a crisis occurs, for coordinated action in times of health crises to protect the health and well-being of people across the EU. While the plan only addresses potential health hazards and crises, the opportunity exists to adopt a similar governance framework which captures and provides information on available capacities and resources, support mechanisms and surveillance across all Member States on a regular basis.

- **Funding conditionality:** Launch a new EU funding initiative specifically for improving public long-term care capacity. EU funding conditionality can also be contingent on achieving healthcare commitments outlined in the European Pillar of Social Rights.

## Cost of living

The rising cost of living has been a pervasive issue in Ireland and across Europe since the tail end of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Cost of living has also consistently been flagged as a key factor affecting recruitment and retention challenges across sectors staffed by civil and public service workers. These sectors employ many low-paid workers, with roles like healthcare assistants, personal care workers, and other hospital support staff making up a large share. However, dissatisfaction with pay and conditions extends beyond low-paid workers, affecting other professionals as well. This discontent, coupled with high living costs, is worsening recruitment and retention issues and straining vital public services<sup>39</sup>.

In June 2025, the Minimum Essential Standard of Living survey from St Vincent de Paul (SVP) showed the cost of essential goods rose by 18.8% from 2020 to 2025<sup>40</sup>.

In September 2025, the President of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) Oliver Röpké stated that the cost of living and housing crises in Europe are a “threat for the trust in democracy” if not properly addressed<sup>41</sup>.

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<sup>38</sup> European Commission (2025) “Commission proposes new initiative to address social housing shortages in the EU” *Press Corner*, IP/25/2836, 3 December. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_25\\_2836](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_25_2836)

<sup>39</sup> Fórsa trade union and TASC (2025) *report - "The Future of the Irish State: 2025 and Beyond"*: Available at: <https://www.forsa.ie/tasc-report-ireland-2025-and-beyond/>

<sup>40</sup> Society of Saint Vincent de Paul (SVP) (2025) *Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL) costs increase by 1.8% in last year with cumulative increase of 18.8% since 2020*. Available at: <https://www.svp.ie/news/minimum-essential-standard-of-living-mesl-costs-increase-by-1-8-in-last-year-with-cumulative-increase-of-18-8-since-2020/>

<sup>41</sup> European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) (2025) “Cost-of-living crisis a big threat for the trust in democracy, EESC President warns,” *European Newsroom*, 19 September. Available at: <https://europeannewsroom.com/cost-of-living-crisis-a-big-threat-for-the-trust-in-democracy-eesc-president-warns/>



30 in Ireland<sup>49</sup>. Similarly, rising prices and the cost of living was the top priority for youth across the EU27, with it being highest in the Netherlands (52%) and lowest in Romania (23%)<sup>50</sup>.

When surveyed on which areas should be a priority for the EU in the next five years, 40% of young people in the EU and 31% of young people in Ireland responded with rising prices and cost of living<sup>51</sup>.

According to the European Movement Ireland EU Poll 2025, the cost of living (56%) was the overall top concern for all respondents in Ireland<sup>52</sup>.

Fórsa's own survey found that nearly three out of four members (73%) say their standard of living has worsened over the past two years, with 37% reporting that it has worsened significantly. Members earning under €50,000 feel the hardest hit.

Fórsa and TASC's collaborative report 'The Future of the Irish State: 2025 and Beyond' highlights approximately one in five respondents reported that they expect their quality of life to decline in the coming years<sup>53</sup>. This sentiment is particularly prevalent among younger members below the age of 45.

This growing pessimism about the future of work is especially notable among younger workers and is unsurprising given the significant increases in the cost of living since 2022 due to global shocks, which have exacerbated long-standing recruitment and retention crises across the public sector and created more difficult working conditions for staff while also negatively impacted the provision of public services.

For younger workers in particular, the high cost of housing in Ireland is likely to be a significant factor impacting the amount of disposable income they have. The Amárach Research survey of Fórsa workers found that those aged 45 and younger were more likely to spend a higher proportion of their wages on housing, while also reporting to spend a lower proportion of their wages on other living expenses, such as bills, food, transport, or clothing<sup>54</sup>.

Ireland must design a Presidency that reflects the lived experiences of workers, particularly younger workers.

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<sup>49</sup> European Parliament (2025) 'Cost of living and environment are the main concerns of young people in the EU', Press Release, 10 February. Available at: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20250210IPR26795/cost-of-living-and-environment-are-the-main-concerns-of-young-people-in-the-eu>

<sup>50</sup> Ibid

<sup>51</sup> European Parliament (2025) *Factsheet Flash Eurobarometer FL013EP – Youth Survey (2025)*. Available at: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20250210IPR26795/cost-of-living-and-environment-are-the-main-concerns-of-young-people-in-the-eu>

<sup>52</sup> European Movement Ireland (n.d.) *Ireland and the EU Poll*. Available at: <https://www.europeanmovement.ie/ireland-and-the-eu-poll>

<sup>53</sup> Fórsa trade union and TASC (2025) *report - 'The Future of the Irish State: 2025 and Beyond'* Available at: <https://www.forsa.ie/tasc-report-ireland-2025-and-beyond/>

<sup>54</sup> Fórsa (2024) *CSQ Winter 2024* [PDF]. Available at: <https://www.forsa.ie/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/CSQ-Winter-2024.pdf>

Using the data trends for 2022–2025 highlighted above, including but not limited to high inflation spikes, subsequent stabilisation, persistent arrears, and voter concerns, the Government and the EU should prioritise emerging issues, such as affordability and consumer protection, housing security and supply, income adequacy, market resilience and inflation management.

It is integral to understand that the EU policy choices over the next five years will determine the Irish Presidency's response to, and its impact on, persistent structural inequalities.

### **Recommendations for Ireland's Presidency and policy programme**

Considering the widespread impact cost of living challenges highlighted by the data presented above, it is essential for Ireland to actively address how future EU policy can better protect living standards, while also understanding the nuanced impact of policy gaps on vulnerable groups such as young people, low-income workers, renters, and families.

Following are some recommendations to alleviate the cost-of-living pressures:

- **Strengthen Economic Security and Wage Adequacy in the EU:** Ireland must continue the implementation and strengthening of the EU Minimum Wage Directive<sup>55</sup> to tackle the decline of real wages in Ireland and across the EU. This also includes the strong promotion of collective bargaining including requiring that participation in competitive tendering for public contracts in the EU should be conditional on collectively bargained agreements.
- **Prioritise a coordinated response to cost-of-living pressures:** Despite inflation now at 2.2%, the burden on households remains high<sup>56</sup>. Ireland and the EU must have stronger oversight of price gouging and essential goods inflation through a common framework for monitoring real wages and inflation. Another aspect that can be looked into is the expansion of the Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL) methodology across the EU to assess the social impact of food price fluctuations<sup>57</sup>.
- **Promote Democratic Stability and Trust in Institutions:** With EESC warnings that the cost-of-living crisis threatens democratic trust<sup>58</sup>, Ireland should push for stronger communication on EU economic policy and promote public engagement platforms. Stakeholder engagements and consultations must also be regularly held to improve feedback and civil society participation in the EU decision-making processes.

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<sup>55</sup> Eurofound (2025) *Minimum wages in 2025: Annual review*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. Available at: <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/en/publications/all/minimum-wages-2025-annual-review>

<sup>56</sup> *Euro area annual inflation up to 2.2% (2025) Euro indicators - Eurostat*. Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-euro-indicators/w/2-02122025-ap>

<sup>57</sup> Society of Saint Vincent de Paul (SVP) (2025) *Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL) costs increase by 1.8% in last year with cumulative increase of 18.8% since 2020*. Available at: <https://www.svp.ie/news/minimum-essential-standard-of-living-mesl-costs-increase-by-1-8-in-last-year-with-cumulative-increase-of-18-8-since-2020/>

<sup>58</sup> European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) (2025) *EESC kicks off work on cost-of-living crisis package*, News release. Available at: <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/news-media/news/eesc-kicks-work-cost-living-crisis-package>

## Conclusion

The EU and its institutions play an incredibly influential role in people's lives but the work that is carried out in Brussels, Strasbourg, and Luxembourg is often far removed from people's daily lives. The Irish Presidency is a real opportunity to bring the work of Europe closer to its citizens by focusing on policies and issues that matter to them most.

We have used this submission to highlight the top three priorities affecting Irish workers, and people across Europe, which should be given particular attention during Ireland's Presidency. Our members exist across the length and breadth of the country, and in virtually every corner of the public sector, and their experiences reflect issues that will continue to significantly impact Irish and European society in the years ahead.

Our Presidency of the Council of the European Union will be an opportunity for Ireland to play a key role in shaping the EU's policy and legislative agenda in a way which responds to the key concerns and needs of the Union and its Member States.

Many national governments consider the interlinked issues of housing, healthcare and cost of living as priority crises requiring coordinated EU action, providing an opportunity for the Irish Presidency to achieve much needed reform in these thematic areas.

This submission highlights the significant challenges facing Europe's labour market and social cohesion, along with specific recommendations for Ireland's Presidency and policy programme for 2026 on each of the priority themes.

Fórsa has consistently argued that a joined-up thinking approach focused on the outlook for workers is crucial to addressing cost of living challenges<sup>59</sup>. Fórsa has repeatedly called for a new social compact which would bring together government, employers, and unions to support Ireland and the EU to better address or resolve present and future challenges, such as healthcare, childcare, education, housing, and climate change. Such a system would also strengthen the EU's resilience and ability to respond to any future crises.

Trade unions also have a pivotal role to play in advocating for this vision and this submission outlines Fórsa members' experiences, which are evidently reflected across European society.

It is our view that anything less than an ambitious proactive approach to tackle these interconnected issues represents a significant missed opportunity for the Presidency. Interventionist policies specifically targeting housing, healthcare and cost of living issues must be prioritised to tackle today's most prominent issues in people's everyday lives.

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<sup>59</sup> Fórsa trade union and TASC (2025) report - *"The Future of the Irish State: 2025 and Beyond"*: Available at: <https://www.forsa.ie/tasc-report-ireland-2025-and-beyond/>

Furthermore, there must be an immediate move away from the current economic model which prioritises privatisation, short-termism, and chronic underinvestment in public services.

This is a befitting opportunity for the Irish Presidency to adopt a proactive and progressive economic strategy that will deliver a better quality of life for workers and their families and build stronger communities across Europe.

**Fórsa strongly believes the fundamental challenges of housing, healthcare, and cost of living facing workers and Irish society today must form the backbone of the development of the priorities and policy programme for Ireland's Presidency of the Council of the European Union 2026.**