

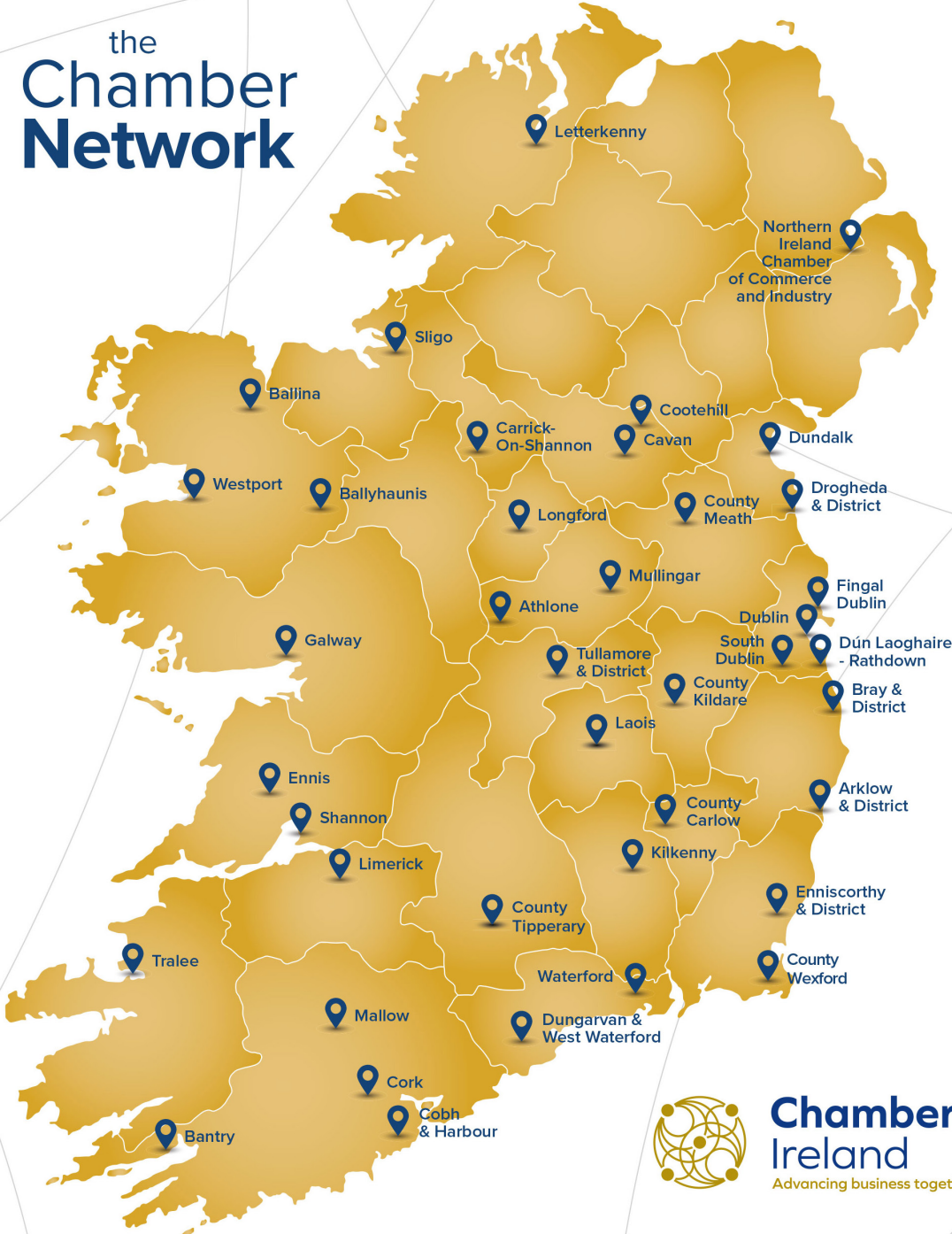


Manifesto for Europe



**Chambers
Ireland**
Advancing business together

the Chamber Network



Chambers Ireland
Advancing business together

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Introduction

Last year Ireland celebrated 50 years of membership of the European Union - 50 years that have been marked by a radical social and economic transformation of the country. The change over these decades is best represented by staggering population growth of over 70%, dramatic increases in the value of exports from €1 billion in 1973 to €208 billion in 2022, and total GDP as a proportion of the EU27 expanding from 0.6% to 3.2%. We've also weathered significant crises and experienced monumental moments in Irish history over this time.

Ireland would not be where it is now without the shared vision and ambition of the bloc. Our membership of the European Union has been a constant driving force for peace, prosperity and the common good. Open collaboration and coordinated action with the 26 other Member States on social, economic and environmental issues has been pivotal in driving unprecedented progress across these areas.

Facing into the 2024 European elections, it is time to take stock of everything that has been achieved and the challenges we have faced since the last election in 2019. At that point in time the uncertainty of what form Brexit would take was still to be determined, no one could have predicted the onset of a global pandemic that would profoundly impact all levels of society, and the sustained Russian invasion of Ukraine has brought into sharp focus the importance of peace and solidarity with our European neighbours and the need to accelerate our transition to renewable energy, with the overall goal of achieving energy security.

As the voice of business throughout Ireland, Chambers Ireland represents 39 member chambers across every major city, town and region on the island of Ireland. Aligning our strategic priorities with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, our aim is to make Ireland a better place in which to live, work and do business.

Looking ahead, businesses are facing many uncertainties and challenges that will require a robust, coordinated and coherent response from our elected European representatives. Chambers across Ireland want a Europe that is open for business, and a Europe that creates jobs and growth. We call on voters and businesses to think seriously about the kind of Europe they want to be a part of and elect candidates who will represent Ireland's interests as the Future of Europe debate evolves. The 2024 European elections are pivotal in shaping this direction and all eligible voters should ensure their voice is heard.

We have compiled our Chamber Manifesto for Europe, in collaboration with the Chamber network, to reflect the key priorities for Irish businesses as we move into the new 2024 – 2029 term of European governance.



Ian Talbot
Chief
Executive



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President



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Chambers Ireland and the Sustainable Development Goals

Chambers Ireland has been appointed as a national Sustainable Development Goals Champion as part of the 2023-2024 SDG Champions Programme. The programme has been developed by the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications to raise public awareness of the SDGs and to demonstrate that everyone in society can make a contribution to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Chambers Ireland is the only business representative organisation appointed to be a champion and, in this capacity, our role is to act as an advocate and promoter of the SDGs and to help businesses realise the opportunities these Goals create. By showcasing the opportunities, we hope to instil confidence in businesses to integrate the SDGs into their work and activities in order to achieve meaningful results.

We promote how the Goals positively impact businesses, communities, and livelihoods. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015, provides a shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future.

Chambers Ireland and ICC Ireland, together with our nationwide network of affiliated Chambers have unanimously pledged to support the Goals. We have worked with our Network and our Sustainable Business Council to help to educate the 9,000 businesses we represent about the Goals.

All of our policy outputs, including this EU Election Manifesto, are aligned with our selected Sustainable Development Goals and seek to help our members address the challenges of an increasingly 'shock prone' world. Chambers Ireland focuses on five key SDGs, which we feel we can contribute directly towards and champion through our work.

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A robust European strategy for climate and energy resilience

In 2020, Ireland was ranked second last in the EU for meeting 2020 renewable energy targets. With the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the focus on energy security has been brought into sharp focus and should be a key priority for incoming Irish MEPs. The benefits of a robust, accelerated and progressive EU industrial policy for renewable energy have the potential to create enormous opportunities for Ireland, both in terms of securing a sustainable energy supply future for the country and in terms of our economic potential to become a net exporter of energy to the rest of Europe.

Our long-term security of supply will require a combination of renewables and hydrogen storage, significant grid development and reinforcement, as well as substantial development of key technical skills required for the green and digital transition. Integrating our energy networks with the EU, particularly through electricity interconnectors, offers enormous opportunities. The main barriers to delivery of this are institutional and regulatory, and a commitment to tackling these barriers should be a key focus in the upcoming election.

Ireland has a unique opportunity within the EU to benefit from the shift towards renewable energy given our enormous sea resources and the resultant electricity generation capacity. Wind, wave and solar energy could see us leading the European transition, but instead we lag behind.

There is little indigenous manufacturing capacity in the renewables sector. Our ports need major investment if they are to facilitate the generation of the 100s of GW of potential energy that lies off our coasts. There is however insufficient domestic demand for such energy therefore Ireland has a major role to play in supporting the EU's green transition by exporting our excess green energy to the Continent. Significant resourcing of our ports, our grid and our international interconnections is needed if we are to build out these investments which are to aid the EU's green transition.

This will help secure not only lower CO2 emissions for the EU, an effective EU renewables Industrial Policy will also secure energy supplies within the single market.

There is an opportunity for both Ireland and the wider EU in creating a more active EU Industrial Policy for renewable energy which catalyses these geographically advantageous resources.

In recent times, we have witnessed some pushback against the EU's climate action commitments and revised targets under the European Green Deal. Businesses have felt the strain of the increased cost of doing business, heightened reporting requirements, and complex legislative frameworks. Empowering businesses for the green transition, while maintaining competitiveness, should be a priority for the new Parliament to ensure continued buy-in and positive action across the public and private sectors that will help us meet our climate action targets.

According to recent projections, Ireland will achieve a reduction of 29% in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030, compared with the target of 51%. This is not good enough and highlights the need for continued progress, as opposed to a slowdown in our ambitions.

Recommendations:

- Develop a comprehensive European strategy to ensure consistent availability of sustainable energy at competitive and stable prices.
- Increased investment and a streamlined permitting system are needed to accelerate growth in Irish renewable energy industries and related infrastructure if Ireland is to become a net exporter of energy to Europe.
- Harmonise the EU industrial strategy with climate policies, carefully considering the needs of businesses.
- Provide core funding for EU-mission climate-neutral cities.
- Enhance the development of global partnerships to achieve climate neutrality. Connect with other emission trading systems and streamline international agreements, particularly in standardizing the CO2 calculation methodologies for goods and services.
- Review the sustainable finance framework to ensure that it promotes investments in a cleaner economy and meets the needs of SMEs

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A globally competitive Europe

With inflation, supply chain shocks, and conflict the global economy has become increasingly challenging for businesses, especially those that are reliant on trade and the persistence of the rules-based system of international trade.

Ireland must prioritise competitiveness and Irish MEPs must focus on tackling issues and promoting growth accordingly. Our continued prosperity will rely on Ireland standing out as the European economy that is a thriving and dynamic place to invest.

The EU has the largest trade network in the world and it must capitalise on this to ensure effective market access for EU businesses globally.

As a small, open economy, Ireland is particularly exposed to risks in the global economy but it is also agile and therefore well placed to take advantage of opportunities that emerge. This flexibility however is dependent on robust integrated rail, air, roads and ports infrastructure which need investment to keep trade flowing.

EU competitiveness is reliant on the availability of low-cost energy, critical raw materials and skilled labour. Furthermore, we must foster entrepreneurship to drive business growth, as too often EU policies neglect the needs of smaller businesses.

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Recommendations:

- Expand the EU's network of bilateral trade agreements, in particular with the world's growth centres to secure better and more reliable access for European businesses.
- Pursue more coherent implementation of existing trade agreements, especially towards SMEs, building on the chamber network's unparalleled links to the business community.
- Strive to improve the functioning of the multilateral trading system through comprehensive reform, and expand European partnerships with Third Country markets in line with the twin transition.



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An enabling policy environment for businesses

EU policies and legislation have a huge impact on the way businesses across Europe operate and their level of success. The EU's legislative stockpile and potential new rules must thus be based on a more careful consideration of the needs of businesses - particularly SMEs - by all policy-makers at all stages.

In last year's State of the Union address by President von der Leyen, a commitment was made to reducing burdens associated with reporting requirements by 25%. At a domestic level, businesses are being challenged by increased labour costs and new employment legislation. The introduction of statutory sick leave, increased PRSI, new work life balance legislation, increases to the minimum wage, the phase-in of a living wage, pension auto-enrolment and the right to request remote working have all increased the legislative compliance and financial burdens facing businesses. On top of this, EU reporting requirements have increased the administrative burden facing businesses.

The introduction of sustainability reporting standards is the most recent and relevant example of well-intentioned policy-making that was designed to hold large companies accountable for the impact of their activities on people and the environment. However, the unintended consequence has been that smaller businesses are directly impacted where they form part of larger businesses' supply chains.

Chambers Ireland would like to see the continued commitment to protecting and promoting business interests in EU policy-making, with a heightened focus on the impact that such policies may have on SMEs. Excessive regulatory and reporting requirements stifle business growth and hamper competitiveness.

At a time when EU economic growth forecasts remain muted, we need to encourage innovation and investment, which requires an open and conducive regulatory framework.

Recommendations:

- Ensure that all EU institutions comply systematically with their established commitments to evidence-based policy making and impact assessment.
- Pursue the announced measures to rationalise reporting requirements and take into account the cumulative burden of EU regulatory compliance on businesses with greater rigour.
- Build on the appointment of an EU SME Envoy to set out a substantive EU SME strategy, enshrining the SME 'Think Small First' Test across the European Commission and other institutions.
- Enable SMEs to access public, venture and debt-based funding to invest for growth by effectively deploying EU funds destined for entrepreneurs and enhancing the functioning of the capital markets union.



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A Europe that invests in its cities and regions

European Union membership has helped to improve many aspects of Irish life, including our infrastructure, the quality of our environment, our opportunities for learning and the way our businesses buy and sell their goods and services.

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Regional development and strategic investment in capital infrastructure is essential to Ireland's competitiveness. European investment since 1973 has seen a transformation of the Irish economy. With new challenges on the horizon, continued large scale EU investment in infrastructure is needed to ensure competitiveness and economic prosperity across all regions in Ireland.

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In an increasingly shock-prone world, Ireland has faced a number of crises in recent years that have slowed or halted progress on the development of key infrastructure. All the while our population has continued to grow and there are now over five million people calling Ireland home.

The banking crisis and subsequent economic crash, Brexit, the Covid-19 global pandemic, and increasing geopolitical instability have all had varying levels of impact on our investment in infrastructure. However, we must maintain focus and continue progressing the goals and objectives of the National Development Plan and Project Ireland 2040. EU funding is fundamental to our ability to invest in this vital infrastructure.

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While Ireland has become significantly more prosperous since it joined the EU and continues to be one of the fastest growing economies in the bloc, we must ensure that all regions of the country benefit from fair and equitable investment.

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Recommendations:

- Continued financial supports to be available via the European Investment Bank to support the delivery of the National Development Plan / Project Ireland 2040.
- Better distribution of EU funds to all regions across the country through streamlined pathways.
- Help our regions increase their competitiveness and enable investments, like the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), to support SMEs and increase digitisation.
- Increased resources to communicate the funding opportunities available to SMEs and entrepreneurs under programmes like InvestEU and Horizon Europe.
- Continued investment in the Committee of the Regions to support applications by local authorities for EU funding and promote best practice.
- Given Ireland's unique position in the wake of Brexit, continued financial supports should be made available to border regions and businesses that have been directly affected to support their continued recovery and growth.
- Increase awareness of the work of the Enterprise Europe Network (EEN) and encourage greater collaboration between EEN development agencies/ cluster groups.



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Delivering the Single Market

The Single Market is Europe's main asset for ensuring inclusive growth and job creation, and the essential driver for investment in key industries. It is a fundamental feature of Europe's competitiveness model, which can only be successful when it is accessible, easy to navigate and open to all. As a small, open and increasingly knowledge-based economy, Ireland relies on the functioning of the Single Market and what it promises in relation to free movement of goods, capital, people and services.

Much has been achieved since its creation 30 years ago, but much more needs to be done if our businesses are to be able to buy and sell goods and access services freely across EU borders. Chambers Ireland's members have an inherent interest in the completion of the EU Single Market across all four freedoms and we call on MEPs to tackle the many remaining barriers that still inhibit full implementation across Europe.

Our connectivity and access to mainland Europe is now more important than ever in a post-Brexit world and, for many businesses, trade has become more complex over the past few years. Therefore, a fully functioning Single Market with minimal barriers is crucial. We believe that more needs to be done at European level to ensure that the Single Market is working in the interests of citizens and businesses, particularly SMEs, and to strengthen communication of how the EU supports Irish business.



A level playing field within the single labour market is vital for improving the EU's competitiveness. Ensuring that all individuals have access to the workforce, which allows them to maximise the utility of their skills, will expand the pool of available workers and also apply their talents more efficiently.

Recommendations:

- Revitalise Europe's competitiveness by creating a real level-playing field – including in the digital and financial spheres – for companies to operate, lowering their cost of entry and reducing disproportionate administrative and regulatory burdens.
- Securing our data connections both within the Single Market and between the EU and our trading partners must also be prioritised.
- Tackle obstacles and restrictions encountered, in particular in the field of services for businesses to fully benefit from the Single Market.
- Focus on the correct implementation of EU rules and faster approach to enforcement in the member states in order to secure fairer competition and economic growth.
- The EU's work programme must deliver diversity, equity and inclusion so that women, migrants, people with disabilities, and other marginalised groups are afforded effective access to jobs across all sectors, and opportunities for promotion and upskilling.



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Bridging the skills gap for growth and the twin transitions

Human capital is one of Europe's competitive advantages, yet skills shortages are hindering businesses from growing, innovating and adapting to technological, environmental and societal change. The EU can play an integral part in developing the skills needed for the future of work.

In Ireland, employment currently stands at 2.6 million, a record high for the State, and unemployment is also at an all-time low. This means that it is now more difficult for businesses to recruit and retain staff with competition for talent driving up wages and putting increased pressure on SMEs.

We are also seeing significant skills gaps opening up in certain sectors of the economy and skills shortages have become an acute reality for many businesses in the post-pandemic recovery. According to a survey carried out by Chambers Ireland of small and medium businesses in 2023, almost nine out of ten respondents were facing significant challenges recruiting essential employees with sufficient skills and qualifications.

This gulf in skills and qualifications is likely to become more pronounced over the coming years as we transition to further green and digital technologies, which may include increased automation, the prolific use of artificial intelligence, heightened cybersecurity requirements, and the obsolescence of certain industries and sectors.



With free movement of workers being a cornerstone of our European identity, a coordinated approach to upskilling and reskilling should be adopted at an EU level to ensure that the workforce of the EU is equipped and ready to meet the demands of the future world of work, and that all individuals can contribute to the development and progression of new burgeoning industries. This should also include coordinated action to ensure the successful integration of displaced people in the European workforce in a way that respects their skills and experience.

Recommendations:

- Align jobs and skills strategies with the EU's industrial policy and labour market needs, informed by skills intelligence and strategic foresight and underpinned by sound funding opportunities, with specific measures towards SMEs.
- Convert green and digital developments into knowledge and learning content with direct application in the labour market. Enhance the recognition, transparency and comparability of skills and qualifications, for better skills matching and increased mobility within the EU.
- Enhance lifelong learning opportunities by integrating skills and innovation strategies into the higher education and vocational training agenda curricula at all levels.



Chambers Ireland are members of Eurochambres – the Association of European Chambers of Commerce and Industry



Chambers Ireland: Manifesto for Europe Priorities

- A robust European strategy for climate and energy resilience
- A globally competitive Europe
- An enabling policy environment for businesses
- A Europe that invests in its cities and regions
- Delivering the Single Market
- Bridging the skills gap for growth and the twin transitions