



Chambers
Ireland
Advancing business together



Ireland's Third SDG National Implementation Plan

Submission by Chambers Ireland

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Contents

About Chambers Ireland	3
Key Points	4
Questions	7
1. What are the key areas of progress in achieving the objectives and actions of the current NIP and how can these be built upon?	7
2. What are some of the key challenges in achieving the objectives and actions of the existing NIP and how can these be addressed?	8
3. Do you agree with the NIP's current key objectives? In your view, are there further or alternative objectives that should be included?	9
4. Are you satisfied that the Governance structures in place are sufficient to ensure increased policy coherence for sustainable development across all levels of government?	10
5. Stakeholder Engagement - what is working well and what needs to be further developed e.g. better reaching the furthest behind first?	11
6. How can youth voices and the voices of groups identified as being in danger of being left behind best be included?	12
7. Are there specific actions that should be considered for inclusion? If so, please specify.	13
8. Are there new topics or areas which need to be considered for inclusion (e.g. AI and Digitalisation, Pact for the Future, etc.)?	13
9. How can the monitoring and reporting framework be improved, particularly in preparation for Ireland's next Voluntary National Review?	14
10. What role can partnerships play in furthering the implementation of the SDGs in Ireland?	15

About Chambers Ireland

Chambers Ireland is an all-island business organisation with a unique geographical reach. Our members are affiliated Chambers in the cities and towns throughout the country – active in every constituency. Each of our member Chambers is central to their local business community and all seek to promote thriving local economies that can support sustainable cities and communities.

Key Points

- The short two-year implementation cycle limits the potential for meaningful structural reform and should be extended to cover 2026–2030.
- Ireland continues to lag behind on circular economy, biodiversity and sustainable production targets, highlighting urgent structural barriers.
- Many SMEs lack the financial and technical supports needed to meet sustainability obligations, creating a significant implementation gap.
- The existing objectives of the SDGs provide a solid foundation, but they need to place greater emphasis on economic resilience, enterprise transition and green and digital skills.
- Strengthening circular economy and digital sustainability objectives would ensure the plan remains relevant to Ireland's evolving economic landscape.
- Accountability remains unclear, and better alignment is needed between national commitments and local implementation.
- Establishing a dedicated SDG implementation unit with clear responsibilities and metrics would significantly strengthen governance.
- Stakeholder engagement efforts have been effective during major campaigns, but engagement is inconsistent throughout the rest of the year.
- The SDGs are often missing from major government communications, which limits visibility and weakens public understanding of national priorities. More targeted outreach and continuous communication are needed to engage a broader and more diverse range of stakeholders.

- Youth and marginalised groups must be engaged through ongoing, structured channels rather than one-off consultations.
- Information on the SDGs should be accessible, easy to understand and directly linked to the lived experiences of communities, particularly in disadvantaged areas.
- The next NIP should introduce practical actions - such as grants, advisory supports and digital sustainability tools, to help SMEs participate meaningfully in the SDGs.
- A national SDG business dashboard would make progress more transparent and easier to track for both policymakers and enterprises.
- Local authorities should be required to report on SDG implementation to ensure stronger alignment between national and local action.
- The plan should explicitly address emerging issues such as artificial intelligence and digitalisation, given their economic, social and environmental impacts.
- We should align our SDG approach with global frameworks such as the UN's Pact for the Future to maintain international coherence and long-term planning.
- Monitoring and reporting should be conducted more frequently and with more detailed regional data to capture local progress accurately.
- Private-sector contributions should be better integrated into SDG monitoring to provide a more complete national picture.
- Publishing annual SDG progress reports would improve transparency and policymaking for Ireland's next Voluntary National Review.

- Partnerships can significantly support SDG implementation when they are purpose-built, clearly structured and focused on measurable outcomes.
- The SDG Champion process has proven effective and could achieve even greater impact if supported with clearer objectives and stronger coordination.

Questions

1. What are the key areas of progress in achieving the objectives and actions of the current NIP and how can these be built upon?

The current National Implementation Plan has helped to firmly establish the Sustainable Development Goals as part of Ireland's policy landscape. One clear area of progress is that the SDGs are now more widely recognised across government as a shared framework that applies not just to environmental policy, but also to social and economic decision-making. This represents an important shift in how sustainable development is understood at national level.

There has also been progress in putting basic coordination structures in place to support SDG implementation. While these arrangements are still evolving, they have helped create clearer lines of engagement between departments and have laid the groundwork for a more joined-up approach to sustainable development over time.

Another positive development has been the increased focus on awareness and engagement. Initiatives such as SDG Week, public consultations and the expansion of national SDG data tools have helped to raise visibility and encourage participation from a wide range of stakeholders. These initiatives show that when opportunities to engage are clear and accessible, there is strong interest in the SDGs across society.

To build on this progress, the next phase of the NIP should focus on turning these foundations into lasting practice. Coordination needs to be strengthened through clearer accountability and measurable outcomes, while engagement efforts should move beyond short-term campaigns towards more consistent, year-round communication. Finally, progress will depend on shifting from short implementation cycles to longer-term planning, with clear priorities and milestones that allow the SDGs to guide real delivery rather than remain largely a strategic reference point.

2. What are some of the key challenges in achieving the objectives and actions of the existing NIP and how can these be addressed?

One of the most persistent challenges in achieving the objectives and actions of the existing NIP is policy fragmentation. While responsibility for SDG implementation is spread across departments, coordination can be inconsistent, which can lead to uncoordinated approaches. The OECD Policy Coherence Scan of Ireland¹ highlights that while structures exist, cross-departmental integration and shared responsibility remain limited.

A further challenge is the limited timeframe of the current implementation plan. A two-year period is insufficient to deliver meaningful structural change across complex policy areas such as climate action, biodiversity and sustainable production. Short implementation cycles can encourage incremental or symbolic actions rather than long-term, transformative reforms. Extending the implementation period to 2026–2030 would allow for clearer sequencing of actions, improved monitoring and stronger accountability, while also aligning the NIP more closely with medium-term EU and SDG targets. Crucially, a longer timeframe could enhance urgency by setting more ambitious milestones and reducing the tendency to defer difficult decisions, thereby strengthening commitment across departments and stakeholders.

Another significant challenge is the uneven pace of progress across environmental goals. Ireland continues to underperform in areas such as responsible consumption, circular economy and biodiversity. For example, Ireland's circular material use rate stands at just 1.8%, far below the EU average of 11.5%², indicating structural barriers to sustainable production and reuse.

¹ https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/oecd-policy-coherence-scan-of-ireland_23b0a0f4-en.html

² <https://www.hub360.ie/blog/2025/2/26/urgent-action-needed-irelands-low-circularity-in-construction-and-demolition-waste>

<https://chambers.ie/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/Submission-by-Chambers-Ireland-Whole-of-Government-Circular-Economy-Strategy-2026-2028-Nov-2025.pdf>

SMEs face many difficulties, often lacking the financial capacity and technical expertise needed to meet these climate and sustainability obligations. To address these challenges, stronger policy coherence mechanisms across departments are required, along with targeted financial and advisory supports for SMEs, as well as clear and consistent guidance, to reduce regulatory complexity. Without these supports, the risk is that sustainability becomes a compliance burden rather than a shared national transition.

3. Do you agree with the NIP's current key objectives? In your view, are there further or alternative objectives that should be included?

The current objectives of the National Implementation Plan provide a strong and credible strategic foundation, particularly in relation to improving policy coherence, raising awareness of the SDGs and strengthening reporting frameworks. These objectives have helped establish the SDGs as a shared reference point across government and have supported a more coordinated national approach to sustainable development.

However, the objectives would benefit from a more explicit focus on economic resilience, enterprise transition and skills development. Sustainability is no longer solely an environmental or social issue. It is increasingly central to economic competitiveness and long-term growth. Ireland's green economy generated approximately €10.7 billion in gross output in 2022³, demonstrating that climate and sustainability action can support job creation and innovation as well as emissions reduction.

The NIP should place greater emphasis on supporting SMEs as they transition to more sustainable business models, developing green and digital skills to future-proof the workforce and strengthening objectives around digital sustainability and the circular economy. Including these elements would ensure that the Plan reflects both social and economic realities and positions

³ <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-biige/businessinireland2022greenconomy/keyfindings/>

sustainability as a core driver of long-term national resilience rather than a stand-alone policy area.

4. Are you satisfied that the Governance structures in place are sufficient to ensure increased policy coherence for sustainable development across all levels of government?

While governance structures for SDG implementation in Ireland have improved in recent years, they are not yet sufficient to ensure consistent policy coherence across all levels of government. Responsibility for the SDGs is distributed across departments, but accountability mechanisms are often unclear, and progress is not always measured or reported in a way that allows for comparison or oversight.

The OECD has highlighted that coordination between national and local government remains a particular challenge, with limited formal mechanisms to ensure alignment between national SDG commitments and local implementation⁴.

Strengthening governance will require moving beyond coordination in principle towards accountability in practice. This will also require adequate resourcing of SDG-related government functions, including the SDG Forum and designated SDG representatives within departments. Without sufficient staff capacity and dedicated resources, coordination structures risk being underpowered and unable to drive meaningful implementation as Ireland approaches the 2030 deadline. Establishing a dedicated SDG implementation unit with the authority to coordinate across departments, clearly defining departmental responsibilities and levels of accountability and agreeing on any metrics to track progress consistently would help ensure that SDG governance is clearer, more transparent and more effective.

⁴ <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/tools/oecd-local-sdgs.html>

5. Stakeholder Engagement - what is working well and what needs to be further developed e.g. better reaching the furthest behind first?

Ireland has made positive progress in engaging stakeholders around the SDGs through consultations, awareness campaigns and initiatives such as SDG Week. These efforts have helped raise awareness and generate interest, with thousands of activities and strong levels of participation across the country⁵.

However, stakeholder engagement remains uneven and episodic. Awareness of the SDGs is often limited to SDG Week, with little sustained communication or visibility throughout the year. This contributes to an inconsistent understanding of why the SDGs matter and how they relate to national policy priorities.

Further development is needed to embed the SDGs more systematically within mainstream government communication. The absence of explicit reference to the SDGs in major policy documents such as the national budget, high-profile strategies and ministerial speeches represents a missed opportunity to raise awareness and generate media attention. Explicit acknowledgement of the SDGs in flagship government communications such as the National Development Plan, the annual Budget and major policy announcements would demonstrate political leadership, give profile to the SDGs and signal that sustainable development is a core government priority. Integrating the SDGs into these core government documents and public communications would help normalise them as a guiding framework for policy, rather than a standalone agenda.

Engagement could also be strengthened through targeted outreach via business representative bodies, civil society organisations and existing government campaigns. Greater use of digital platforms and clear, practical messaging would further support inclusion. Overall, a more

⁵ <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-climate-energy-and-the-environment/policy-information/sustainable-development-goals/>

sustained and visible communication strategy is required to build public understanding, foster ownership of the SDGs and ensure that those most at risk of being left behind are meaningfully engaged.

6. How can youth voices and the voices of groups identified as being in danger of being left behind best be included?

Youth and vulnerable groups need to be included in a way that is meaningful, consistent and embedded in decision-making, rather than through one-off or symbolic consultations. Structured, ongoing engagement is essential to ensure these voices genuinely influence policy development and review. Partnering with education bodies, youth councils and community organisations provides a practical way to create stable channels for participation and feedback.

Consultation feedback already shows that many people feel the SDGs are distant from everyday life, particularly within disadvantaged communities. This lack of visibility can weaken trust and limit engagement⁶.

Inclusion can be strengthened by ensuring information about the SDGs is accessible, written in plain language and clearly linked to real-life impacts. Targeted outreach in disadvantaged and rural areas is also critical, as is making sure that digital engagement tools do not unintentionally exclude people with limited access or digital skills. When inclusion is done well, SDG implementation is more likely to reflect lived experience and address real needs, rather than remaining a purely policy-driven exercise.

⁶ <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-climate-energy-and-the-environment/consultations/public-consultation-on-the-development-of-irelands-third-sustainable-development-goals-sdgs-national-implementation-plan/>

7. Are there specific actions that should be considered for inclusion? If so, please specify.

Yes. The next National Implementation Plan would benefit from the inclusion of clear, practical actions that demonstrate how high-level commitments will translate into real delivery. Without tangible measures, there is a risk that the SDGs remain aspirational rather than actionable.

Targeted support for SMEs is essential. Dedicated grant schemes for clean technology adoption, energy efficiency improvements and digital sustainability would help smaller businesses engage meaningfully with the SDGs while remaining competitive. Transparency could also be improved through the development of a national SDG business dashboard, allowing progress to be tracked, compared and communicated more clearly.

At local level, mandatory SDG reporting by local authorities would help ensure national commitments are reflected in community-level action. The OECD has highlighted that concrete delivery mechanisms and accountability structures are critical if SDG frameworks are to achieve real impact rather than remain policy statements⁷.

Together, these actions would help bridge the gap between strategy and implementation, strengthening confidence that the NIP can deliver measurable and lasting outcomes.

8. Are there new topics or areas which need to be considered for inclusion (e.g. AI and Digitalisation, Pact for the Future, etc.)?

Yes. The next National Implementation Plan would benefit from explicitly addressing emerging issues that are already reshaping Ireland's economy and society, particularly artificial intelligence and wider digitalisation. While digital technologies can support progress on the Sustainable Development Goals, they also bring new challenges that are not yet fully reflected in current SDG planning. Digital transformation affects energy demand, productivity, workforce skills and social

⁷ https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/unleashing-policy-coherence-to-achieve-the-sdgs_a1c8dbf8-en.html

equality and without careful planning there is a risk that these impacts could undermine sustainability objectives rather than support them.

AI and digital infrastructure, including data centres and cloud computing, have a growing environmental footprint, particularly in terms of energy use. At the same time, automation and AI are changing the nature of work, creating both opportunities and pressures for workers and businesses. If these transitions are not supported, digitalisation risks widening regional and social inequalities. Explicitly linking digital policy and AI development with the SDGs would help ensure that technological progress contributes to climate goals, economic resilience and social inclusion rather than operating in isolation.

Ireland's SDG framework should also be more clearly aligned with evolving international initiatives, particularly the UN Pact for the Future⁸. Global challenges such as climate change, digital governance and inequality increasingly require long-term and coordinated responses. Aligning national SDG implementation with these global commitments would ensure Ireland remains forward-looking and consistent in its approach, while reinforcing the importance of intergenerational fairness and long-term planning.

Overall, incorporating AI, digitalisation and emerging global commitments into the NIP would make the framework more realistic and future-focused. It would help ensure that Ireland's approach to sustainable development keeps pace with rapid technological change and remains aligned with international best practice, rather than reacting to challenges after they have already emerged.

9. How can the monitoring and reporting framework be improved, particularly in preparation for Ireland's next Voluntary National Review?

Monitoring and reporting on the SDGs in Ireland would benefit significantly from being more detailed, more frequent and more locally focused. While Ireland already has strong foundations

⁸ <https://www.un.org/en/summit-of-the-future/pact-for-the-future>

in place through tools such as GeoHive⁹ and the national SDG data portal,¹⁰ the information available does not always clearly show how progress differs between regions or communities. Greater data granularity, including regional and local breakdowns, would make it easier to understand where progress is being made and where additional support is needed.

There is also an opportunity to better capture the role of the private sector in SDG delivery. Businesses play a major role in areas such as climate action, employment and innovation, yet their contributions are not consistently reflected in current monitoring frameworks. Integrating private-sector data would provide a more complete picture of national progress and strengthen accountability across all sectors.

Publishing annual SDG progress reports, rather than relying primarily on periodic reviews or voluntary national reporting cycles, would further strengthen transparency. Regular reporting would support more informed policy decisions, allow issues to be addressed earlier, and ensure Ireland is better prepared for its next Voluntary National Review. More frequent reporting would also help maintain momentum and public trust in the SDG process.

10. What role can partnerships play in furthering the implementation of the SDGs in Ireland?

Partnerships can play a critical role in advancing the implementation of the SDGs in Ireland, but only where they are purposeful, well-resourced and focused on delivery. From our perspective, there is little value in partnerships that exist in principle but do not result in tangible actions, measurable outcomes or clear benefits for those involved. Without defined objectives, accountability and follow-through, partnerships risk becoming symbolic rather than impactful.

Chambers of Commerce are uniquely positioned to support SDG delivery at local and regional level, particularly in engaging SMEs, translating national policy into practical action and

⁹ <https://www.geohive.ie/>

¹⁰ <https://irelandsdg.geohive.ie/>

supporting enterprise transition. However, past experience has shown that partnership alone is not enough. Where partnerships have lacked clear outputs, timelines or success measures, the opportunity to leverage chambers as effective delivery partners has not been fully realised. This can lead to disengagement and a perception that SDG partnerships are disconnected from the realities facing businesses.

The SDG Champion process has been a particularly successful example of partnership-led engagement, attracting participation from large organisations and influential representative bodies. Introducing greater structure around this process, including clearer objectives, defined roles and expectations, and mechanisms to leverage Champions for wider public communication, could significantly increase awareness and understanding of the SDGs beyond specialist audiences. With appropriate coordination and support, SDG Champions could act as visible advocates for sustainable development, helping to translate national commitments into language and actions that resonate with businesses, communities and the wider public.

For partnerships to genuinely support SDG implementation, they must be structured around clear goals, defined roles and measurable outcomes. This includes identifying what success looks like from the outset, ensuring adequate resources are in place and regularly reviewing progress. Partnerships should focus on practical delivery, such as skills development, climate action at local level and SME support, rather than remaining at a high-level or consultative stage.

Ultimately, effective partnerships should create value for all parties and contribute directly to SDG outcomes. When partnerships are designed to deliver real results, rather than simply to demonstrate engagement, they can become a powerful mechanism for translating national SDG commitments into meaningful action across communities and businesses throughout Ireland.