



**Chambers
Ireland**
Advancing business together

IRELAND'S 2026 PRESIDENCY OF THE COUNCIL OF THE EU

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Chambers Ireland

Advancing business together

Chambers Ireland is an all-island business organisation with a unique geographical reach. Our members are the 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.

We also work with a network of European Chambers of Commerce (Eurochambres) to ensure that the interests of Irish business are represented at European level. A core part of our work is to monitor and influence legislation debated and agreed at European level so that we can ensure that Irish businesses provide input on any regulatory changes that may impact them in the future. In an ever-changing geopolitical climate, it is now more important than ever for Irish business to engage with the European Union.



Eurochambres is the European Association of Chambers of Commerce and Industry, its members being national Chambers of Commerce throughout the EU and EU aspirant countries. Established in 1958 as a direct response to the creation of the European Economic Community, Eurochambres represents over 20 million businesses throughout Europe. Eurochambres is the leading voice for the broad business community at EU level, building on Chambers' strong connections with the grass roots economy and their hands-on support to entrepreneurs. Chambers' member businesses – over 93% of which are SMEs – employ over 120 million people.



MESSAGE FROM THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE

It has been twelve years since Ireland last held the Presidency of the Council of the European Union and a lot has changed in that time. Since that period we have had Covid, a war in Ukraine, and Brexit. We are in a fundamentally different time to 2013, yet while global markets have shifted, the EU has remained one of the strongest markets in the world.

Nonetheless gaps still exist that need to be addressed if we want to stay competitive and deliver for all of our citizens. This has been a consistent theme for many businesses and have been amplified by the recommendations of the Draghi and Letta reports last year. As such, taking on the Presidency in 2026 gives Ireland a chance to help shape that conversation, focusing on competitiveness, sustainability, and long-term prosperity for over 450 million people.



Ian Talbot
Chief Executive

We also cannot overlook the growing importance of security and defence in shaping a stable environment for business and communities across Europe. This is necessary not only to safeguard our democratic institutions and critical infrastructure, but also to ensure that companies can invest and operate with confidence.

As a small, open economy, Ireland is more exposed to global trade than many of our main competitors. The importance of a sustainable free trade agenda is additionally highlighted by the more than 38 million jobs that depend on EU exports alone and the sobering fact that in the coming years, 90% of global economic growth is expected to be generated outside of Europe. We have to foster a trade and investment environment with stable, transparent, and fair trade rules that work for businesses of all sizes, and facilitate market access for Irish products and services to the world's top growth centres.

The ability of the Presidency to set the agenda is its most powerful tool. With this responsibility, the Irish Government can shape outcomes that will resonate far beyond its six-month term. Within its grasp is the priceless opportunity to decide an economic strategy that enhance the Single Market as a business location and drives innovation through a horizontal industrial policy framework.

The past year in the EU has been marked by efforts to restore its competitiveness amid persistent challenges. While inflation has eased and demand has strengthened, businesses continue to

“The Irish Government can shape outcomes that will resonate far beyond its six-month term.”

grapple with high labour costs, skills shortages and complex regulations. This is reflected in the Eurochambres Economic Survey (EES 2026), which gathered insights from over 41,000 businesses across Europe. The Irish results showed concern in three critical areas: labour costs (63%), lack of skilled workers (48%), and regulatory burdens (43%).

Competitiveness is also about creating opportunities for both people and businesses to grow. Focussing on these areas as a matter of priority can create a legacy that endures; an EU where businesses can invest, employ and innovate with confidence. The agenda for 2026 should therefore be defined by policies that simplify regulation, reduce costs for businesses and complete the Single Market.

Put bluntly the EU has to move from rhetoric to results. This means accelerating progress on the Capital Markets Union, the Savings and Investments Union and the Banking Union to unlock finance for businesses. It also means advancing our Free Trade Agreements including Mercosur, along with promoting smarter simplification for SMEs, a digital and AI agenda that endures, scaling up investment in skills and ensuring affordable energy to power the green transition.

It is in everyone's key interest to ensure minimal disruption to business and trade flows between Northern Ireland, Ireland and Great Britain. We need to see a real commitment to honour the common understanding at pace, with strategic measures that can protect our competitiveness and ensure frictionless trade. Linking the Emissions Trading Schemes (ETS) and ensuring UK alignment with the Sanitary and Phytosanitary Agreement (SPS) should be core components of that effort.

Finally, as we look to the future, our actions must reflect a commitment to sustainability. In our view, a competitive Europe must also be a sustainable Europe. We encourage Government and all relevant stakeholders to incorporate UN Sustainable Development Goals into our policy framework for 2026 and beyond.

“The EU has to move from rhetoric to results. This means accelerating progress on the Capital Markets Union, the Savings and Investments Union and the Banking Union to unlock finance for businesses.”

WE HAVE STRUCTURED OUR SUBMISSION IN A WAY THAT:



PINPOINTS THE MOST IMPORTANT HIGH-LEVEL THEMATIC PRIORITIES FOR THE PRESIDENCY



SHOWS HOW THE PRESIDENCY CAN MAKE THE MOST SUBSTANTIAL POSITIVE IMPACT FOR PEOPLE, BUSINESSES AND COMMUNITIES



CHAMPIONS AN “ISLAND STRATEGY” WITHIN THE COUNCIL AGENDA



HIGHLIGHTS THE MOST IMPORTANT POLICY AREAS TO PRIORITISE

HIGH-LEVEL THEMATIC PRIORITIES FOR THE PRESIDENCY

The Presidency should:



DELIVERING A STABLE EU BUDGET TO SUPPORT BUSINESS GROWTH

Improve the framework conditions for SMEs and strive to harmonise single market rules and address structural national barriers to the movement of goods and services. In particular, conclude negotiations on the revised EU Public Procurement legal framework and ensure that EU preference criteria in strategic sectors do not hamper business activities and genuinely support economic growth and competition in the single market, while reflecting rules-based trade without adding new burdens on trade partners and like-minded economies. Delivery of the 2028–2034 Multiannual Financial Framework 2028-2034 (MFF) should be prioritised, to secure the EU budget to drive competitiveness, further the digital and green transitions, and provide a stable funding framework critical for business growth.



COMPETITIVENESS THROUGH INNOVATION

Strengthen Europe's competitiveness and close Europe's innovation gap: facilitate the translation of research into the commercialisation of products and services by encouraging public-private partnerships and supporting the development of startup ecosystems across member states. This includes advancing the EU Startup and Scaleup Strategy and establishing the Scaleup Europe Fund to promote access to funding, enhance collaboration between universities, research centres, and industry, and invest in advanced skills and digital infrastructure to ensure that Europe remains a global leader in emerging technologies. Such a goal should be reflected in a more innovation-friendly regulatory framework that facilitates market entry and accelerates the adoption of new products and services.



TAKE DECISIVE ACTION

Take decisive action to tackle the most persistent barriers in the single market, the so-called "Terrible Ten", including by addressing the root causes of these obstacles and strengthening the consistent enforcement of EU rules. The Presidency should prioritise resolving regulatory divergences and fighting gold-plating, which contribute to fragmentation and undermine market growth.

MAKING THE MOST SUBSTANTIAL POSITIVE IMPACT FOR PEOPLE, BUSINESSES AND COMMUNITIES ACROSS THE EU

The Presidency should:

Ensure the Commission Work Programme (CWP) 2027 reflects the commitment towards simplification: most new legislative initiatives should have a strong simplification dimension and invite the Commission to withdraw pending proposals such as the Late Payment Regulation.

Raise attention to the anticipated (end 2025 / early 2026) Commission Recommendation to Member States on the transfer of businesses to the next generation to exchange best practices and measures for the correct and coordinated implementation of such measures at the national level.

Establish clear channels for dialogue between stakeholders and the legislators; Consider priorities and ongoing discussions within the Commission's Expert Groups, such as the Industrial Forum and the Network of SME Envoys, when organising meetings of the Competitiveness Council (Internal market and industry).

Advance practical mobility and skills portability, by improving recognition of qualifications and skills validation, and facilitating cross-border mobility for learners, apprentices and workers to address shortages and boost competitiveness.

Prioritise strong and effective enforcement in the context of the expected revision of the Consumer Protection Cooperation Regulation and safeguarding a genuine level playing field for compliant businesses. In particular, it should focus on equipping authorities with the tools needed to tackle rogue traders, both within and outside the EU, and to ensure that non-compliant operators cannot undermine consumer trust or distort competition.

DRIVING A PAN-EUROPEAN ISLAND STRATEGY THROUGH COLLABORATION

Ireland's Presidency offers a unique opportunity to champion an "Island Strategy" within the Council agenda. Working closely with Malta, Cyprus, and other insular regions, Ireland can highlight shared challenges - such as connectivity, climate resilience, and economic diversification - and ensure these are reflected in EU policy and funding frameworks.

By leveraging the existing Insular Regions Interregional Group and aligning with Cyprus during its preceding presidency, Ireland can position island issues at the heart of discussions on transport, energy transition, and cohesion policy. This approach would strengthen Ireland's leadership role, deliver tangible benefits for island communities, and reinforce the EU's commitment to balanced territorial development. It also aligns with Ireland's broader sustainability and competitiveness priorities by promoting green infrastructure, resilient supply chains, and inclusive growth across Europe's most vulnerable regions.

We would be happy to engage with national Chamber organisations in other insular regions to assist in this output.

OUR EU PRIORITIES

Our call for the Presidency is for a strategic shift from survival to success. We have categorised our asks in terms of:

01 ECONOMIC POLICY

02 SINGLE MARKET

03 TRADE

04 SKILLS

05 ENERGY & SUSTAINABILITY

01. ECONOMIC POLICY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

'Better regulation' has to be the overarching theme of the 2026 term. The Presidency should focus on coupling regulatory simplification with structural reforms, delivering infrastructure including the EU Housing Action Plan, and ensuring innovation while safeguarding cost competitiveness for businesses.

At a time when EU economic growth forecasts are cautious, businesses across Europe need to encourage innovation and investment which requires an open regulatory framework that is conducive to growth.

Addressing the issues with the increasing regulatory burden and adopting simplification measures have to be core to the agenda for 2026. Much has been made of the Draghi report and its recommendations since its publication, yet only 11% of those have been actioned. It has also been over two years since the commitment by President von der Leyen to reduce administrative burdens by 25%, particularly those linked to reporting requirements. Ensuring progress in this area should therefore be a priority.

Looking ahead at the Presidency's legislative stockpile, we are calling for all potential new rules to be based on a careful consideration of the needs of businesses - particularly SMEs - by all policymakers at all stages.



KEY POINTS



Delivering on affordable housing:

- Advance key initiatives under the European Affordable Housing Plan, including the Construction Services Act.
- Establish a long-term financing framework, simplify regulations, and promoting innovation and digitalisation in construction to expand housing supply across Europe.

Better Regulation:

Revise the Interinstitutional Agreement on Better Law Making (IIABLM):

- Ensure SME test and Impact Assessments are adequately considered.
- Guarantee legislation is drafted from the perspective of smaller businesses.

Collaborate with the European Commission ahead of the Q2 2026 Communication on Better Regulation:

- Secure a clear commitment to improve legislative design.
- Introduce a systematic mechanism to assess the impact of substantial amendments during negotiations.

Request full access to Regulatory Scrutiny Board resources:

- Evaluate member states' positions before negotiating mandates.
- Consider a final revision of cost-benefit analysis compared to the Commission's initial Impact Assessment before adoption of legal acts.

Swiftly implement the SME Relief Package

to provide short-term relief and boost long-term competitiveness for SMEs. This will help respond to challenges such as inflation, energy costs, supply chain disruptions, and regulatory burdens.

Put SMEs at the centre of EU policymaking

Shepherd a Council "SME relief & regulatory fitness" package of conclusions to be presented at the November EU SME Assembly in Dublin.

Maintain simplification momentum in areas relevant to SMEs and strategic sectors.



02. SINGLE MARKET

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since accession to the EU over 50 years ago Ireland has experienced firsthand the significant benefits of the Single Market for both businesses and citizens. It has been central to the success of our economy for decades.

However as highlighted by the Letta report, the Single Market remains incomplete. Persistent fragmentation and barriers continue to limit its full potential, especially for SMEs that often face many challenges when operating across borders.

The presidency must work towards a Single Market that delivers on the Union's broader objectives: the green and digital transitions, strategic autonomy and lasting global competitiveness. A truly integrated market will unlock major economic gains, safeguard our interests from external shocks and support the EU's ability to lead in innovation. Deeper integration offers a pathway to scale domestic businesses, attract long-term investment and ensure that businesses can compete effectively within and beyond the EU. For this reason, delivering on initiatives like the 28th Regime should take priority.

Access to finance and capital should also be an area of focus. The EU urgently needs to progress the three unions to ensure access to finance, including the Savings and Investments Union, the Banking Union and the Capital Markets Union.

Europe's Single Market remains its most significant economic achievement, yet its full potential is still unrealised. Completing and modernising the Single Market should be a core focus for the presidency if it is to deliver concrete benefits for businesses, workers and citizens across all Member States.



KEY POINTS



Access to finance and SME support

- Coordinate national governments to mobilise private investments toward a European Savings and Investment Union.
- Incentivise and accelerate SME investments in sustainable practices and digital tools.
- Advance the Savings and Investments Union, Banking Union and Capital Markets Union.

Adopt the Digital Omnibus

- Ensure swift adoption of the Digital Omnibus including amendments across the General Data Protection Regulation, Data Act, cybersecurity rules, and parts of the AI Act during trilogue under the Irish Presidency.

Digital Fairness Act (DFA)

- Advance structured Council discussions so Member States form an early, well-informed position.
- Prepare the file for efficient trilogue under the subsequent Presidency.
- Ensure impacts on consumers, businesses, and the digital single market are carefully assessed.

Accelerate negotiations on an optional and parallel “28th regime”

- Provide businesses with a simpler and predictable regulatory environment for cross-border operations.
- Reduce administrative burdens and compliance costs.
- Support innovation, competitiveness, and growth while preserving Member States’ regulatory autonomy.

03. TRADE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The global trade landscape is becoming increasingly unpredictable. In recent years the EU has faced growing challenges: retaliatory tariffs, fragmented supply chains and competition from other economic blocs pursuing their own industrial strategies. These pressures threaten the competitiveness of the EU and its ability to maintain open, rules-based trade.

The most effective way to diversify the risk from such pressures is to advance the EU Free Trade agenda and this should be a core priority of the Presidency. 85% of future global growth is projected outside Europe and it is this outward-looking trade policy that secures market access and attracts investment. Accordingly, a core priority of the Presidency should be to ratify agreements that are on the table such as the EU-Mercosur Agreement which has been held up in negotiations for years.

The Presidency should also address strategic vulnerabilities. This includes safeguarding supply chain resilience for critical goods, reinforcing partnerships with like-minded economies and ensuring reciprocity in trade concessions. The EU's leadership at the World Trade Organisation and initiatives like MC14 will be vital to restoring predictability and enacting reform in the multilateral arena.



KEY POINTS

Advance new trade deals

Significantly progress negotiations with high-growth regions such as ASEAN.

Ratify concluded agreements

Ensure swift ratification of deals already negotiated, including Mercosur and Mexico.

Implement the EU-US Turnberry Accord

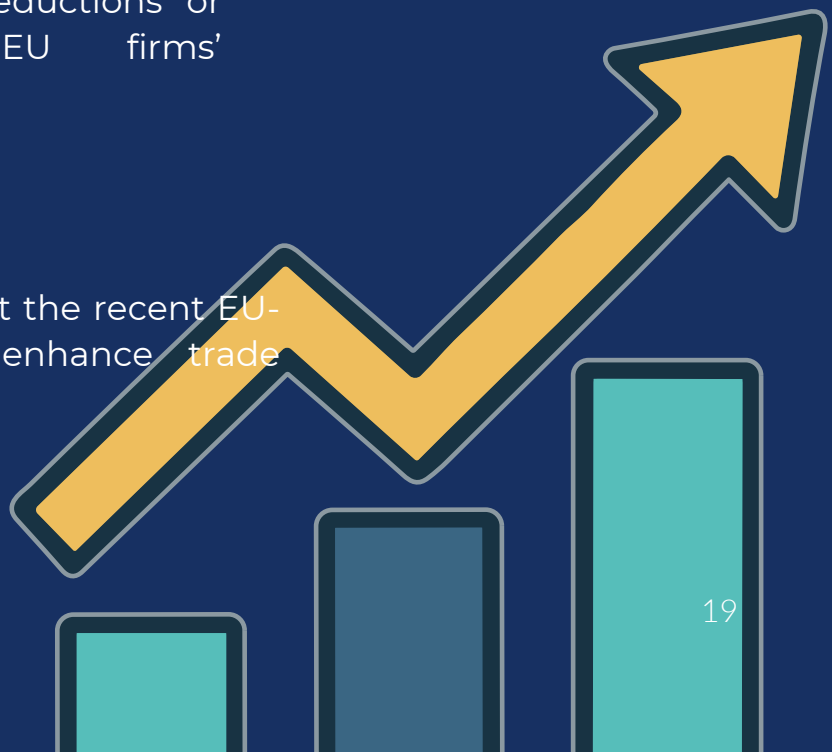
Continue good-faith implementation of the accord to strengthen transatlantic trade relations.

Secure tariff reprieve for EU exporters

Work towards additional tariff reductions or exemptions to improve EU firms' competitiveness globally.

Fully implement the EU-UK reset

Deliver on commitments agreed at the recent EU-UK Summit to stabilise and enhance trade relations post-Brexit.



04. SKILLS

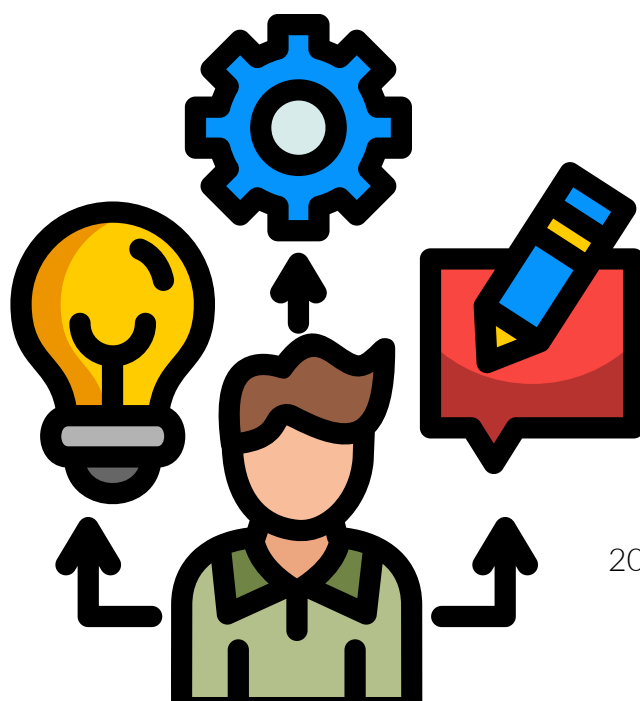
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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 Presidency has a pivotal role to play by prioritising the development of skills needed for the future of work.

Skills development has to be aligned with business needs across the EU. Tackling widespread skills shortages (especially green & digital) via VET, apprenticeships, and upskilling, will act as a key link between education and employers.

Current changes in the global economy mean that many workers will also have to retrain. At present we are experiencing a twin transition and this creates an extraordinary demand for specialised skills which exceeds the supply of qualified workers. Across sectors there is also a shift in employer focus from traditional degrees to specific skill set recruitment. This emphasis on specific skills shows the critical importance of re-skilling.

Demographic trends further increase the skills gap. The EU's working-age population is expected to shrink by about 2 million people annually until 2040 and this adds pressure to an already tight labour market. Migration and mobility can help bridge workforce shortages, but regulatory and administrative burdens (complex visa and work permit processes, slow recognition of qualifications, high administrative costs to name a few), particularly for SMEs, often hinder their ability to navigate these frameworks efficiently.



KEY POINTS

Funding for skills

- Ensure strong EU funding for skills in the next MFF (including Erasmus+, ECF, NRPPs), safeguarding dedicated support for VET, keeping mobility as centrepiece, SME-friendly up-and reskilling activities.

Mobility and skills portability

- Improve the recognition of qualifications and skills validation.
- Facilitate greater cross-border mobility for learners, apprentices and workers to address shortages and boost competitiveness

Embedding entrepreneurship

- Mandate entrepreneurship competencies across primary, secondary, VET and adult learning, paired with age-appropriate delivery.

Skills for the future

- Link STEM modules to innovation/enterprise projects
- Prioritise labour market talent gaps with a focus on green and digital skills, including AI.

05. ENERGY & SUSTAINABILITY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

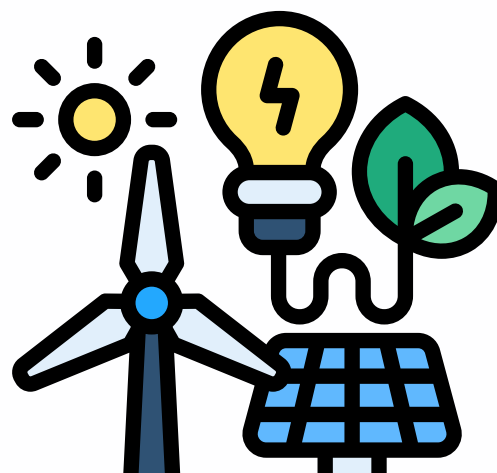
The twin goals of achieving climate neutrality and ensuring energy security shape the EU's strategic agenda for the coming decade. While the European Green Deal and Fit for 55 package set ambitious targets to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 55% by 2030 and reach net zero by 2050, delivering on these commitments requires accelerated action across all sectors.

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.

Accordingly 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 Presidency must focus on initiatives that are practical, proportionate and avoid excessive regulatory burdens that disproportionately burden SMEs. Access to sustainable finance, streamlined permitting for renewable projects and harmonised climate policies across Member States are critical to making the transition achievable and economically viable.

The next legislative cycle will be critical in shaping the Energy Union, updating key directives on renewables and efficiency and introducing frameworks for emerging technologies. Accordingly success will depend on coordinated action, including investment in infrastructure and a commitment to innovation that ensures we deliver on our climate goals.



KEY POINTS



Energy Affordability & Competitiveness

- Advance the Energy Union to deliver affordable and secure energy for businesses and households.
- Remove physical and regulatory bottlenecks in energy markets.
- Implement the Action Plan on Affordable Energy to reduce costs for SMEs and support a just transition.

Energy Security & EU-UK Cooperation

- Advocate for reforms in EU funding mechanisms to include third-country projects (critical for Ireland's UK gas reliance).
- Strengthen the EU Energy Security Framework.
- Prioritise EU-UK ETS linking negotiations and maintain regulatory alignment to avoid uncertainty.

Electricity Grids & Infrastructure

- Champion a strong European Grids Package with:
 - Binding timelines for grid permits.
 - Multi-stakeholder strategic planning at regional level.
 - Anticipatory investment in cross-border projects.
 - Better access to EU funding for large-scale renewables (e.g., offshore wind).
- Prioritise legislative files: Grids Package, TEN-E Regulation Review, and Energy Union package for the decade ahead.

Simplification & Regulatory Alignment

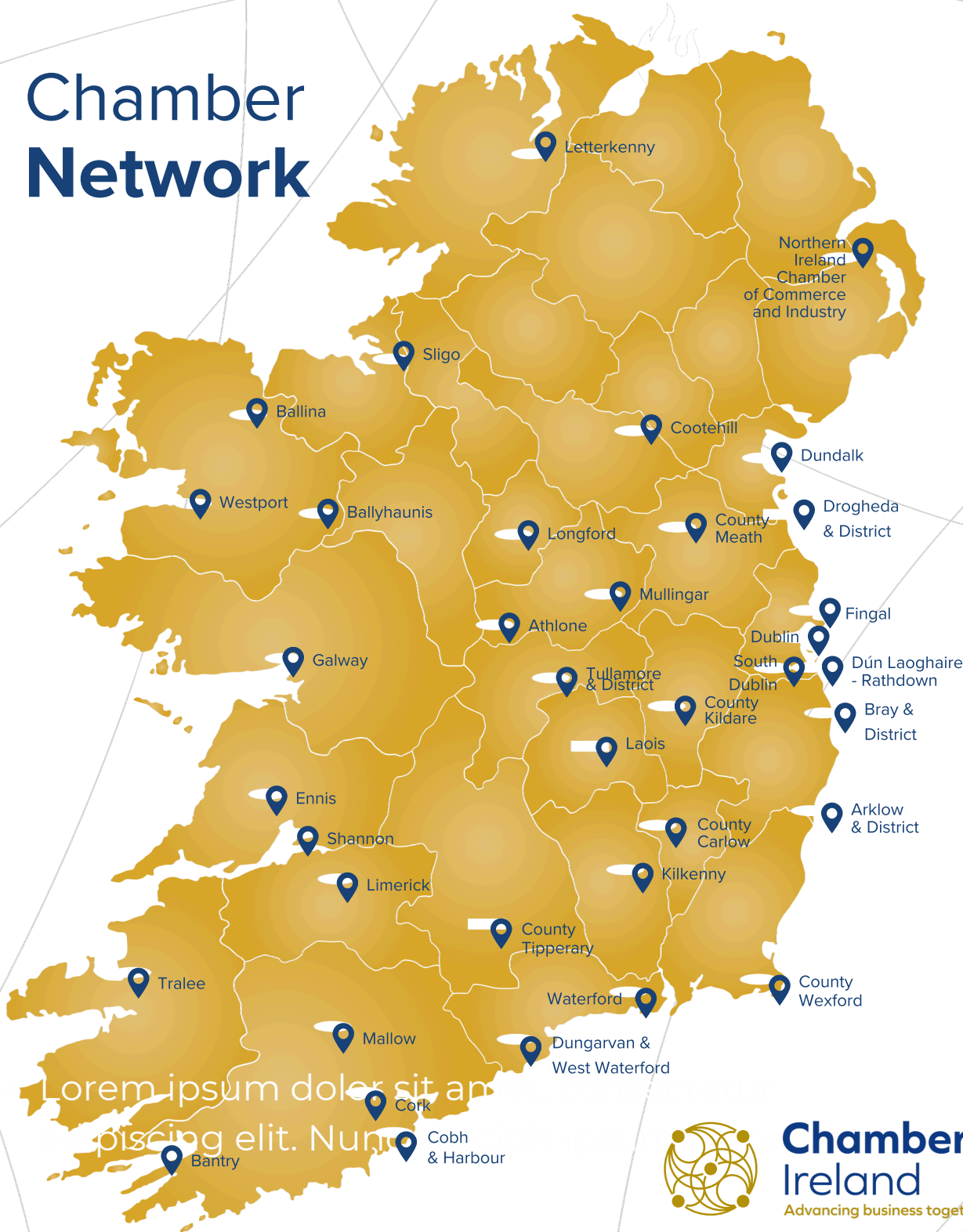
- Support adoption of the Environmental Omnibus to simplify environmental requirements for businesses.
- Champion streamlined permitting and regulatory processes for cross-border projects. Push for simplification in energy product legislation via the Energy Omnibus.

Decarbonisation & Climate Policy

- Underpin the post-2030 climate framework with robust impact assessments.
- Ensure swift integration of carbon removals into the EU Emissions Trading Scheme.
- Maintain free allocation in ETS I until CBAM proves effective.
- Accelerate EU energy system decarbonisation and innovation in smart grids and digitalisation.



Chamber Network



36 Affiliated Chambers

10,000+ Businesses represented across the country

1023 Total lobbying returns in 2024

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