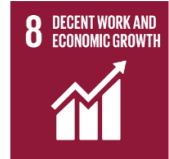




**Chambers
Ireland**
Advancing business together



Department of Social Protection Strategy Statement 2025-2028

Submission by Chambers Ireland

March 2025

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Key Points

- Significant progress that has been made under the Department of Social Protection's Statement of Strategy 2023-2026, including the introduction of the Pay-Related Benefit and the digital transformation via the myWelfare portal.
- Ireland must adapt its policies to effectively integrate asylum seekers and enable them to participate in the workforce. The Strategy should focus on removing barriers to language, qualifications recognition, and social inclusion.
- Investments should be made in language training programmes, providing workplace accessibility incentives, and offering targeted vocational training to improve employment prospects for underrepresented groups.
- Gender inequality, high childcare costs, and barriers faced by people with disabilities continue to hinder full labour market participation in Ireland.
- Addressing the gender pay gap, expanding access to affordable childcare, and promoting flexible work arrangements are critical.
- Increasing workplace accessibility for people with disabilities, providing tailored employment services and improving disability awareness and support services are essential.

About Chambers Ireland

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

Our Network has pledged to advocate for and support the advancement of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). As SDG Champions, we use the Goals as a framework to identify policy priorities and communicate our recommendations. We have a particular focus on five of the goals encompassing decent work and economic growth (SDG 8), sustainable cities and communities (SDG 11), Gender Equality (SDG 5), Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure (SDG 9) and climate action (SDG 13).¹

¹ The Chambers Ireland SDGs. Available at: <https://chambers.ie/sustainable-development-goals/>

General

Chambers Ireland acknowledges the significant progress made under the Department of Social Protection's Statement of Strategy 2023-2026, including the introduction of the Pay-Related Benefit and the digital transformation via the myWelfare portal. However, there are several key challenges that need to be addressed in the upcoming Strategy Statement 2025-2028. These challenges include the growing number of asylum seekers, gender inequality, high childcare costs, and barriers faced by people with disabilities.

Chambers Ireland suggests investing in language training programs, providing workplace accessibility incentives, and offering targeted vocational training to improve employment prospects for underrepresented groups. We emphasise the importance of addressing the gender pay gap, expanding access to affordable childcare, and promoting flexible work arrangements. For people with disabilities, increasing workplace accessibility, providing tailored employment services, and improving disability awareness and support services are necessary. The housing crisis and lack of affordable housing directly affect employment by creating instability and financial stress, making it harder for individuals, especially those from underrepresented groups, to secure and maintain stable jobs due to high commuting costs, frequent relocations, and overall uncertainty. Therefore, it is crucial that effective and adequate measures are implemented to support those facing these disadvantages.

Overall, Chambers Ireland's perspective is focused on creating a more inclusive and equitable labour market by addressing these challenges and implementing targeted strategies to support underrepresented groups.

Questions

1. The progress we feel has been achieved from the aims and commitments set out in Department of Social Protections Statement of Strategy 2023-2026.

Chambers Ireland welcomes the progress made under the Department of Social Protection's Statement of Strategy 2023-2026. Notable advancements include the introduction of the Pay-Related Benefit, which strengthens support for workers, and the digital transformation via the myWelfare portal, enhancing accessibility and efficiency in service delivery.

The introduction of the Pay-Related Benefit marks a significant reform in Ireland's social protection system. It ensures that individuals with a strong work history receive higher payments if they lose their jobs and offer a stronger safety net and cushions them from sudden income loss. This reform brings Ireland in line with other EU countries, supporting workers who have contributed to the system through their PRSI payments. We have long emphasised the importance of a flexible, adaptable pay-related benefit system that meets the diverse needs of individuals.² This system is crucial for addressing skills mismatches, improving job satisfaction, and boosting national productivity. It also plays a role in housing stability by allowing workers to continue paying rent or mortgage until they secure new employment. Overall, the introduction of this benefit is a major step in creating a more open, adaptable, and inclusive social welfare system.

Considerable progress has been made by the Department of Social Protection in its digital transformation, particularly through the expansion of the myWelfare portal. Users can now apply for services like fuel allowance and child benefit, as well as track application statuses online, for example. Overall this has streamlined service delivery and provides greater convenience for users through.

² https://chambers.ie/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Chambers-Ireland_Pay-Related-Benefit-for-Jobseekers-Submission_FINAL.pdf

Reforming social welfare systems and advancing digital services reflects a commitment to building a more inclusive and efficient social safety net. Continued progress in these areas will further strengthen support for workers and enhance service delivery for all citizens.

2. Key challenges facing the Irish labour market that the Department of Social Protection Strategy Statement 2025-2028 will need to address over the lifetime of the strategy.

As Ireland progresses as a global economy, it encounters several significant challenges that will influence its labour market in the coming years. The Strategy Statement for 2025-2028 must address both longstanding and emerging issues to ensure that Ireland remains competitive, inclusive, and resilient in the face of economic uncertainty. These challenges are rooted in demographic shifts, economic volatility, and social issues and reflect the complexity of managing a modern labour force.

As geopolitical tensions arising from conflicts continue to shape global migration patterns, Ireland will need to adapt its policies to integrate asylum seekers effectively. While they contribute to the workforce, barriers such as language, recognition of qualifications and social inclusion need to be addressed. Furthermore, Ireland's reliance on international trade and foreign investment makes it vulnerable to geopolitical shifts, requiring strategic planning to maintain economic stability and resilience.

Gender inequality, high childcare costs, and barriers faced by people with disabilities continue to hinder full labour market participation in Ireland. Women often face pay disparities and limited career advancement, particularly due to the prohibitive cost and limited availability of childcare, which restricts their workforce engagement. In 2023, Ireland ranked 9th in the EU on the gender equality index, a decline of two places from 2022³. This highlights the fluctuating nature of progress and underscores the importance of ongoing policy efforts and financial support to advance gender equality. Additionally, people with disabilities still encounter significant

³ [2025 PBS](#)

challenges in accessing employment, including discrimination and inadequate support. To foster a more inclusive labour market, there needs to be a focus on reducing childcare costs, implementing policies to close the gender pay gap and ensuring better workplace accommodation for individuals with disabilities.

The rising cost of living in Ireland, coupled with issues in housing, poses a significant challenge to the labour market. The housing shortage across the State not only impacts individuals' disposable income but also restricts mobility, making it harder for workers to relocate for job opportunities or stay in stable, secure housing. The inability to afford housing adds pressure to the workforce, leading to higher stress levels and lower overall productivity. Moreover, the high cost of living is prompting many skilled people to leave Ireland in search of more affordable opportunities elsewhere. Addressing the housing crisis and overall cost of living is crucial for supporting a stable and effective labour market.

3. Suggested actions to help improve the employment prospects and outcomes of people underrepresented in the labour market.

It is essential the Department take decisive action to improve the employment outcomes of underrepresented groups, including women, people seeking international protection, and those with disabilities. This includes investing in language training programs, providing workplace accessibility incentives and offering targeted vocational training. Additionally, expanding access to affordable childcare and promoting policies that support flexible work arrangements are essential for improving women's participation in the workforce.

Asylum Seekers

Significant barriers to employment exist for those seeking international protection, primarily due to language proficiency challenges. To help address these barriers, it is essential to invest in

intensive language training programmes. Our Closing Skills Gap report⁴ in 2024 highlighted that 25,000 individuals were currently facing language challenges that prevent them from accessing employment opportunities. Among the 76,126 PPS numbers issued to adult arrivals from Ukraine, 77% were active, but only 31% of Ukrainian adults had earnings from employment. To help address these barriers, we argued that it is essential to invest in intensive language training programmes.

International best practices show that countries like Germany, Finland, Sweden, Denmark, and France have been successful in improving employment rates and incomes by providing targeted, intensive language training for migrants and refugees. For example, intensive language programmes can increase the likelihood of a migrant being employed by 38% and increase the likelihood of someone being in skilled employment by 45%, as in Germany. In Finland there was a 47% increase in the cumulative earnings of migrants and a 13% decrease in the total amount of social benefits claimed, while France experienced increased labour force participation among migrants by between 14.5% - 26.6%.

The aforementioned figures support our view that to fully capitalise on the potential of people seeking international protection, Ireland must prioritise and expand intensive language training programs. This will not only improve integration but also fill critical skill gaps experienced acutely across the State, fill skills gaps and enable them to contribute to the economy.

We recommend the swift implementation of the single permit system for living and working in Ireland. Last year's announcement of a unified visa/permit process is a positive step and its immediate rollout would help reduce the administrative and financial burdens that businesses face when recruiting from outside Europe. By streamlining these procedures we can attract a more diverse range of skills and perspectives and foster a more inclusive workforce.⁵

⁴ <https://chambers.ie/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Closing-Skill-Gaps-Intensive-Language-Training.pdf>

⁵ [2025 PBS](#)

Women & Childcare

Women, especially those balancing family responsibilities, face several barriers that limit their full participation in the workforce.

One of the key challenges women face in Ireland's labour market is the gender pay gap. As of 2022, the Central Statistics Office (CSO)⁶ reported the gender pay gap at 9.6%. Women are often underrepresented in higher-paying, senior roles, and face barriers to career progression. Grant Thornton⁷ found that just 36% of women held senior management roles in Irish businesses in 2024. The findings reflect a 10% drop from the previous year when 40% of senior management roles were held by women. This data underscores the ongoing inequality that women continue to face, limiting their opportunities for advancement and fair compensation. Addressing such disparities is essential for creating a more equitable workforce.

Childcare continues to be a significant barrier to the full participation of women in the workforce. Ireland has some of the highest childcare costs in Europe, with the Dublin Chamber of Commerce⁸ reporting that Ireland ranks second highest in the OECD and the worst in Europe for childcare expenses. In Dublin, the cost of childcare is notably higher than the national average—approximately 10% more than Cork and 50% more than Limerick. According to the Dublin Chamber's Business Outlook Survey, nine out of ten businesses identify the childcare crisis as a major obstacle to attracting and retaining staff. This underscores the urgent need for affordable childcare solutions to support working parents, particularly women, in achieving a better work-life balance.

⁶ <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-ses/structureofearningsurvey2022/genderpaygap/>

⁷ <https://www.grantthornton.ie/news-centre/businesses-in-ireland-see-fall-in-number-of-women-in-senior-management-roles/#:~:text=The%20findings%20in%20the%20annual%20Women%20in%20Business,of%20senior%20management%20roles%20were%20held%20by%20women.>

⁸ <https://www.dublinchamber.ie/News-and-Media/Press-Releases/ArtMID/1536/ArticleID/1274/Childcare-Crisis-Hits-Staffing-in-Dublin-Businesses>

Equally, many lone parents struggle to find work due to a lack of flexible options.⁹ Nearly half of mothers and female carers believe Ireland is now a worse place to work than it was a year ago. The study also showed that 62% of women had to take unpaid leave due to caregiving responsibilities, and 73% had to call in sick, compared to 48% and 59% of men. These findings highlight how caregiving duties disproportionately affect women and emphasise the need for more flexible work policies to support them.

To improve women's employment prospects and support gender equality, we are calling for targeted actions across various areas. Expanding access to affordable childcare and promoting paid family leave and flexible work arrangements will enable more women to return to full-time work. Empowering women in entrepreneurship is equally important. Tailored training, dedicated funding, and microfinancing loans to support female business owners should be examined. Additionally, collaborating with universities to create start-up accelerators and offering mentoring and networking opportunities would help women overcome financial barriers and grow their businesses.

We also acknowledge the importance of promoting parental leave equality and enhancing access to early learning and childcare. A thorough review of parental leave supports, including maternity, paternity, and parental leave, will identify obstacles to greater parenting equality and inform the development of more flexible policies. Simplifying leave options will help families allocate leave more equitably between parents. In terms of childcare, increasing subsidies under the National Childcare Scheme (NCS) and expanding breakfast and after-school programs will make childcare more affordable and accessible. To ensure sufficient childcare places, increasing core funding for small and medium-sized providers is necessary. Finally, expanding mentoring programs like "Better Start" would help improve the quality of early childhood education, laying a strong foundation for children's development while supporting parents in the workforce.

⁹ <https://www.irishexaminer.com/business/companies/arid-41461009.html>

Disability

Disability remains a significant barrier to employment for many people in Ireland, with individuals with disabilities often facing discrimination, lack of accessibility, and limited opportunities in the labour market. According to the Disability Federation of Ireland,¹⁰ one in five people report having a disability. Ireland ranks the lowest of the EU for the disability employment rate being 32.6%, almost 20% below the EU average of 51.3%. The additional cost of living with a disability was estimated, in a report published by the Department of Social Protection to be between €10,397- €15,177. a year. These statistics highlight the urgent need for targeted policies and support to bridge the significant gap in employment rates and alleviate the financial burden faced by people with disabilities in Ireland.

To address these issues, we propose several key actions. First, workplace accessibility should be improved, with employers providing reasonable accommodation, such as modified workstations, assistive technologies, or flexible hours where appropriate. The Department should incentivise businesses to implement these changes through grants. Training and support for both employees and employers can create a more inclusive work environment. Employers should also be educated on the benefits of hiring people with disabilities, such as increased diversity and the potential to tap into an underutilised talent pool.

Additionally, promoting equal employment opportunities for people with disabilities requires comprehensive reform of existing supports. A review should be carried out focusing on supports for employers and employees to ensure accessible training, financial, and operational assistance. Given that 22% of the Irish population reports a long-term condition or disability¹¹, the employment gap for individuals with disabilities must be addressed. Providing free Disability Awareness Training for employers and updating the Reasonable Accommodation Fund to align with modern workplace needs are essential steps. Consolidating all disability-related supports into one grant would simplify access, and expanding personal assistant services for employees

¹⁰ <https://www.disability-federation.ie/publications/disability-in-ireland-factsheet-2024/>

¹¹ [Health, Disability, Caring and Volunteering Census of Population 2022 - Summary Results - Central Statistics Office](#)

with physical disabilities would further promote inclusivity. Furthermore, increasing funding for the Work Placement Experience Programme would offer tailored support for long-term unemployed individuals with disabilities, helping them gain work experience or upskill to re-enter the workforce.

Free professional training should be accommodated for parents who care for children with disabilities or additional needs. Many parents are forced to leave the workforce due to a lack of support services, and offering targeted training in areas such as Occupational Therapy, Speech & Language Therapy, Psychology, and Special Needs Assistance would empower parents to better support their children.¹² This training would create career opportunities for parents to return to work when ready and reduce pressure on the HSE by developing a pool of professionals who can support not only their children but others in the community as well.

Chambers Ireland recommends the implementation of a national strategy to improve employment outcomes for people with disabilities. This should include targeted vocational training, job placement programs, and better incentives for employers to make workplaces more accessible. Additionally, increasing disability benefits and expanding public awareness campaigns to challenge stereotypes will help create a more inclusive and equitable labour market. These measures would support both individuals with disabilities and their families, while enhancing overall workforce participation in Ireland.

Housing

Addressing the housing crisis in Ireland is closely linked to improving the employment prospects of underrepresented groups, such as low-income individuals, asylum seekers and young people. Affordable and stable housing is essential for securing and maintaining employment. Without access to suitable housing, individuals often face challenges like high commuting costs and housing insecurity, which can limit their ability to participate fully in the workforce. The increase

¹² [General Election Manifesto](#)

in emigration, with more than 69,000 people emigrating Ireland in the 12 months up to April 2024, up from 64,000 in 2023¹³, highlights the growing difficulty many face in securing affordable housing.

To improve employment outcomes, the government must prioritise increasing the availability of affordable housing. Key measures should include expanding social and affordable housing projects, reviewing the targets for social housing under Housing for All, and considering the increased demand. Additionally, incentivising private sector investment in low-cost rental properties and ensuring housing policies align with job training and employment support services are essential. These measures would ensure that individuals facing housing instability have access to the resources necessary to improve their employability.

Then Housing for All target should be increased from 33,000 to 50,000 units per year to align housing investment with the needs of our growing population. Moreover, the government should introduce a transparent plan to implement the recommendations from the Housing Commission report, addressing a housing deficit of between 212,500 and 256,000 homes. This strategy should include the acceleration of key urban transport infrastructure projects like the All-Island Rail Review, Metrolink, Cork Suburban Rail, and DART extensions, which will improve connectivity and support high-density housing developments. Investing in rural transport infrastructure will ease long commutes and expand job access in remote areas, promoting sustainable urban development.¹⁴

We also recommend the establishment of vacancy reduction targets at the local level and the expansion of the Vacant Home Tax to include commercial properties. This would incentivise the active management of vacant properties, reduce environmental impacts, and encourage the repurposing of underutilised spaces. Additionally, the Derelict Sites Act 1990 should be renewed

¹³ [gov.ie - Migration - the facts; 2025 PBS](https://www.gov.ie/en/publications-and-statistics/publications/migration-the-facts-2025-pbs/)

¹⁴ [2025 PBS](https://www.gov.ie/en/publications-and-statistics/publications/2025-pbs/)

to incentivise infill and brownfield construction, contributing to sustainable urban growth while preserving green spaces.

By taking these steps, the government can improve access to affordable housing, ensure better job access, and create a more equitable society where individuals can thrive in the workforce. This will help address the housing crisis, reduce long-term unemployment, and retain the skills and talent that Ireland has to offer.

To achieve meaningful change, it is crucial for the government to implement targeted strategies that address the unique challenges faced by women, asylum seekers, and individuals with disabilities. By fostering an environment of inclusivity, providing necessary support services, and ensuring equal opportunities in both the workplace and community, Ireland can create an inclusive labour market that works for everyone. This proactive approach will not only improve the lives of underrepresented groups but will also drive economic growth and strengthen social cohesion. Providing affordable housing will elevate the burden to those at a disadvantage in society, and also help retain the skills and talent that the young people of Ireland have to offer.