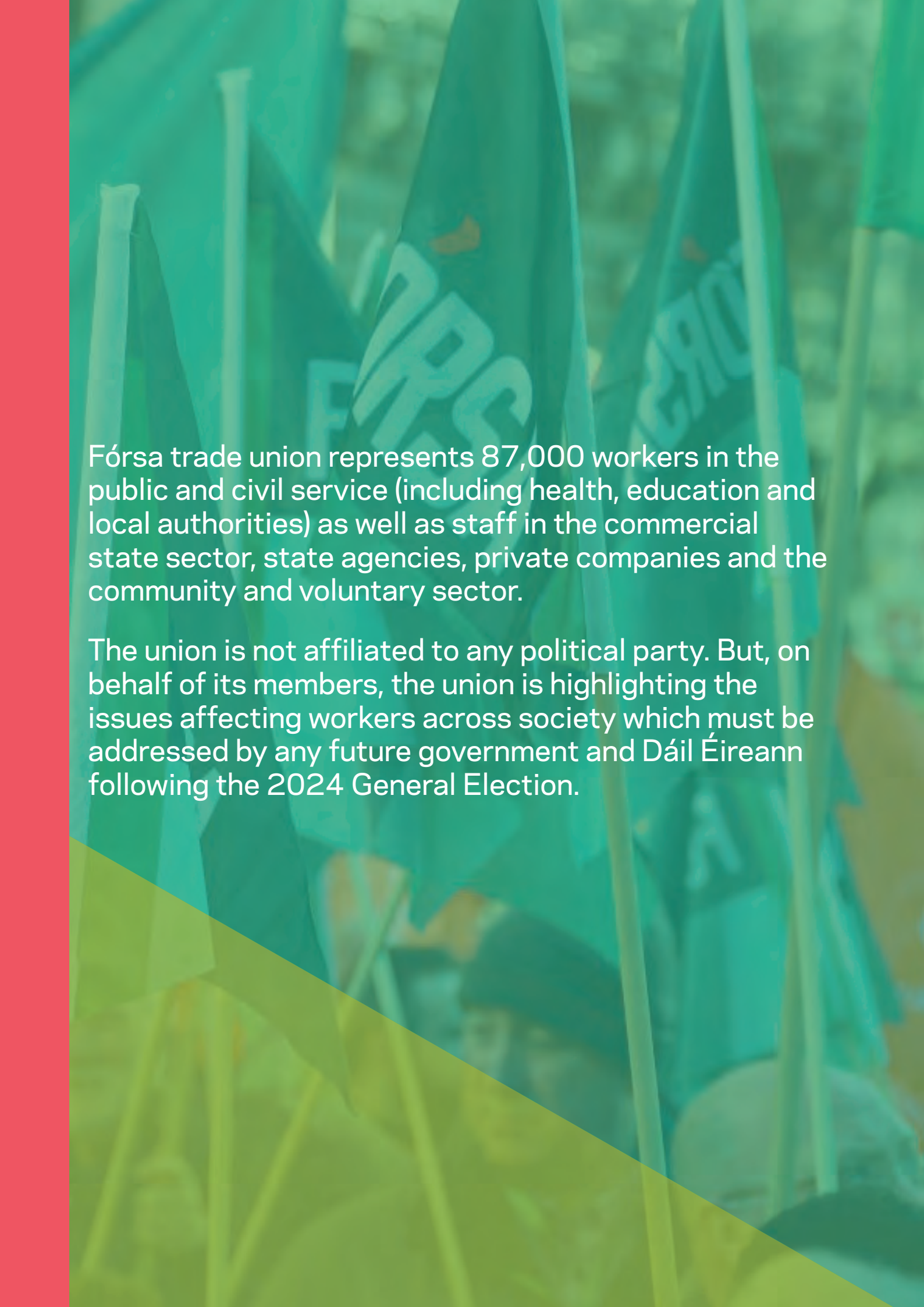




## General Election 2024

## Manifesto



Fórsa trade union represents 87,000 workers in the public and civil service (including health, education and local authorities) as well as staff in the commercial state sector, state agencies, private companies and the community and voluntary sector.

The union is not affiliated to any political party. But, on behalf of its members, the union is highlighting the issues affecting workers across society which must be addressed by any future government and Dáil Éireann following the 2024 General Election.

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# Executive summary

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## Pay

- Negotiate and agree with trade unions a successor pay agreement, with increases in real terms that go beyond inflation, to follow the Public Service Agreement 2024-2026.
- Meaningful engagement on the local bargaining clause to produce outcomes that address the issues affecting grades, groups and categories of public servants.
- Remove the two lowest points, applied in the austerity era, to pay scales for new entrants to the public service.
- Support the reduction in the number of increments on public service pay scales to a maximum of 10 annual increments.
- Remove the FEMPI-era requirement that prohibits new entrants from obtaining incremental credit for relevant prior experience.
- Pay public and civil servants at negotiated overtime rates for every hour worked beyond contracted hours, including where time off in lieu is given, at an amount in line with Article 4.2 of the Revised European Social Charter.
- Replace the minimum wage with a living wage, based on 60% of the median hourly wage, as per the recommendation of the Low Pay Commission and the commitment contained in the 2020 Programme for Government.

## A four-day week

- Pilot a four-day working week in parts of the public and civil service, without loss of pay or productivity, to be undertaken in consultation and agreement with the relevant trade unions.

## Value for money public services

- Use directly employed public servants to carry out and deliver public services and avoid the outsourcing of duties and services to agency staff, external consultants, and third-party commercial organisations. Negotiation should take place with trade unions in line with the Public Service Agreement where outsourcing is deemed necessary.

## Health and social care services

- Fully implement the vision of Sláintecare, including investment in elective-only hospitals for day surgeries and surgical hubs which will ultimately free up beds in general hospitals. Increase investment into community health services, preventative care including health promotion and mental health services.
- Adequately resource the HSE to meet existing and future service demands and the needs of Sláintecare.
- Increase the number of course places in the health and social care professions to increase the supply of Health and Social Care Professionals (HSCPs).
- Establish a structured, fair and sustainable funding model for 'section 39' agencies, to underpin services and ensure fair pay and working conditions for those who are delivering services that would otherwise have to be provided by the State.
- Ensure representation of Health and Social Care Professionals (HSCPs) in the Senior Management Team in the new HSE Health Regions.
- Ensure that all relevant workers who delivered frontline services receive the pandemic special recognition payment (PSRP). In cases where workers are excluded from the PSRP, unions should be allowed to make their case for inclusion (a case-by-case review).
- Commission a third-party review of the implementation of the PRSP to ensure relevant organisations were not excluded from the spirit of the scheme.

## Local services and democracy

- Provide adequate investment and independent funding powers for local authorities.
- Fully implement the EU Charter on Local Self-Government, inclusive of the Additional Protocol.
- Support initiatives for directly elected mayors in each local authority.
- Begin the processes required to provide for the return of waste collection services to local authorities, including but not limited to introducing legislative changes to the Waste Management Act 1996.
- Hold an early referendum to ensure that Ireland's water services remain in public ownership and control.
- Negotiate with water workers' trade unions prior to any significant change in arrangements for the delivery of water services.
- Work with unions and other stakeholders to ensure an ongoing role for local authorities in the provision of local services.
- Deliver a large-scale public home-building programme that takes account of accurate existing population and future population projections.
- Support an increase of local-authority-led cost rental public housing.
- Increase local authority direct labour for the delivery and construction of public homes, home energy upgrades, preventative maintenance and effective void management.
- Endorse the holding of a referendum which would establish the constitutional right to housing.

## Civil Service

- Amend the industrial relations acts to give civil service workers access to the WRC and Labour Court OR completely overhaul, as a matter of priority, the conciliation and arbitration scheme to modernise the process for dispute resolution, so that civil service workers can have similar recourse to almost all other workers in the state by involving the WRC in the scheme.
- Legislate to modernise the outdated practise of excluding the majority of civil servants from engaging in political activity.
- Engage with unions on issues of serious concern in relation to the Civil Service Regulation (Amendment) Bill 2018.

## Education

- Complete the review of the national SNA Contract for the start of the academic year in September 2025.
- Confirm that the new minimum essential qualification for SNAs will be set at QQI Level 6.
- Continue funding the National SNA Training Programme and introduce a funding model for SNAs to access continuing professional development training.
- Provide access to the Single Public Service Pension Scheme for School Secretaries and Caretakers.
- Progressively increase higher and further education funding to OECD average levels over the lifetime of the next government. This includes increased funding for student grants and supports.
- Phase out the student contribution charge over the lifetime of the next government in a move towards the full introduction of publicly funded higher education.

- Confirm a new employment framework for School Completion Programmes, including the introduction of a single employment structure within ETBs and granting of public service status to all those working within School Completion Programmes.
- Implement a job evaluation scheme for Technological Universities and Institutes of Technology, alongside an appropriate funding model to allow this scheme to be fully realised.

## Trade union access and recognition

- Introduce legislation that strengthens the legal right to be represented by the relevant union and outlaw the victimisation, harassment or penalisation of staff for joining a union or for organising for better pay and conditions at work.
- Provide workers with the right to access trade union representatives in their workplace so that they can get information on their rights and can talk about workplace issues.
- Provide union representatives with statutory rights which enable them to effectively carry out their duties as representatives during work hours. This includes facilitating meetings during paid work hours.
- Re-introduce tax relief on trade union subscriptions within the first year of government.
- Introduce strengthened legislation to outlaw bogus self-employment arrangements and close loopholes that allow bad employers to exploit staff in this way, while avoiding their duty to contribute through the PRSI and tax system.

## Gender equality in the workplace

- Amend Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act and Employment Equality Act to protect employees affected by period or menopause-related symptoms in the workplace.
- Provide free access to hormone replacement therapy (HRT) to alleviate painful and uncomfortable symptoms of menopause.
- Increase the existing statutory provision for paid leave for victims of domestic violence to 10 days.
- Fully implement the Third National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual & Gender-Based Violence 2022-2026.

## Publicly provided childcare

- Deliver publicly provided and publicly funded affordable childcare that is accessible for all families.

## Futureproofing society and the workplace

- Deliver increased and sustained investment to create employment in new and emerging green jobs and in training for upskilling in line with current climate and biodiversity plans.
- Increase investment in public transport to ensure workers can access reliable public transport options.
- Negotiate and agree AI policies with trade unions to ensure a smooth and positive adoption of AI.
- Create upskilling programmes designed to boost worker complementarity. These programmes should be targeted at high-risk workers with high exposure and low complementarity.

# Introduction

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Fórsa is the largest public sector trade union in Ireland. Though we are not aligned to any political party, we advocate for and campaign on behalf of our members every day. This manifesto outlines what a society that works for workers would look like. It outlines the policies that would address the major challenges faced by Fórsa members at work and in their lives.

Since the last general election in February 2020, the environment in which we work has changed dramatically. Responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, workers demonstrated incredible resilience and agility as they navigated some of the most unforeseen and demanding challenges.

Public servants ensured that this country continued to operate. Fórsa members kept hospitals and community health services operational, assisted students in accessing education, continued to provide vital local services, and supported the government in navigating the most difficult of circumstances.

Society and workplaces have evolved. The rise of remote and flexible working during this time saw an increased opportunity for many workers to access a more equitable work-life balance. Many workers reflected on the necessity of accessing public services like healthcare, particularly should another health pandemic strike in the future.

There are still several significant challenges that emerged during the pandemic that must be addressed during the next Dáil term. This manifesto outlines the policies which would address these challenges, and build a more equal Ireland.

More than 20,000 public sector workers who are Fórsa members completed a recent survey, conducted by Amárach Research, which shaped the direction of this manifesto.

## Our members were clear, they want the next government to prioritise:

- Pay increases which go beyond rates of inflation,
- Protection of remote work and the introduction of a four-day working week in the public and civil service,
- The provision and availability of high-quality, world-class public services.

Not only do public servants want to see these changes, but high proportions of those surveyed are also willing to change their voting intentions to support political parties and candidates who commit to these policies.

We are calling on all political parties and candidates for election to support these policies. We are asking for their inclusion in the next Programme for Government and for the next Government to commit to their implementation.

We invite parties and candidates to engage with Fórsa on the issues outlined in this manifesto, and we look forward to working together to strengthen our public sector, for our workers, for service-users, and for society as a whole.



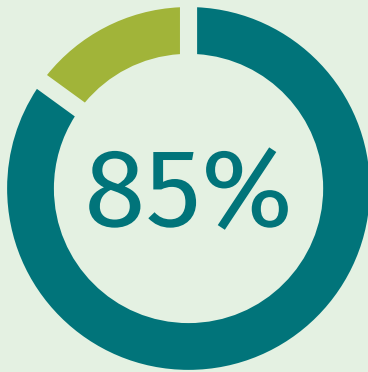
# Pay

## Public service pay

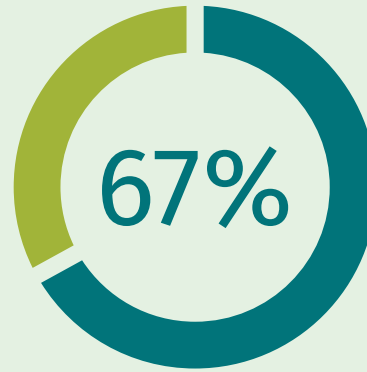
The Public Service Agreement 2024-2026, which governs pay and conditions for most public and civil servants, expires on 30th June 2026. The timely negotiation of a successor agreement is vital in ensuring workers are protected against rising inflation and the associated costs of living. Additionally, the negotiation of a successor agreement allows for stability in predicting public service pay for a defined period.

Public sector workers all over Ireland have said they want a real pay rise – one that goes beyond inflation, and that rewards them for their work and allows them to have a decent quality of life.

### *In a recent survey of public servants:*



Nearly 85% of respondents said the issue of pay improvement is a key consideration for how they will vote in the next election.



67% said that they are likely to support political parties who commit to the negotiation of pay increases which go beyond rates of inflation, with this rising to 74% for those respondents under the age of 35.<sup>1</sup>

Political parties seeking to form the next government should support these workers by providing them the prospect of a decent quality of life through negotiating a new pay agreement that reflects the dedication and commitment of our public servants and recognises their value in the workplace.

A significant clause in the existing Public Service Agreement 2024-2026 is provision for local bargaining. This clause will enable workers to address structural issues and changes to work practices through negotiation for the first time in over 20 years.

### **We are seeking commitment to:**

- Negotiate and agree with trade unions a successor pay agreement, with increases in real terms that go beyond inflation, to follow the Public Service Agreement 2024-2026.
- Meaningful engagement on local bargaining clauses to produce outcomes that address the changes affecting grades, groups and categories of public servants.

## Improving low pay for young people

For many, starting a new job does not automatically guarantee a quality standard of living or that a person will no longer experience poverty. The Central Statistics Office Survey on Income and Living Conditions 2023 shows that poverty still exists for those in employment with most recent in-work poverty figures at 5.9%.<sup>2</sup>

Lower paid workers and young people who are more likely to be renting are disproportionately affected by the high cost of living. Staggering housing costs, in addition to rising energy and fuel prices, and higher food costs, all lead to a higher proportion of their income being spent on these expenses, severely impacting their quality of life. Similarly, the same CSO report shows that concerns around financial deprivation have risen year-on-year since 2021 as consumer price inflation accelerated during and after the Covid-19 pandemic.

### We are seeking commitment to:

- Remove the two lowest points, applied in the austerity era, to pay scales for new entrants to the public service.

## Shorter pay scales for workers

Across the public sector, there is huge discrepancy between how workers at different stages of their career progress through the pay scales for their grade. This is evident in the large number of differences in the number of increments and years it takes for lower grades to reach the maximum of their pay scale compared to their colleagues employed at a higher grade. For example, a clerical officer and executive officer pay scale in the civil service includes 16 and 14 annual increments respectively. This is compared to 7 increments for a principal officer and 4 for an assistant secretary. Similarly, several pay scales for administrative, clerical and related scales in the education, health, and local government sectors extend beyond 10 increments, and far beyond ten years when accounting for long-service increments. In order to improve fairness across the workforce, the Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform should negotiate with unions to reduce the number of increments to no more than 10 for each grade.

### We are seeking commitment to:

- Support the reduction in the number of increments on public service pay scales to a maximum of 10 annual increments.

## Incremental credit for new entrants

New entrants to the public and civil service who are recruited through open competition usually start at the minimum of the relevant salary scale. Such a requirement prevents the public and civil service from attracting talent from outside the public service (from within the private and other sectors) who have valuable skills and experience which would strengthen the public service workforce.

To attract suitably qualified and experienced professionals, starting salaries within the public service must be able to compete with career opportunities in the private sector. Any new opportunities which would require a highly skilled and experienced professional to take a cut in their salary serve as a disincentive to those considering furthering their career by joining the public service. To attract skilled and experienced professionals, relevant outside experience should be reckonable for incremental credit thereby determining where a new recruit to the public service is placed on a salary scale.

### We are seeking commitment to:

- Remove the FEMPI-era requirement that prohibits new entrants from obtaining incremental credit for relevant prior experience.



## Working overtime

Public and civil servants who work beyond their contracted hours in a normal Monday to Friday working week are entitled to certain overtime arrangements or time off in lieu. These are outlined for each sector of the public service, as per the 2021 overtime circulars. These circulars state that overtime payments should be at a rate higher than the basic or flat rate of pay. However, where time off in lieu is given instead of an overtime payment, this time is given at the flat rate (i.e. the same amount of time off in lieu of the amount of overtime worked).

Under Article 4.2 of the Revised European Social Charter, workers are entitled to an increased rate of remuneration for overtime work, subject to exceptions in particular cases. Where remuneration for overtime is entirely given in the form of time off, Article 4.2 requires that this time be longer than the additional hours worked.<sup>3</sup> Ireland is in breach of this article.

### We are seeking commitment to:

- Pay public and civil servants at negotiated overtime rates for every hour worked beyond contracted hours, including where time off in lieu is given, at an amount in line with Article 4.2 of the Revised European Social Charter.

## Living wage

The Low Pay Commission has recommended increasing the minimum wage to 60% of the median wage by January 2026.<sup>4</sup> Based on projections from the LPC 2023 report, the national living wage in 2024 is €13.82 per hour.<sup>5</sup> In January 2024, the minimum wage was set at €12.70 per hour, bringing the minimum wage to 55.1% of median hourly wages. Budget 2025 will see the minimum wage increase by 80 cents to €13.50 per hour from January 1. The minimum wage will need to increase further between now and 2026 to meet the LPC recommendation of 60% of the median hourly wage.

### We are seeking commitment to:

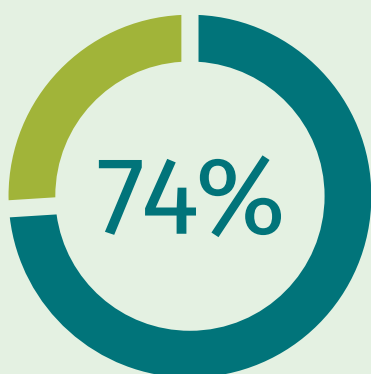
- Replace the minimum wage with a living wage, based on 60% of the median hourly wage, as per the recommendation of the Low Pay Commission and the commitment contained in the 2020 Programme for Government.

# A four day week

## Four-day week trial in the public service

A four-day working week will improve the balance between work and personal lives, providing positive change for workers, without losing pay or productivity. The benefits of working time reduction or a four-day working week are threefold: social, economic, and climate- bringing gains for organisations, their workers, and society.

### Research of public servants in Ireland found that:



74% would vote for political parties or candidates that commit to trialling a four-day week in the public and civil service, even if they had never voted for them before.

While the private sector has already begun trialling the four-day week at pace, the government and public service have declined to take a leading role in piloting a four-day week. A policy change, to allow trials of a four-day week based on no loss of pay or productivity, would contribute to greater equality across society and avoid a new dualism emerging where only those who can afford the luxury of reducing their hours of work can do so. As it stands, only a small proportion of people, usually those on higher incomes, can choose to reduce their hours and enjoy all the benefits of autonomy over their time and time away from work.<sup>6</sup>

Evidence also suggests that a four-day workweek leads to improved health and wellbeing for employees. Given that public sector workers are more likely to experience poor mental health compared to their private sector counterparts, implementing such a policy could help improve overall health among the public sector, along with other positive outcomes such as productivity gains.<sup>7</sup> Research undertaken in the UK has shown that poor mental health in the public sector has cost the UK government around £1,794-2,174 per

employee per annum through presenteeism and absenteeism.<sup>8</sup> Poor work-life balance, overworking and stress all lead to mental health problems among the workforce. Four-day week trials around the world have shown that by reducing worktime hours, we can alleviate these problems in the workplace, and increase wellbeing and employee satisfaction, leading to a healthier and happier workforce.

Four-day week trials conducted in the public sector and government agencies in Iceland showed an increase in productivity and improved wellbeing.<sup>9</sup>

### We are seeking commitment to:

- Pilot a four-day working week in parts of the public and civil service, without loss of pay, or productivity, to be undertaken in consultation and agreement with the relevant trade unions.

# Value for money public services

## Use of direct labour and tackling outsourcing

Across public services, there has been continued outsourcing of work to private contractors, external consultants, and agency workers even though work can and should be undertaken by public service direct labour. Outsourcing often costs three-to-four times more than if that work was carried out by directly employed staff. The HSE is one example where an over-reliance on agency staff, as well as excessive and extended use of private external consultancy, has led to budget overruns as well as frustrations among staff. Additionally, local authorities continue to use private contractors to carry out work that should be done by County and City Council staff. Waste services is one example, where the removal of graffiti, street cleaning, painting, street-washing and general operative work has been assigned to third-party contractors. Where possible, organisations should work to upskill and train the existing workforce, promote them into vacant roles, and directly recruit staff to fill gaps.



### We are seeking commitment to:

- Use directly employed public servants to carry out and deliver public services and avoid the outsourcing of duties and services to agency staff, external consultants, and third-party commercial organisations. Negotiation should take place with trade unions in line with the Public Service Agreement where outsourcing is deemed necessary.



**"CAN'T  
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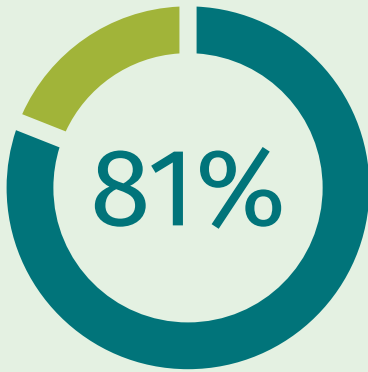
**FÓRSA**  
Member Survey August 2024

**"NOT  
ENOUGH  
STAFF TO  
DO THE  
WORK"**

**FÓRSA**  
Member Survey August 2024

# Health and social care services

Research into the attitudes of public servants found that:



81% are likely to support political parties or candidates who commit to substantially increased investment in community health services – including hospitals and health promotion – as a move towards high-quality, free healthcare for all, even if they haven't voted for them before.

## Investing in services and adequate recruitment of staff

The recruitment and retention of staff continues to be a significant issue of concern across our health services, with the HSE's latest staffing strategy showing that vacancies up to the end of 2023 have been effectively suppressed.

The recruitment freeze enforced in 2023 led to a significant number of vacant posts going unfilled. The HSE has since advised that these previously sanctioned and fully funded posts will be considered in the context of headcount for 2024, which means that they will no longer be recruited for, despite remaining vacant.

Failure to fill these frontline vacancies will continue to place severe pressure on healthcare workers, as they work to deliver safe services, most prominently in community health services, mental health, services to older people and disability services.

Furthermore, significant investment in preventative care is required. With an ageing population and a growing number of people with complex conditions, we need substantial investment in preventative care, and a multi-disciplinary approach looking at new models of care.

### We are seeking commitment to:

- Fully implement the vision of Sláintecare, including investment in elective-only hospitals for day surgeries and surgical hubs which will ultimately free up beds in general hospitals, and increased investment into community health services, preventative care including health promotion and mental health services.
- Adequately resource the HSE to meet existing and future service demands and the needs of Sláintecare.
- Increase the number of course places in the health and social care professions to increase the supply of HSCPs.
- Establish a structured, fair and sustainable funding model for 'section 39' agencies, to underpin services and ensure fair pay and working conditions for those who are delivering services that would otherwise have to be provided by the State.

## Regional Director for Health and Social Care

As part of the restructuring of the HSE and the establishment of new Regional Health Areas, medical, nursing and midwifery staff will benefit from having a specialist regional director. However, Health and Social Care Professionals will not.

Health and Social Care Professionals (HSCPs) are the second largest clinical group of staff in the HSE. Yet despite this, the HSE have excluded HSCPs from representation on the Senior Management Team in the new HSE Regional Health Areas. HSCPs should have a senior management role, on par with those already agreed for other clinical groups. Their exclusion contradicts the stated aim of Sláintecare. That is “integrated delivery of care in the right place at the right time”. The role would provide a diversity of input and expertise that will bring significant added value for people who require integrated health services. It is an essential element of appropriate clinical governance and assurance which is a requirement for patient safety. This exclusion would mean that the insights and concerns of Health and Social Care Professionals, who form the second largest clinical group in the HSE, would be absent from critical decision making.

### We are seeking commitment to:

- Ensure representation of Health and Social Care Professionals (HSCPs) in the Senior Management Team in the new HSE Health Regions.

## Covid-19 Pandemic Special Recognition Payment



Fórsa members working in health and social care settings were vital in ensuring the provision of essential care and in keeping services running during the Covid pandemic. It is their dedication and commitment to helping people that kept the most vulnerable people safe during the most challenging of times for people and their families. In January 2022, the Government announced that a once-off payment, the Pandemic Special Recognition Payment (PSRP), would be made available for frontline healthcare workers, in

recognition of their dedication to providing public health services and care during the most challenging and difficult circumstances of the Covid-19 Pandemic.<sup>10</sup>

Feedback has shown that many workers were excluded from the scheme, and it remains our position that they should have been included, given the essential, frontline work that they completed.

### We are seeking commitment to:

- Ensure that all relevant workers who delivered frontline services receive the pandemic special recognition payment (PSRP). In cases where workers are excluded from the PSRP, unions should be allowed to make their case for inclusion (a case-by-case review).
- Commission a third-party review of the implementation of the PRSP to ensure relevant organisations were not excluded from the spirit of the scheme.





**"INCREASED  
WAITING  
LISTS"**

**FÓRSA**

# Local services and democracy

## Revitalisation of Local Government

Enshrined in our constitution is the simple principle that strong effective local government is the foundation of a prosperous and progressive society. Over several decades, the impact of austerity measures, privatisation of former local government services, increased executive power, and the stripping of responsibilities from local authorities has weakened our local government. This undermining of essential public services in areas such as housing, waste, water and health, has eroded the public's trust in our system of government, and in our public services and institutions.

Furthermore, Ireland scores poorly compared to other European countries and internationally in relation to relative strength, size and structure of local authority units; balance of power between the chief executive or administrative and elected parts of local government; range of functions for which local government has responsibility; relationship between central and local government; and financial autonomy of local government.

Additionally, overall spending at local government level is miniscule when compared to our European neighbours. In 2022, just 9.7% of all public spending occurred at local government level in Ireland, which is the fourth lowest in the European Union after Greece, Cyprus and Malta.<sup>11</sup> This is far below the average of around one-quarter of all government spending occurring at local level across the European Union.

Fórsa has a vision of strengthened local democracy in Ireland with a strong local government which provides localised, efficient, and effective public services.

### We are seeking commitment to:

- Provide adequate investment and independent funding powers for local authorities.
- Fully implement the EU Charter on Local Self-Government, inclusive of the Additional Protocol.
- Support initiatives for directly elected mayors in each local authority.





## Waste

Many local authorities, faced with an unviable business model for domestic refuse, exited waste management over the past decades which has ultimately resulted in a 'quasi-market' for waste which is poorly regulated with environmental and other costs. Private refuse services are not only unaccountable, but the current model has led to private bin collection services which have proved uncompetitive, inefficient and unable to provide affordable services or consistent coverage. The lack of competition is evident in that: only 20 main operators service 90% of households that avail of a collection service; 18% of households nationally, and 25% in the Dublin region, do not have a choice of service provision from multiple suppliers; and 23% of households do not have a waste collection service at all. Further to this, a recent Competition and Consumer Protection (CCPC) report highlights the degree to which the unique Irish waste management market is highly inefficient in enabling a competitive market. The report concludes that domestic waste collection is a "natural monopoly".<sup>12</sup> This leaves room for a significant number of illegal practices such as illegal dumping or fly tipping in both urban and rural areas. 44,868 tonnes of waste were unmanaged in 2016 with the ultimate clean-up costs borne by local councils.

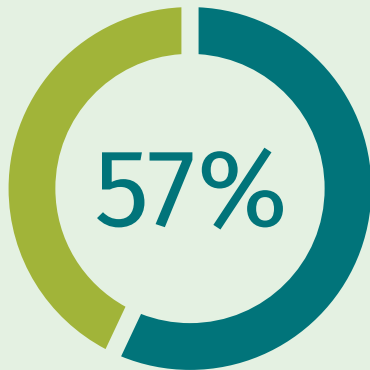
An Institute of Public Administration research report on the remunicipalisation of waste services in Dublin City Council found that just four waste collection companies account for almost three quarters of the Dublin City market.<sup>13</sup> Of the five international comparator cities surveyed, Dublin was the only city with a fully privatised system, with all others including a strong element of public involvement either through direct collection of waste through publicly owned companies or with publicly owned companies managing the service through private tenders for kerbside waste collection. The report concludes that in order to return waste collection services to local authorities and to provide legal certainty for local authorities, amendments to the Waste Management Act 1996 will be required.

We believe that remunicipalisation is good for workers, good for residents, and good for the environment.

### We are seeking commitment to:

- Begin the processes required to provide for the return of waste collection services to local authorities, including but not limited to introducing legislative changes to the Waste Management Act 1996.

## Research among public servants found that:



More than half (57%) of respondents would support candidates or parties that, if part of the next government, commit to an early referendum to ensure that Ireland's water services remain in public ownership and control, even if they did not vote for them before.

## Water

Most countries that have privatised water services have seen increases in price and reductions in service quality, and there are many global examples of privatised water services being brought back into public ownership. A referendum on the future of water in Ireland would give people the opportunity to have their say and give people the opportunity to safeguard public ownership for future generations. Privatised water services result in higher costs and poorer services for the public. Public ownership of water services ensures safe and sustainable access to water for everyone. A referendum would help protect Irish water services from any future attempt at privatisation, providing a constitutional guarantee of public ownership.

Opinion polls show that a huge majority of the Irish public want a referendum to ensure water services can never be privatised.

### We are seeking commitment to:

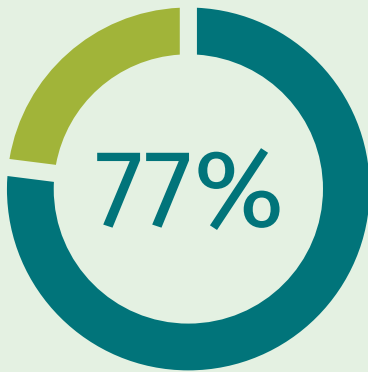
- Hold an early referendum to ensure that Ireland's water services remain in public ownership and control.
- Negotiate with water workers' trade unions prior to any significant change in arrangements for the delivery of water services.
- Work with unions and other stakeholders to ensure an ongoing role for local authorities in the provision of local services.



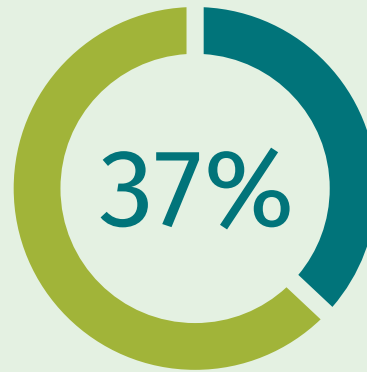
## Housing

Building and strengthening our public services depends upon the recruitment of young people but rising rental costs and house prices are driving our younger generations overseas for a better quality of life. Over 69,000 people left Ireland in the 12 months up to April this year – an increase of over 5,000 on the year previous.<sup>14</sup> This is the highest emigration figure for the State since 2015 and a damning indictment of successive governments which have consistently failed our young people. Additionally, a 2024 Eurofound report also noted that the percentage of working young people still living with their parents has risen 13 percentage points from 27% to 40% in the last ten years.<sup>15</sup>

*A recent survey of public servants showed that:*



77% believe the housing crisis has worsened since the last election, with this rising to 83% for those respondents under the age of 35.



Additionally, 37% of respondents spend more than 30% of their monthly income on housing, with this figure rising to 49% for those respondents under the age of 35.

The stability of our public services will require future governments to prioritise the delivery of public housing. This is essential in returning confidence to those young people that it is possible to afford to live in Ireland, independently from their parents, with a good quality of life where accommodation costs do not make up an unsustainable proportion of their wages.

The shift away from the role of local authorities in the provision of public housing has been a long-term trend which began in the 1980s. The traditional provision of council housing has been displaced by the growing importance of private sector rental subsidies including the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP). While the previous government boasted about its home-building programme in that it has built more houses in its lifetime than any government since the 1970s, it has failed to take account of the stark differences in population since then. This means that in comparison, it has not even built half the number of houses which were built per population size in the seventies.

Cost rental models of accommodation are at the heart of a sustainable model, in practice this means changing the financial, rental, letting and maintenance model for public housing provision and making this new model the primary vehicle for delivering public housing.

### We are seeking commitment to:

- Deliver a large-scale public home-building programme that takes account of accurate existing population and future population projections.
- Support an increase of local-authority-led cost rental public housing.
- Increase local authority direct labour for the delivery and construction of public homes, home energy upgrades, preventative maintenance and effective void management.
- Endorse the holding of a referendum which would establish the constitutional right to housing.



# Civil service

## Industrial relations structures

Despite ongoing commitments to modernise the civil service industrial relations structures, including the matter of granting access for Civil Servants to the Workplace Relations Commission and the Labour Court, like almost every other worker in the state, the civil service industrial relations system still consists solely of a conciliation and arbitration scheme introduced in 1950. This scheme has little or no capacity for dispute resolution.

### We are seeking commitment to:

- Amend the industrial relations acts to give civil service workers access to the WRC and Labour Court OR completely overhaul, as a matter of priority, the conciliation and arbitration scheme to modernise the process of dispute resolution, so that civil service workers can have similar recourse available to almost all other workers in the state by involving the WRC in the scheme.

## Political activity

Civil Servants above the entry grade of Clerical Officer are precluded from engaging in political activity. This is an outdated system and there should be greater freedom for grades above this level to engage in political activity, run for election to local councils, engage in campaigning, and have the freedom to make public comment on issues of public interest.

### We are seeking commitment to:

- Legislate to modernise the outdated practise of excluding the majority of civil servants from engaging in political activity.

## Civil Service Regulation (Amendment) Bill

The Civil Service disciplinary procedures are commonly held as the gold standard. They have clearly defined roles and spaces for everyone's voice to be heard and should be held up by the State as the model for all sectors. Contrary to this, the previous government was progressing legislation that would seek to alter the provisions of the 2016 Civil Service Disciplinary Code to change the process by which Civil Servants' contracts can be terminated.

The Civil Service Regulation (Amendment) Bill 2018, if enacted, will downgrade the power to terminate a civil service worker's employment from Secretary General to a lower grade, among other changes in relation to who has the decision-making authority over other disciplinary actions. The draft legislation does not ensure fair procedure for employees and is an attempt to change employment terms and conditions by direct legislation rather than by industrial relations negotiation in the civil service.

### We are seeking commitment to:

- Engage with unions on issues of serious concern in relation to the Civil Service Regulation (Amendment) Bill 2018.

# Education



## Special Education and Special Needs Assistants

The role of the Special Needs Assistant (SNA) has evolved since the position was first introduced to schools. SNAs continue to play a pivotal role in ensuring that students with additional needs can access and exercise their right to education. Despite positive developments to the role to best support students in the classroom, an appropriate contract of employment has not developed in tandem. Therefore, the current contract does not accurately reflect the work being undertaken in schools across the country.

A review of the contract of employment for Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) formed a key component of the Public Service Agreement, *Building Momentum* (2021-2022). The Department of Education has subsequently initiated a Special Needs Assistants National Workforce Plan, with the review and development of the SNA role constituting a core part of this body of work. The SNA contract must be renegotiated to accurately reflect the ways in which SNAs support students. This should include key issues such as a national redeployment scheme for SNAs in order to retain skilled and experienced staff within schools, the issuing of guidance on best practice, and the introduction of a SNA career structure.

Additionally, the minimum essential qualification for SNAs must also be amended. The expansion of the role, alongside the increased level of training and upskilling needed to effectively support students with additional needs, must be reflected in the qualification levels required to undertake this work. Previous commitments from the Department of Education have placed the appropriate qualification at a QQI Level 6. However, this must be confirmed and actioned.

In order to best support students, it is imperative that SNAs are able to avail of appropriate and funded training. The National SNA Training Programme has seen the upskilling of more than 3000 SNAs since its inception. This type of standardised training ensures that students across the country will be supported to the same standards regardless of where they live. Further to this, access to continuing professional development, funded and provided by the Department of Education, will allow SNAs to keep their skills and knowledge up to date with the latest developments in special education support.

### We are seeking commitment to:

- Complete the review of the national SNA Contract for the start of the academic year in September 2025.
- Confirm that the new minimum essential qualification for SNAs will be set at QQI Level 6.
- Continue funding of the National SNA Training Programme and introduce a funding model for SNAs to access continuing professional development training.



## School Secretaries and Caretakers

School Secretaries and Caretakers still work in the precarious position of lacking access to a public service pension. Despite their obvious role in providing a public service in schools across the country, their lack of pension entitlements leaves them at a disadvantage compared to other public service roles and, in particular, in comparison to their colleagues within the school community. While progress was made during the lifetime of the last government in introducing basic employment rights for School Secretaries including paid holidays and sick leave, and the ceasing of layoffs every summer, the introduction of such pension entitlements would recognise their important public service and provide security for these workers in retirement.

### We are seeking commitment to:

- Provide access to the Single Public Service Pension Scheme for School Secretaries and Caretakers.

## Higher education funding

The higher education student-staff ratio (23.4 to 1) in Ireland is among the worst in the OECD, and student numbers are expected to further increase over the course of this decade.<sup>16</sup> This is a significantly large ratio compared to the OECD EU27 average of 17 students to 1 staff. Furthermore, Ireland's share of per-capita GDP allocated to education is under 15%, which is significantly less than the OECD average of 27%. Increased state funding is needed to ensure that higher education in Ireland can continue to deliver on quality, access and affordability. In 2022, the European Commission identified a funding shortfall of €307 million for the higher education sector in Ireland. While that gap has narrowed with the governments increase of €106 million over the past two years, there remains a shortfall of around €100 million to adequately resource the sector.<sup>17</sup> Students in Ireland are also faced with the highest fees in the European Union. The recent one-off measures introduced as part of the cost-of-living measures to help tackle the cost of education for students and families are welcome. However, they fail to recognise the significant return on investment that higher education provides to society as a whole, while still bringing significant financial pressure on students.

We believe that higher education is a public good which deserves adequate investment, and which should be free at the point of access to all students. Future governments must introduce policy measures to reduce the burden of fees on existing and future students and significantly increase core funding to provide stability in the sector.

### We are seeking commitment to:

- Progressively increase higher and further education funding to OECD average levels over the lifetime of the next government. This includes increased funding for student grants and supports.
- Phase out the student contribution charge over the lifetime of the next government in a move towards the full introduction of publicly funded higher education.

## School Completion Programme

The School Completion Programme is vitally important in allowing students, who might otherwise be unable to complete their education, to attend school and continue learning. The programmes administered by the School Completion Programme, such as after school programmes and career guidance, cannot function without adequate funding to support this work. Continued commitment to the funding of the School Completion Programme will ensure that no student is at risk of lacking the support needed to continue in their education journey.

Further to this, those working in the School Completion Programme must be recognised for the work they do in supporting those at-risk students. This includes the communication and application of pay increases, in line with negotiated public service agreements, in a timely manner. It also requires the removal of the two-tier system of employment which exists within the sector, whereby some staff are employed directly by Education and Training Boards (ETBs) on contracts which reflect public service terms and conditions, and some staff are employed through more precarious grant systems. The introduction of a single employment structure within ETBs and the granting of public service status to those working in this sector would resolve this.

### We are seeking commitment to:

- Confirm a new employment framework for School Completion Programmes, including the introduction of a single employment structure within ETBs and grant public service status to all those working within School Completion Programmes.

## Technological Universities and Institutes of Technology

In 2019, an agreement was negotiated to introduce a job evaluation scheme for staff working within Technological Universities and Institutes of Technology. This scheme would allow those staff, who believe they are working at a level higher than the position that they occupy, to apply to have their role evaluated. If successful, the evaluation can result in the regrading of that individual to the grade which appropriately matches the work that they do, along with the appropriate pay and conditions. Despite its agreement, the implementation of this scheme has yet to be finalised. Ensuring that there is a funding agreement in place which will allow for the regrading of these roles will allow for the full implementation of the job evaluation scheme.

### We are seeking commitment to:

- The implementation of a job evaluation scheme for Technological Universities and Institutes of Technology, alongside an appropriate funding model to allow this scheme to be fully realised.

# Trade union access and recognition

## The right to access and organise

While Irish workers have a constitutional right to belong to a trade union, there is no requirement for employers to recognise unions or to engage in collective bargaining. In addition, many bad employers victimise and harass staff who join unions or seek union representation. Comparatively, Ireland is an outlier in the EU, alongside only Cyprus, in its failure to legislate for employee representatives to be protected against dismissal and from being discriminated against for their trade union activity. This failure means that employee representatives can be dismissed for engaging in trade union activity.

While these employees can take a case against their employer under the Unfair Dismissals Act, the damage on the employee has already been inflicted, which undermines and weakens the ability to organise for better pay and conditions in the workplace. All workers should be able to unionise free from victimisation and harassment.

The Irish government is required to transpose the EU Directive on adequate minimum wages by November 2024. An objective of this directive is to enhance coverage of collective bargaining on wage setting, and the government must publish an action plan outlining measures to achieve this by the end of 2025. Collective bargaining has been the norm across most modern European countries for decades with the vast majority of workers covered by collective agreements: Italy (97%), Austria (94%), Spain (91%), Finland, France (both 90%) and Sweden (89%).<sup>18</sup> Ireland is not even close to reaching this sizeable coverage of workers with only 34% of the workforce covered by collective bargaining agreements. All workers should be able to exercise their right to collectively bargain through their trade union. It is vital that trade unions and their representatives are recognised by employers as the representative voice of their members.



### We are seeking commitment to:

- Introduce legislation that strengthens the legal right to be represented by the relevant union and outlaws the victimisation, harassment or penalisation of staff for joining a union or for organising for better pay and conditions at work.
- Provide workers with the right to access trade unions representatives in their workplace so that they can get information on their rights and can talk about workplace issues.
- Provide union representatives with statutory rights which enable them to effectively carry out their duties as representatives during work hours. This includes facilitating meetings during paid work hours.

## Tax relief on trade union subscriptions

Tax relief on trade union subscriptions was abolished in Budget 2011 as an austerity measure. However, tax relief for subscriptions to business and professional organisations was maintained, despite an announcement that all such reliefs were to be abolished. The absence of this tax relief disproportionately affects trade union members and should be rectified on grounds of fairness and equity, and in recognition of the important role played by trade unions in Irish society. Re-introducing tax relief on trade union subscriptions would provide parity between professional organisations and unions and bring Ireland in line with best European and international practice. It would reflect the next government's commitment to collective bargaining and help to achieve the goals of the Adequate Minimum Wages Directive.

### We are seeking commitment to:

- Re-introduce tax relief on trade union subscriptions within the first year of government.

## Bogus self-employment

Bogus self-employment refers to situations where workers are forced by an employer to declare themselves self-employed, even though they are effectively bound to the employer in the same way as an employee. This allows employers to avoid costs, like employers' PRSI, and means that workers are denied basic employment rights like guaranteed hours and pay rates, paid sick leave, and protection from unfair dismissal.

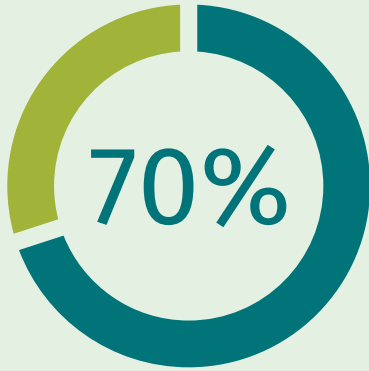
As well as being an exploitative practice for workers, bogus self-employment is bad for the economy. In October 2019, the Oireachtas Committee on Employment Affairs and Social Protection was told that bogus self-employment could be costing the state €1 billion in lost tax and PRSI.

### We are seeking commitment to:

- Introduce strengthened legislation to outlaw bogus self-employment arrangements and close loopholes that allow bad employers to exploit staff in this way, while avoiding their duty to contribute through the PRSI and tax system.

# Gender equality in the workplace

A survey of Fórsa members in 2022, showed that:



Over 70% of workers who menstruate had to take time off work due to their periods.

## Menstruation and menopause

The menopause and menstruation have a negative impact on the working lives of women and people who menstruate. More complex conditions associated with menstruation often have more severe symptoms, like Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS), which affects 1 in 5 women of reproductive age, and endometriosis, which is found in 10% of reproductive age women and girls globally according to the World Health Organization.<sup>19,20</sup>

Menopause, which is the cessation of periods due to lower hormones from ageing, usually occurs between ages 45-55. Those who experience menopause can suffer an array of symptoms – such as pain, hot flushes, fatigue, and brain fog – for up to 10 years after their last period. Hormone replacement therapy (HRT) is a prescription-based treatment which can be used to help alleviate these symptoms.

A survey of Fórsa members in 2022, showed that over 70% of workers who menstruate had

to take time off work due to their periods. Only 1% of respondent workplaces had a menstrual policy in place, and 6 in 10 respondents did not feel comfortable telling their managers about their difficulties at work in relation to menstruation and menopause. Furthermore, 1 in 4 respondents had been diagnosed with a specific condition resulting in debilitating medical symptoms. These results emphasise why all workplaces need practical menstruation and menopause policies in place, focusing on accommodations, training, privacy, and equality.

We welcome the Menopause in the Workplace Policy Framework for Civil Service Organisations,<sup>21</sup> the provision of specialist supports for menopause, the rollout of a national menopause awareness campaign, and commitments to undertake comprehensive research into people's experiences with managing the menopause and menstruation in workplaces. However, failure to protect such policies in legislation is directly in conflict with assisting people in accessing and availing of these supports. Policies for those experiencing period or menopause-related symptoms are only effective if worker's feel empowered to use them without fear of detriment or victimisation.

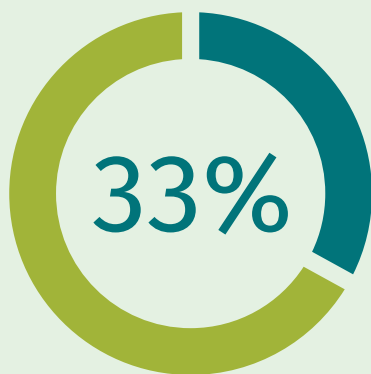
Explicitly mandating protections for these policies in all employments through the occupational health and equality legislation would ensure workplace safety and equality at work. By championing these policies within existing legislative frameworks such as the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act and Employment Equality Acts, Ireland can lead by example, promoting diversity, inclusion, and equality on a global stage.

### We are seeking commitment to:

- Amend Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act and Employment Equality Act to protect employees affected by period or menopause-related symptoms in the workplace.
- Provide free access to hormone replacement therapy (HRT) to alleviate painful and uncomfortable symptoms of menopause.



A survey of public servants, with more than 3,000 respondents indicated that:



just under a third of respondents had personally experienced domestic abuse.

## Domestic violence

A survey of public servants, with more than 3,000 respondents participating, indicated that almost a third of respondents had personally experienced domestic abuse. Further evidence showed that in eight-in-ten of those cases, the perpetrator was an intimate partner, while two-in-ten offences were by a family member.<sup>22</sup> According to the results, 95% of victims suffered abuse at their home, and 40% of these said that the work environment offered them some safety and respite from abuse.

While the workplace can offer some temporary respite from abuse, it is critical that victims are supported to take the necessary time away from work in order to safely leave abusive relationships. Paid leave for domestic violence provides financial stability to workers who need to maintain financial independence from their abuser to leave their relationship. Research has proven that financial control by abusers is one

of the reasons people struggle to escape domestic abuse. Those experiencing abuse may not have financial independence or full control of their own finances. If a person's income is monitored by their abuser a change in their normal salary could alert the abuser, putting the victim at additional risk.

An extension to the existing provision of paid leave from five days to ten days, in line with international best practice, would better support victims seeking to exit their abusive situations. The existing five-day cut-off point could act as a barrier for those navigating a pathway out of domestic abuse, which often involves moving home, attending court dates, meetings with legal representatives, changing schools or attending counselling appointments.

Furthermore, it is essential that services supporting victims and survivors of domestic violence receive adequate multi-annual funding to best carry out their work and ensure their services can be accessed by all those who need support.

### We are seeking commitment to:

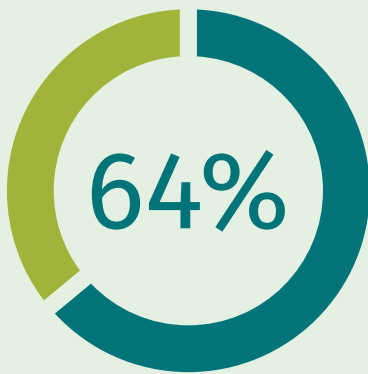
- Increase the existing statutory provision for paid leave for victims of domestic violence to 10 days.
- Fully implement the Third National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual & Gender-Based Violence 2022-2026.<sup>23</sup>

# Publicly provided childcare

## Public system of early childhood education and care

Ireland has the highest level of private provision of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) of any OECD country. Fórsa is calling on the State to recognise childcare as an essential public service and to guarantee quality, accessible and affordable childcare for families and decent pay and conditions for workers. Fórsa welcomes recent increases in State investment into the sector which now stands at €1.25 billion (0.3% of GDP), however, this still falls short of the OECD average of 0.8% of GDP.<sup>24</sup>

### Research among public servants found that:



64% of respondents would vote for political parties or candidates who support publicly provided affordable childcare accessible for all families, even if they did not vote for them before.

According to the OECD, childcare costs in Ireland are the third most expensive of any country in the European Union with approximately 20% of a double-income household's disposable income going towards childcare costs. In certain counties this rises to 25% of their disposable income.<sup>25</sup>

Many families have equated the cost of childcare to that of paying a second mortgage, but cost is not the only factor affecting parents with small children in accessing childcare. Accessibility and availability are a huge problem across the country, with many parents unable to locate a childcare place for their child. The lack of affordability and accessibility of childcare places is leaving families in a situation where one parent must make the decision not to return to work, either because they cannot afford to, or because they cannot find a childcare place. Evidence shows us that when this happens, it is usually women who are disproportionately impacted, having to choose between caring responsibilities or decent pay in employed work. This absence from employed work can also have a knock-on effect on women's lifetime earnings, career progression, and pension savings (including employer contributions).

### We are seeking commitment to:

- Deliver publicly provided and publicly funded affordable childcare that is accessible for all families.

# Futureproofing society and the workplace

## Climate action and a just transition

Climate change will bring significant changes to people's every day and working lives. The transition to a carbon-free society must involve the development of new job-creating technologies and industries, whilst also ensuring that the living standards of workers and communities most affected by climate action are protected and that no one is left behind.

### We are seeking commitment to:

- Deliver increased and sustained investment to create employment in new and emerging green jobs and training for upskilling in line with current climate and biodiversity plans.

## Improved public transport

Research among public servants found that only 16% of respondents used public transport to get to work, while 81% drove their own car. Half of those who travel to work by car do so because there is no other way to access their workplace. Greater investment in public transport is required, including increased provision of services to meet the growth of commuter towns, and to make public transport a viable option for workers.

### We are seeking commitment to:

- Increase investment in public transport to ensure workers can access reliable, public transport options.

### Research among public servants found that:



Half of those who travel to work by car do so because there is no other way to access their workplace.



## Artificial intelligence (AI)

The Public Service Agreement 2024-2026 makes specific reference to artificial intelligence (AI) in clause 2.3.1 stating that the public service must play its part in taking a lead role in the adoption of AI technologies. The adoption of new AI or automated tools in our public service will bring about new opportunities for how workers carry out their roles. The impacts of AI on workers will vary across demographics, and it is imperative that with any new changes, workers are supported to adopt AI in such a way that it enhances their role and their experience in the workplace.

Over time, AI may have an impact on Ireland's labour market. It is important that, in highly exposed occupations with high degrees of complementarity, workers are supported to develop the skills to take advantage of AI as a supporting technology so that the high degree of complementarity can be leveraged.

The Department of Finance and Department of Enterprise trade and Employment report on AI risks and opportunities considers persons working in 'Administrative and Secretarial' occupations or 'Sales and Customer Service' roles to be most 'at risk' from AI, relative to other occupations.<sup>26</sup> Where the government has identified 'at risk' occupations, every available measure should be used to protect these workers in their roles and support them to adapt how they carry out their working responsibilities. This may involve opportunities to up-skill and re-skill and opportunities for lifelong learning to ensure that people are not left behind as our economy continues to digitalise.

### We are seeking commitment to:

- Negotiate and agree AI policies, with trade unions to ensure a smooth and positive adoption of AI.
- Create upskilling programmes designed to boost worker complementarity. These programmes should be targeted at high-risk workers with high exposure and low complementarity.



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