



Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

Response to Ireland's Competitiveness Challenge 2020

Publication of the response to the
NCPC report

25 November 2020

Government Response to Ireland's Competitiveness Challenge 2020

The Government welcomes the National Competitiveness and Productivity Council (NCPC) report, Ireland's Competitiveness Challenge 2020, published on 25 September 2020.

The Government recognises the importance and value of the Council's work in assessing Ireland's competitiveness and is committed to addressing the Council's recommendations.

Ireland's Competitiveness Challenge 2020 is framed by the unprecedented economic impact and uncertainty that COVID-19 has caused here in Ireland and globally. Reflecting upon this, the Council has identified four key challenges that need to be addressed to put the economy on a sound competitiveness footing as we begin the path the recovery.

These four challenges are to:

- Support Ireland's workers and leverage opportunities for upskilling;
- Address Climate Action in a Competitiveness Context;
- Invest Strategically in Ireland's Physical Infrastructure; and
- Resolve Long-standing Issues

Across these four priority areas, a set of twenty actions are proposed by the NCPC for consideration by Government. The Government welcomes the focus of the NCPC on these priority areas and agrees both on their importance and relevance to Ireland's continued competitiveness.

The following outlines how the Government is responding to the priority areas and actions proposed by the NCPC.

Support Ireland's Workers and Leverage Opportunities for Upskilling

Recommendation 2.1: Strengthen supports for Jobseekers

- (i) Publish the evaluation of the JobPlus programme and ensure that the programme provides an effective response in the context of the COVID-19 labour market conditions.*
- (ii) Increase the capacity of the Intreo Public Employment Service to provide additional case officers for job search and employment supports to jobseekers.*

Responsibility: Department of Social Protection

The Government recognises the critical importance of supporting the development of Ireland's workforce in particular in the context of COVID-19. Through both the July Jobs Stimulus, and Budget 2021, unprecedented measures to support workers are being taken.

Steps have already been taken by the Department of Social Protection to enhance the capacity of the Public Employment Service in order to support employees who have permanently lost their job. The Department has introduced, and continues to develop, new measures aimed at subsidising employment, developing work experience opportunities and enhancing the supports and services available to people who may wish to seek to expand their skillset and avail of education, training and employment supports.

Examples of the measures being taken to increase capacity include the allocation of an additional 300 staff to work in the Department during 2021 so as to expand the capacity of Intreo Centres in providing employment services. This includes the assignment of an additional 100 Job Coaches. Recruitment for these posts has started and it is intended to start to fill these positions over the next number of weeks once the current Level 5 public health restrictions are lifted.

The evaluation of the JobsPlus programme, undertaken by the EU Commission's Joint Research Centre and the Department of Social Protection, was published on the 22 October. It found that participation on this scheme had very positive impacts on employment outcomes and earnings for participants. The Department will reflect on the findings of the evaluation with a view to identifying further steps. In addition as part of the July Jobs Stimulus, funding for additional places on this programme was provided and the eligibility criteria for participation on this scheme were widened.

Recommendation 2.2: Intensify efforts to boost high-level ICT graduate output from the education and training system, in line with the target (70% of annual expected demand) set out in Technology Skills 2022. Publish a Technology Skills 2022 interim progress report.

Responsibility: Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science; Higher Education Authority; SOLAS; Skillnet Ireland

In addition to the actions already outlined in Technology Skills 2022, the priority objective to increase ICT graduate output has been further enhanced by the measures taken in the July Stimulus Package and Budget 2021. For example:

- Substantial additional funding has been provided across both Springboard+ and Human Capital Initiative Pillar 1, providing free and subsidised full- and part-time provision in areas of identified skills need, including in relation to meeting skills needs in ICT - 487 of the additional 2,555 full and part time places provided under the July Stimulus are in this area.
- Funding has also been provided under the July Stimulus to support the provision of 11,597 places on short, modular courses that can be offered in a flexible manner and through blended or online learning. Included are a number of courses, which will allow people to acquire required ICT skills without breaking away from the labour market.
- Skillnet Ireland is expanding its ICT conversion programme in 2021, focusing in developing new Level 9 ICT post-graduate programmes for industry practitioners (Targeting: AI, Blockchain, IoT, Cloud and Data Analytics).
- The Apprenticeship Incentivisation Scheme, which provides an employer grant of €3,000 per apprentice registered between March 2020 and June 2021, will support the continued expansion of ICT and engineering apprenticeship programmes at levels 6-10 of the NFQ in areas such as CGI, software development, network engineering, cybersecurity, manufacturing technology and software solutions architecture.

A High Level Steering Group meets and reviews progress on the actions outlined in the Plan and will examine the possibility of a formal interim report on Technology Skills 2022.

Recommendation 2.3: Deliver on the Future Jobs Ireland target of bringing the proportion of workers with basic digital skills in Ireland at least in line with or above the EU average by 2025 (EU 2025 target: 70%).

Responsibility: Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science; SOLAS

The National Skills Council have already identified as a priority the need for increased digital literacy to meet current and future skill needs across all sectors of the economy. This is reflected in a number of initiatives underway or in place. For example:

- SOLAS has been tasked with the development of a new 10-year strategy for adult literacy, numeracy and digital literacy. The strategy will take a whole-of-government approach and provide a framework to support individuals to improve their literacy, numeracy and digital literacy. The aim of this new strategy will be to ensure that everyone has the literacy, numeracy and digital literacy to meet his or her needs and participate fully in society. Its development will involve input by relevant Government Departments and agencies.
- The SOLAS Skills to Compete initiative funded under the July Stimulus and Budget 2021 is designed to provide significant opportunities for upskilling/reskilling, including in particular the development of digital skills with a specific focus on those who have been displaced from employment because of COVID-19.
- The key objective of the Regional Skills Fora EXPLORE initiative is to create a new solution to help address the issue of Ireland's low level of participation in lifelong learning and the low levels of basic digital and transversal skills amongst older low skilled persons in employment.

Recommendation 2.4: Address the lack of awareness among SME managers of the range of management development opportunities and supports currently available.

Responsibility: Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment; Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science; Skillnet Ireland; Enterprise Ireland; Local Enterprise Offices; SOLAS; Higher Education Authority; Business representative bodies

The Government acknowledges that the productivity of Irish SMEs continues to lag international norms. One key lever to address this is to ensure that the owners and managers of SMEs are sufficiently skilled to adopt best practice approaches to running their businesses. Uptake of available training courses and supports needs to increase if this is to be achieved. SME managers need to be able to identify their skills needs and those of their staff, and they need to identify relevant management development opportunities to address these needs.

The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment will lead and coordinate the implementation of this recommendation. Two strands of activity will come together to achieve this.

First, the SME Growth Taskforce will input into the National Economic Plan responding to recommendations from the OECD's report on SME and Entrepreneurship Policy in Ireland. A sub-group on Productivity, Digitalisation and Competitiveness will consider a range of recommendations which are outlined in the report.

Second, the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs published a report on Management Skills in SMEs on 22nd October, entitled '*Leading the Way*'. This report contains six recommendations designed to improve the management skills and practices of SME managers. The recommendations focus on increasing the participation of SME managers in relevant training, inter alia, by (a) developing tools that will allow SMEs to identify their skills needs, (b) increasing cooperation between providers in the public sector, (c) emphasising the importance of best practice and formal training, and (d) identifying ways to assess the effectiveness of management development. An Implementation Group will be set up shortly. The first action will be to communicate the findings of the report to SMEs across the country and include them in the implementation plan in an integrated and active way.

Skillnet Ireland in collaboration with other agencies is further promoting the MentorsWork scheme that has been successful is helping SME owner/managers respond to business challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Skillnet Ireland will continue to support programmes that address the digital skills gap in SMEs, and management development that enables the adoption of the new technologies in SMEs that boost competitiveness and innovation.

The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and the Regional Skills Fora Managers are developing a strategy to create a joined-up promotional/marketing national campaign, to encourage employer engagement (from companies, which have not previously engaged) on skills needs.

Recommendation 2.5: Increase active cooperation at an operational level between management training providers, with a focus on sharing data, knowledge and good practice, to ensure the coherence and effectiveness of the overall training offer from the perspective of training participants.

Responsibility: Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science; Skillnet Ireland; SOLAS; Education and Training Boards; Higher Education Authority; Enterprise Ireland; Local Enterprise Offices; Private providers

As noted under recommendation 2.4, the National Skills Council has approved the publication by the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs of a report on Management Skills in SMEs, entitled '*Leading the Way*'. An Implementation Group will be set up shortly.

This report contains specific recommendations designed to improve the management skills and practices of SME managers. The report and its recommendations place a considerable emphasis on coordination and cooperation between organisations rather than new initiatives. Strong and effective coordination between all bodies engaged in management training is considered essential and will be a priority for the Implementation Group once established. Examples of the emphasis placed on coordination and cooperation in the report include Recommendation 3, Make the Offer more Coherent and Accessible, and Recommendation 4, Put the Focus on Best Practice and Key Areas.

Recommendation 2.6: Address the demand for skills arising from the COVID-19 pandemic

- (i) Publish the findings from the COVID-19 Industry Insights Series outlining the skills needs of enterprises in the context of COVID-19 labour market conditions.*
- (ii) Examine the ongoing impact of COVID-19 on SMEs and engage with other enterprise agencies and industry bodies to design targeted industry-led responses to meet business needs in sectors severely impacted by the enterprise and labour market challenges posed by COVID-19.*

Responsibility: Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science; Skillnet Ireland

Skillnet Ireland will publish the collated Industry Insights series in Q4 2020. The series is developed in partnership with 70 trade associations, enterprise groups and individual firms, and examines the impact of COVID-19 at sectoral level, and the implications for talent, skills, and training.

Building on the investments in the July Stimulus Package and Budget 2021 to upskill and reskill people who have been affected by the current pandemic and train in the skills of the future, the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science will continue to engage with all relevant stakeholders to ensure that existing and future skills needs of the economy and society are met.

The July Stimulus measures, with regard to the work of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, were informed by advice on skills priorities in the context of the pandemic, by the National Training Fund Advisory Group, and the National Skills Council. Skills advice was and continues to be, shaped by challenges including COVID-19, the digital gap and Brexit. The National Skills Council will shortly publish its autumn 2020 Statement of Priorities, and meet on 24 November to discuss its work plan for 2021.

The type of innovative collaborative engagement ensured by the diverse membership on each Regional Skills Fora, promotes a balanced and insightful environment on which the fora can carry out its work on the skills agenda on a regional basis.

Address Climate Action in a Competitiveness Context

Recommendation 3.1: Undertake research with close engagement with businesses and key stakeholders, to identify a range of CO2 abatement opportunities and technologies, by company size and sector, that would enable businesses to decarbonise in line with Ireland's national targets.

Responsibility: Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment; Enterprise Ireland; IDA Ireland; Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland

The Government welcomes and agrees with the prioritisation that the NCPC has placed on the Climate Action as an important influencing factor of Ireland's future competitiveness and productivity.

The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment's Climate Action Unit has recently tendered for independent experts to undertake an analysis of the data available to establish a sub-sectoral breakdown of process emissions within industry, to develop an interactive model of CO2 emissions abatement opportunities in industry, and to provide insight into the feasibility of carbon abatement levels that could be achieved through the different measures or interventions identified.

The model will build upon and go further than the Marginal Abatement Cost Curve outlined in the Climate Action Plan 2019 and will aid the Department to identify specific actions that the Department and its agencies (in conjunction with others) can pursue with industry. These actions will provide input into the development of the Climate Action Plan 2021 and the subsequent annual plans.

Recommendation 3.2: Assess the carbon mitigation incentives and supports available to enterprises to determine whether they are fit for purpose in achieving Ireland's

climate targets and identify areas where further intervention is needed to support companies to decarbonise.

*Responsibility: Department of Environment, Climate and Communications;
Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment; Sustainable Energy Authority of
Ireland; Enterprise Ireland; IDA Ireland*

In the context of increasing Ireland’s climate ambition in line with the European Green Deal and the Programme for Government commitments, additional measures that could enable Ireland to meet the higher emissions reduction target will be required. This increased ambition and new actions will be set out in the next iteration of the Climate Action Plan. The Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Bill 2020 currently being considered in the Oireachtas provides for annual revisions of the Climate Action Plan. The Department of Environment, Climate and Communications welcomes consideration of interventions that will support this programme of work.

The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, is working with Enterprise Ireland in the context of the launch of the proposed €10m Green Fund following its announcement in the July Jobs Stimulus. Discussions are taking place with Enterprise Ireland, the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment, and SEAI on this fund and also on the wider landscape for business supports available to drive decarbonisation to ensure a holistic approach is taken to addressing potential gaps in the current supports offered.

Recommendation 3.3: Establish a one-stop-shop environmental hub and website that would allow businesses to assess their carbon footprint and access information on the supports available to help them to decarbonise.

*Responsibility: Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment; Department of
Environment, Climate and Communications; Enterprise Ireland; IDA Ireland;
Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland; Irish Water; Environmental Protection
Agency*

The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment and the Department of Environment Climate and Communications are currently developing an online Climate Action hub for enterprises. The digital tool will act as a one stop shop ‘hub’ for enterprises which will help inform and guide micro and small enterprises that wish to begin their decarbonisation journey, calculate their carbon footprint and access information on Government supports to assist them. The climate action hub is due to be launched the first quarter of 2021.

Recommendation 3.4: Decarbonise the gas network

- (i) Provide a clear policy signal, as part of Ireland’s Long-Term Strategy, that the gas network will be carbon neutral by 2050.*
- (ii) Develop a pathway of the steps that need to be taken to 2050 to decarbonise the gas network. This should include an early and detailed assessment of future policy options and cost-efficient renewable energy sources that can be used, with prioritisation for ‘no regrets’ investments in Ireland’s energy infrastructure.*

Responsibility: Department of Environment, Climate and Communications

The Programme for Government commits to achieving net zero emissions by 2050. It is expected, in order to meet this commitment, that all energy networks and carriers, including the gas network, will be carbon neutral by 2050. Decarbonising the gas network will include a reduction in the demand for gas and the replacement of the natural gas carried in the network with renewable gas. Renewable gases will include biomethane and green hydrogen (i.e. hydrogen produced from renewable sources).

Ireland’s National Energy & Climate Plan, published in August 2020, set an indicative target of 1.6 TWh for the level of indigenous biomethane in the gas grid by 2030. The plan included a number of policies and measures being considered to support the uptake of biomethane in the gas grid. The National Energy and Climate Plan also set out that the target will be reviewed in 2023. In July 2020, the European Commission published a hydrogen strategy. As part of the consideration of this strategy, the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications is working with other Member States to examine how best to accommodate hydrogen within the gas grid.

Invest Strategically in Ireland’s Physical Infrastructure

Recommendation 4.1: Provide supports such as resource packs and templates to complement the updated Public Spending Code and support public bodies in meeting their requirements in evaluating, planning and managing public investments.

Responsibility: Department of Public Expenditure and Reform

The Government is continuing to prioritise investment in capital infrastructure. In Budget 2021 an additional allocation of €1.6 billion was made on capital expenditure, taking this expenditure to €10.1 billion, the largest amount ever allocated to public capital spending in the history of the State. The Government concurs with the NCPC that central to the

capital programme must be rigorous assessment and appraisal of planned projects so as to ensure quality investment decisions maximising outcomes from limited public resources.

A programme of further technical guidance is being prepared by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform to support the updated Public Spending Code. The first part of that programme to be delivered will be updated financial analysis guidance supported by templates. Financial analysis is key to informing affordability and financial impact of a project. This guidance is being prepared and will be published before the end of the year.

Resource packs and templates to support public bodies will also be an important part of that programme. Resources packs for the Strategic Assessment Report and Preliminary Business Case are currently being developed and will be published in Q1 2021. The Strategic Assessment Report supports early engagement on the rationale for potential policy interventions and ensures the strategic fit of potential projects with government policy. The Preliminary Business Case is the detailed appraisal of a proposed project including detailed objectives, options analysis, risk assessment and consideration of delivery.

A further programme of work including updated economic appraisal and programme appraisal guidance will follow later in 2021.

Recommendation 4.2: Challenge regions and cities to learn from best practice across the country on ways to maximise efficiency in order to improve the business environment for local enterprises.

Responsibility: Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage; Regional Assemblies; Local Authorities

The Government recognises the need to support efficiency, flexibility and accessibility on the part of Local Authorities, in particular in obtaining consents and permits by business in relation to their activities.

As part of the response to COVID-19, Government has initiated a range of interventions, particularly with respect to the use of urban streets to allow businesses flexibly respond to issues arising from the pandemic.

Government is also conscious of the need for improvement in the capability of the planning system, including the introduction of a more comprehensive digital system – work in this regard is advancing in collaboration with Local Authorities on the development of an appropriate operational e-planning IT system.

Government also recognises the importance of building towards sustainable and balanced growth while addressing both the immediate and longer term responses required. Given the current levels of uncertainty posed by COVID-19 on our urban settlements, continued resilience and agility will also need to be co-shared across sectors. Planning our cities and towns which creates the vibrancy required to sustain many SMEs will be an important dimension of recovery, reflecting “liveable compactness” by providing necessary community infrastructure, increased and variable housing typologies and essential green infrastructure. These issues are currently being debated as part of the EU and OECD urban agenda and to the fore in developing a Towns Centre First agenda as set out in the new Programme for Government.

The Local Government Management Agency (LGMA) and County and City Management Association (CCMA) also promote, within the Local Sector through the LEO Network, the development of best practice and lesson learning with a current strategic focus on Green Economic opportunities, SMEs implementing sustainable practices, export incentives and competencies, Brexit, female enterprise programmes, digitalisation programmes (including trading online), management development, innovation programmes, and first stop shop offering for all businesses. The LGMA and CCMA also facilitate, *inter alia*, National Forums and Working Groups across the sector for learning, best practice development and innovation.

Recommendation 4.3: Complete a comprehensive mapping exercise of the types and capacity of remote working facilities currently available in order to identify where gaps exist to meet local and regional business needs. Create a single classification, website and central directory to inform individuals and enterprises of the facilities available in their locality.

Responsibility: Western Development Commission; Department of Rural and Community Development; Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage; Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment; Department of Environment, Climate and Communications; Local Authorities

In December 2019 the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment published the Remote Work in Ireland report. The report identified the need for guidance for employers in the areas of equality; health and safety; employment conditions; data protection; and training.

To build on this work, the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, committed to the establishment of an Interdepartmental Group to align approaches and develop clear guidance on remote work for employers and employees. This IDG was formed in April 2020 and has met twice to date.

In light of the current emergency home working situation that has taken place as a result of COVID-19, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment published Guidance for Working Remotely during COVID-19, a webpage which allows employers and employees to easily navigate the existing guidance on remote working. It also contains links to the new guidance released in response to remote working during COVID-19. The work of the Interdepartmental Group will be complemented by a parallel strand of work on identifying and codifying remote working facilities across the country.

The Department of Rural and Community Development and the Western Development Commission (WDC) are building up a national picture of remote working assets across the country by mapping and classifying the various facilities available. The objective is to develop a national network of remote working spaces - to include digital hubs, Broadband Connection Points, Libraries and other facilities that offer remote working services - which will benefit remote workers, local entrepreneurs, and local communities in both rural and urban settings.

The WDC has already mapped over 100 remote working hubs within the Atlantic Economic Corridor (AEC) region which runs from Kerry to Donegal. In addition, over 300 Broadband Connection Points (BCPs) are currently being deployed within the National Broadband Plan intervention area. Many of these BCPs will provide remote working capacity in rural areas and these have also been mapped as part of the WDC's work.

The objective is to build on the WDC's work to date in the AEC region, to develop a national network of remote working facilities, with the potential for shared back-office services and a common booking portal for clients. An Inter-Departmental/Agency Group, chaired by the Department of Rural and Community Development, has been established to oversee this project.

This work will help to identify the various types of facilities available in each local area based on a pioneering Hub Classification Model developed by the WDC. It will enable gaps in different types of provision to be identified and lead to greater efficiency of investment in remote working infrastructure to ensure that local and regional business needs are met.

Recommendation 4.4: Prioritise the roll-out of better and greener transport links so that traffic gridlock is avoided when the economic recovery gathers pace and more people return to work.

Responsibility: Department of Transport; Department of Environment, Climate and Communications

The Government is committed to delivering major transport projects, including BusConnects, DART+, MetroLink, the Luas Expansion and high-speed rail. A further public consultation on the Corridors for BusConnects Dublin will be held in Q4 this year. An order has been placed for 100 double deck hybrid which are due delivery in Q4 2020.

The movement to low-emission urban buses is central to the promotion and normalisation of cleaner fuels and technologies. To this end, Ireland has committed to no longer purchasing diesel-only urban buses for public transport services. To help inform the longer-term bus procurement strategy, the Department of Transport, together with the NTA, Dublin Bus and Bus Éireann, undertook a comprehensive series of low-emission bus trials. The overall results suggest that electrification represents a feasible option for fleet transition that could help tackle carbon emissions, air quality and increase the use of renewable energy in transport.

In the longer term, the Department of Transport is currently carrying out a review of sustainable mobility policy and will develop a new 10-year national sustainable mobility policy over the coming months. The new policy will cover all aspects of active travel and public transport policy and will provide a strategic backdrop to the increased investment planned by the Government across the sustainable mobility programme. It will replace the previous Smarter Travel policy, dating from 2009. The policy will be closely aligned with the national strategic outcomes of the National Planning Framework.

Recommendation 4.5: Establish the proposed Commission on Housing without delay and ensure it has sufficient resources to deliver on its work.

Responsibility: Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage

The Programme for Government commits to establishing a Commission on Housing, to examine issues such as tenure, standards, sustainability, and quality-of-life issues in the provision of housing.

The Department of Housing, Local Government, and Heritage is scoping the proposed Commission and will bring proposals forward in that regard as soon as practicable.

Resolve Long-Standing Issues

Recommendation 5.1: Ensure that SMEs are aware of the financing options available to them by progressing the launch of the Business Finance Advisory Hub that should signpost learning options for SMEs to improve financial knowledge.

Responsibility: Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment

Government recognises that stronger business finance capability amongst the Micro and SME base (MSME) and will support these businesses to be more successful at starting, sustaining, growing or exiting their business.

On that basis, Government welcomes the recommendation to progress the launch of the Business Finance Advisory Hub (BFAH). From work undertaken on the BFAH to date, it has been established that the BFAH will act as an online ‘one-stop-shop’ at which MSMEs:

- Can inform themselves of the range of financing options that are available.
- Can access clear, simple and accessible business finance information.
- Can be signposted to learning supports which will help them develop deeper levels of business finance acumen.

Since March 2020 it has been necessary to prioritise resources towards responding to the immediate financial challenges facing MSMEs brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, and so less progress has been made on the BFAH than had been planned. However, as resources become available again, it is planned that the activity on the BFAH initiative will be renewed.

Recommendation 5.2: Personal Injuries Guidelines

- (i) *Adopt Guidelines on Personal Injuries.*

Responsibility: Judicial Council (PIGC)

- (ii) *Monitor the use of these Guidelines and their impact on award levels, and ultimately on the cost of insurance.*

Responsibility: Department of Justice

The Judicial Council Act 2019 was enacted on 23 July, 2019. The provisions of the Act provide, inter alia, for the establishment of a Personal Injuries Guidelines Committee (PIGC). That Committee’s main function is the preparation of personal injuries guidelines and the expectation would be that the adoption of guidelines will result both in a greater level of consistency in the assessment of general damages and in downward pressure on the level of awards in such cases. It is anticipated that preparation of the guidelines will be completed in December 2020 and the next step thereafter will be the submission of those guidelines to the Executive Board of the Council.

An amendment to the Judicial Council Act was among the provisions included in the Commission of Investigation (Mother and Baby Homes and certain related Matters) Records, and another Matter, Act 2020 which was signed into law by the President on 25 October 2020. The amendment will have the effect of ensuring that the Judicial Council must adopt the personal injuries guidelines no later than 31/7/2021 (potentially 3 months ahead of the schedule originally set out in the Judicial Council Act 2019).

Monitoring of the use of the guidelines and their effect on award levels will be put in place once the guidelines are formally adopted by the Judicial Council.

Recommendation 5.3: Take action to bring legal costs for businesses into line with other common law jurisdictions and improve access to justice, primarily by implementing the recommendations of the Review of the Administration of Civil Justice Group.

Responsibility: Department of Justice

The report of the Review Group on the Administration of Civil Justice is due to be published in November. It is wide-ranging in nature with approximately 90 recommendations relating both to procedural reform and to litigation costs. Work is at an early stage in the Department of Justice in terms of considering how best to respond to the report's recommendations. That response will inevitably involve legislative intervention both at primary and at secondary level. It will also require administrative action.

In addition, the Department is undertaking a research project regarding Legal Costs and Access to Justice which is intended to examine the evidence in relation to legal costs in Ireland as a potential barrier in access to justice. The overall objective of the project is to examine the diverse factors that result in the current levels of legal costs and the extent to which the cost of legal services (whether in Court or non-Court mechanisms) represents a barrier to access to justice.

Recommendation 5.4: Prioritise the implementation of the proposed actions designed to make housing and renting more affordable as outlined in the Programme for Government, and periodically review the effectiveness of these measures to determine whether they are sufficient or need modification.

Responsibility: Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage

The Government believes everybody should have access to good-quality housing to purchase or rent at an affordable price, built to a high standard, and located close to

essential services, offering a high quality of life. Over its period in office the Government will:

- Put affordability at the heart of the housing system.
- Prioritise the increased supply of public, social, and affordable homes.
- Progress a state-backed affordable home purchase scheme.
- Improve the supply and affordability of rental accommodation and the security of tenure for renters.

Work by the Department of Housing, Local Government, and Heritage is continuing, with an Affordable Housing Bill planned for later this year, and an Affordability Measures package being included in Budget 2021. These include:

- A new national Affordable Purchase Shared Equity Scheme to improve access to new homes for first time buyers;
- A new programme for funding the delivery of Cost Rental homes which will see €35m made available to Approved Housing Bodies in 2021;
- €60m allocated to the Serviced Sites Fund (SSF) in 2021. To date, funding of €127m has been allocated in support of 35 projects through the SSF. This will provide infrastructure support the delivery of almost 3,200 affordable homes to purchase and rent on local authority land. Delivery of these homes will start in 2021.
- The Local Infrastructure Housing Activation Fund (LIHAF) has been allocated some €38m in 2021, which will go towards funding major public infrastructure projects and the delivery of up to 20,000 new homes across public and private sites over the lifetime of the scheme.

In terms of improving protection for tenants, the Department of Housing, Local Government, and Heritage are also working on delivering commitments including:

- The moratorium on tenancy terminations and rent increase under the Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (COVID-19) Act 2020 was extended twice by Government Order until 1 August 2020.
- The Residential Tenancies and Valuation Act 2020 came into effect on 1 August 2020 to better target enhanced protections, in relation prohibition on evictions and rent increases, to the most vulnerable tenants until 10 January 2021 and respect the constitutionally protected property rights of landlords. This Act enables the residential rental sector to resume activity in as near as normal manner as possible.
- Extensive measures to protect renters were introduced in the Residential Tenancies (Amendment) Act 2019.
- Budget 2020 provided Exchequer funding of €9m for the operational costs of the Residential Tenancies Board (RTB) which resolves tenancies dispute,

representing a 29% increase on 2019 funding. Budget 2021 provides €11m in RTB funding, representing a further year-on-year increase of 22% to enable the RTB to deliver on its new functions and broadened mandate.

Recommendation 5.5: Make childcare costs more affordable by adopting the recommendations from the Expert Group currently examining the funding model that will allow for the delivery of accessible, affordable, high-quality childcare. Prioritise the implementation of other actions set out in the PfG designed to make high-quality early learning and care and school-age childcare more accessible and affordable.

Responsibility: Department of Children, Disability, Equality and Integration

Ensuring the provision of accessible, affordable, and high-quality early learning and care (ELC) and school-age childcare (SAC) is a priority for the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. State investment in the sector has increased by 141% since 2015. A commitment to further increase State investment by at least doubling investment in the decade to 2028 is included in First 5, the ten-year, whole-of-Government strategy for babies, young children and their families.

An Expert Group has been established to develop a new Funding Model. The Expert Group is tasked with examining the current model of funding, its effectiveness in delivering quality, affordable, sustainable and inclusive services and considering how additional resourcing can be delivered for the sector to achieve these objectives, drawing on international practice in this area.

It is anticipated that this Expert Group will be required to be in place for approximately two years, until November 2021. The expectation is that the Expert Group will meet 4-6 times per year and that the project will take approximately 2 years, until the end of 2021. The meeting plan has been altered in response to the new remote working environment caused by COVID-19 restrictions. The Group's recommendations will be submitted to the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, and ultimately Government. The possibility of fast-tracking the project is being considered.

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