



Coimisiún na hÉireann um Chearta
an Duine agus Comhionannas
Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission

Submission to the Public Consultation on the Development of the Priorities and Policy Programme for Ireland's Presidency of the Council of the European Union 2026

Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission

December 2025

Published by the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission.

Copyright © Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission 2025

The Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission was established under statute on 1 November 2014 to protect and promote human rights and equality in Ireland, to promote a culture of respect for human rights, equality and intercultural understanding, to promote understanding and awareness of the importance of human rights and equality, and to work towards the elimination of human rights abuses and discrimination.

Submission Form

Optional questions

Respondent type

Independent, publicly-funded statutory body

What is your sector/area of work?

Human rights and equality

What is your connection to the issues you are providing feedback on? For example, are you an expert practitioner, person affected by a policy issue, member of the public with a general interest in the topics, etc.?

IHREC is the National Human Rights Institution and the National Equality Body for Ireland.

We have a remit to:

- Protect and promote human rights and equality;
- Encourage the development of a culture of respect for human rights, equality, and intercultural understanding in the State;
- Promote understanding and awareness of the importance of human rights and equality in the State;
- Encourage good practice in intercultural relations, promote tolerance and acceptance of diversity in the State and respect for the freedom and dignity of each person;
- Work towards the elimination of human rights abuses, discrimination and prohibited conduct.

We are also the Independent Monitoring Mechanism for Ireland under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities; the independent National Rapporteur on the Trafficking of Human Beings; and will be assigned the role of the Co-ordinating National Preventive Mechanism under the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture, pending ratification. We also have legal powers under the Gender Pay Gap Information Act 2021, and a role in relation to the EU Artificial Intelligence ('AI') Act.

Describe your geographical focus in the context of your submission? For example, rural, urban, national or EU wide.

Together with Equality Commission for Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, we have a mandate under the Good Friday Agreement to consider and report on equality and rights issues with an island of Ireland dimension, and works to ensure

there is no divergence of rights on the island of Ireland following Brexit, as per the terms of Article 2(1) of the Windsor Framework

We are also a member of European networks of human rights institutions and equality bodies:

- European Network of National Human Rights Institutions (ENNHRI)
- European Network of Equality Bodies (Equinet)
- European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA)

Through these memberships we engage with our peers across Europe to share learning, identify and promote best practice in our operations, and support and demonstrate solidarity with NHRIs and NEBs who are at risk when democracy, peace and the rule of law are under threat.

Question 1 – What should Ireland choose as the high-level thematic priorities for its Presidency of the Council in 2026?

IHREC welcomes the opportunity to provide input into Ireland's 2026 Presidency. We appreciate the inclusive spirit of participation and consultation underpinning this process, and consider it an example of good practise in Presidency preparations. As Ireland's National Human Rights Institution and National Equality Body, we wish to make clear our expectation of sustained engagement throughout the preparations and delivery of the Irish Presidency.

The context in which Ireland will assume this Presidency differs significantly from when we last held it in 2013. Then, Ireland and Europe were emerging from the financial crisis, and the Presidency focused on restoring stability, growth, and employment - an agenda that closely reflected Ireland's domestic priorities at the time. Today, the EU faces a far more complex and volatile landscape: Russia's war in Ukraine, accelerating digital and green transitions, persistent inflation and cost-of-living pressures, erosion of trust in public institutions, political polarisation, and the loss of once-trusted international partners. Security and defence have consequently been a high priority in recent Presidencies, while narratives around Europe's competitiveness (or lack thereof) have led to wide-ranging 'simplification' agenda that has concerning implications for the fundamental rights of European citizens and the European legislative process.

Against this backdrop, we think it pertinent to remind ourselves of the historical origins of the European project, its overall objectives, and what makes it worth defending from external aggression. The EU's own strategic agenda puts 'a free and democratic Europe' first and foremost, stating that 'respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities, remains the cornerstone of our Union'.¹

Ireland's longstanding commitment to principled international engagement and its forthcoming campaign for election to the UN Human Rights Council provides a clear foundation for a values-led Presidency. HRC campaign priorities, particularly on civil society and human rights defenders, women's rights and gender equality, and the rights of LGBTIQ+ people should inform Ireland's approach within the EU, particularly at a time when civic space and equality protections are increasingly under attack from populists and hostile foreign influence.^{2 3 4}

¹ [European Council, Strategic Agenda 2024-2029](#)

² [Concord Joint Statement, NGOs under attack, 7 April 2025](#)

³ [European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual and Reproductive Rights, 26 June 2025](#)

⁴ [ILGA Europe, Annual Review 2025](#)

IHREC's 2024 Annual Poll reflects strong public support for a rights-based agenda: 91% of respondents agree that human rights are important for a fair society, and 84% believe people should be treated equally regardless of origin. At the same time, rising material deprivation, affecting 93 million people across the EU (21% of the population), underscores the need to prioritise inclusive growth and robust social protections.⁵ Economic insecurity risks fuelling social fragmentation and hate, with consequences for cohesion and democratic stability.⁶

For these reasons, Ireland's Presidency priorities should:

- Place the protection of fundamental rights at the centre, ensuring competitiveness and simplification do not erode rights or weaken the European Social Model.
- Support and strengthen equality bodies and human rights institutions across the EU.
- Promote inclusive, sustainable economic growth in the context of the next MFF that counters inequality, deprivation and polarisation.

Ireland will inherit the Presidency at a pivotal moment. By grounding its leadership in integrity, participation and fundamental rights, it can help steer the Union through competing pressures while reinforcing the values that make it worth defending.

⁵ [Eurostat, People at risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2024](#)

⁶ [Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Olivier De Schutter, July 2025, Far-right populism and the future of populism.](#)

Question 2 – Which particular policy areas and legislative proposals should be a focus of work for the Irish Presidency of the Council in 2026? What should the Irish Presidency aim to achieve in these areas?

Simplification

IHREC and our European partners are deeply concerned by the effects of the cross-cutting simplification agenda on various legislative files, including particularly CSDDD, CSRD, GDPR and the AI Act. While reducing unnecessary administrative burdens is a legitimate aim, the current proposals appear to be driven by corporate lobbying (including from outside the EU) and risk deregulation by the back door, at the expense of fundamental rights, environmental protection, workers rights and privacy.

Of particular concern is the use of fast-track Omnibus legislation that diminishes scrutiny by legislators, civil society and human rights and equality bodies. The European Ombudswoman ruled that the way the Omnibus I package (among others) was progressed amounted to 'maladministration', falling short of the Commission's own standards.⁷ Such procedural shortcuts weaken internal rule of law within European institutions, and undermine the EU's credibility in addressing rule of law backsliding in Member States and candidate countries.

As a designated Article 77 body under the EU AI Act, IHREC is particularly concerned by the **Digital Omnibus and AI Omnibus** proposals that would delay and weaken oversight and monitoring of high-risk AI systems. These provisions, if passed, would allow high-risk AI systems in sensitive areas such as employment and healthcare to operate for years without fundamental rights protections, creating immediate risks of discrimination, system failures, and inability to prevent harm. Furthermore, critics of these changes point out that they will not support European digital innovation but rather give tech giants free reign over the data of European citizens, reinforce their monopolies, and potentially turbo-charge their ability to shape political debate and influence elections, completely contrary to the aims of the Democracy Shield. Ireland has an important role to play on digital simplification as we are home to the European HQs of several tech giants, and the Data Protection Commission plays an important role in enforcing GDPR. IHREC's Annual Poll found that most Irish residents are concerned about the potential impact of AI on society (71%) and desire regulation of it (75%), but only 22% think the State is doing a good job regulating tech companies. Maintaining public trust requires a Presidency that champions rights-based digital governance rather than a bonfire of regulations. IHREC understands that Ireland will be hosting a global summit on AI in

⁷ [European Ombudsman, 26 November 2025, Ombudsman finds maladministration in how Commission prepared urgent legislative proposals](#)

October 2026. We call on the State to ensure meaningful participation of Article 77 bodies and ensure that the summit foregrounds development and use of AI in a manner that does not undermine human rights and equality.

Protecting civic space

The Irish Presidency will see the finalisation of the **Multiannual Financial Framework** (2028-2034). IHREC welcomes proposals to increase funding to civil society through AgoraEU, but notes the absence of explicit safeguards for advocacy, policy-making participation, and protection from political interference. Without clear earmarking and political commitment to shield civil society from arbitrary constraints, the proposals risks reflecting Europe's shrinking civic space rather than reversing it.⁸

Shrinking civil space across Europe, highlighted by recent attacks on environmental NGOs and proposals by the EU Commission to eliminate the LIFE programme,⁹ requires a Presidency that defends civil society's independence and capacity, in order to reflect the commitments under the Civil Society Strategy, the Democracy Shield and the renewal of the Union of Equality Agenda. Ireland should promote a robust transposition of the Anti-SLAPP Directive and support the use of dissuasive sanctions and funding conditionality on Member States that do not respect civic freedoms.

⁸ [European Council Experts Debrief, October 2025, Towards the Next MFF: Can the EU Deliver?](#)

⁹ [European Movement Ireland, Sept 2025, Budgeting for Democracy](#)

Advancing equality

Several EU equality strategies will advance around Ireland's Presidency, including on gender, disability and poverty.¹⁰ The Gender Equality Strategy is particularly important as it comes at a time when women's rights are facing a growing global backlash. Ireland is committed to advancing gender equality, as articulated in the priorities for the UN HRC campaign, so we call on the State to support an ambitious transposition of the Pay Transparency Directive, the Gender Balance on Corporate Boards Directive, and the Standards for Equality Bodies Directives, which will strengthen the ability of Equality Bodies to promote non-discrimination at the national level.

We welcome indications that a High-Level conference on Equality will be held in Dublin in September 2026, and encourage a strong focus on gender equality, disability rights and LGBTIQ inclusion.

¹⁰ See also the LGBTIQ Equality Strategy, Anti-Racism Action Plan, the EU Roma Framework , and Combatting Anti-Semitism Strategy.

Question 3 – How can the work of the Council during the term of the Irish Presidency make the most substantial positive impact for people, businesses and communities across the EU?

To deliver positive impact during the Presidency, the Council should prioritise outcomes that directly improve the lives of people, strengthens communities and supports European businesses through a stable, rights-based and cohesive European environment.

People

The Presidency should prioritise measures that uphold and expand rights protections for individuals across the Union. Progress on the long-stalled Horizontal Equal Treatment Directive would extend anti-discrimination protections beyond employment into key areas of everyday life and benefit millions of people. Advancing this Directive would demonstrate the EU's commitment to equality at a moment when rights protections are increasingly contested. In parallel, the Presidency should reinforce rights-based governance in the digital sphere. Efforts to dilute AI and digital regulation under the simplification agenda risk exposing people to discrimination, privacy violations, cyberattacks, and unsafe technologies. A Presidency that upholds robust oversight and transparency, rather than deregulation, will help ensure that digital and technological change serves individuals rather than undermines their safety or dignity.

Communities

A vibrant civic space and strong rule-of-law protections are the foundation of resilient communities. However, fast-track omnibus procedures and reduced opportunities for democratic scrutiny, increasingly used in EU law-making, risk weakening institutional accountability and public trust. Communities benefit when EU decisions are transparent, participatory, and subject to rigorous oversight. Ireland's Presidency can make a significant positive impact by actively promoting open policy-making processes, defending participatory rights, and ensuring that simplification measures do not come at the expense of transparency or fundamental rights. This is particularly important given rising disinformation, declining trust in institutions, and increasing political polarisation across Member States.

The Presidency should also champion inclusive social and economic policies. With 93 million EU residents at risk of poverty, material deprivation threatens social cohesion and fuels populist and exclusionary narratives. Supporting rights-based social protection, anti-discrimination policies, and investment in equal opportunities would help strengthen communities and counter polarising forces.

Business

Businesses thrive in a stable regulatory environment grounded in legal certainty, accountability, and strong social cohesion. Rights-respecting governance is not an obstacle to competitiveness; it is a precondition for sustainable economic activity and public legitimacy. A Presidency that upholds the EU's fundamental rights framework, rather than weakening it through deregulation, will provide predictable standards, fair competition, and consumer trust. It will support decent work and diverse entrepreneurship in small, medium and large enterprises within urban, rural and island communities. Ensuring integrity in digital markets, protecting data privacy, and maintaining robust oversight of high-risk AI systems will support European innovation and reduce the likelihood of costly harms. Similarly, inclusive growth strategies benefit businesses by expanding workforce participation, supporting skills development, and reducing the economic drag of social exclusion. The European Social Model, anchored in fair working conditions, equality, and social protection, remains a crucial competitive advantage in global markets.¹¹

¹¹ [Eurofound, 2025.](#)

Question 4 – How can we best communicate the values and benefits of EU membership to its citizens and create a sense of ownership, amongst citizens, over Ireland's Presidency of the Council of the EU?

To effectively communicate the values and benefits of EU membership and to foster a sense of ownership over Ireland's Presidency, a people-centred, accessible and participatory approach is essential. Polling consistently shows that Ireland is one of the most pro-EU member states in the Union but IHREC's Annual Poll shows that only 40% of respondents are aware of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU – significantly lower than other international human rights treaties.¹² This gap represents a major opportunity for strategic communication.

Communicating EU values

Public engagement is strongest when people can see how EU membership protects their rights in real, concrete ways. Communications should highlight how EU policies safeguards individuals in their daily lives at work, online, in accessing goods and services, and in protecting their equality, dignity and privacy. Framing the Charter as a practical, everyday safety net, rather than an abstract legal instrument, would support wider understanding of the EU as a values-based project that delivers tangible social benefits.

Messages should emphasise that the EU protects what people consistently say matters: fairness, equal treatment, and the ability to live free from discrimination. These themes resonate strongly with Irish people: 91% affirm the importance of human rights for a fair society, and 84% support equal treatment regardless of origin.¹³

Ownership through Participation

A sense of ownership does not emerge from messaging alone but from opportunities for people to see themselves reflected in the Presidency's work. In line with the EU Civil Society Strategy and the Democracy Shield, meaningful participation through dialogue, consultation, and shared spaces for discussion should underpin Ireland's approach.

The Presidency calendar should include citizen forums, youth assemblies, social partner dialogues and civil society roundtables, ensuring broad inclusion. This is especially important given that only 30% of people in Ireland feel their views are adequately represented at EU

¹² European Convention on Human Rights: 78%; Universal Declaration of Human Rights: 55%

¹³ IHREC Annual Poll 2024

level.¹⁴ Structured opportunities for deliberation and co-creation would demonstrate that the Presidency belongs not only to government but to the public it serves.

Youth participation requires particular attention. Polling across Europe indicates growing alienation from democratic processes among younger generations.^{15 16} Creating substantive channels for youth engagement would help address this democratic disconnect and cultivate long-term ownership of the European project.

Transparency and Accessibility

At a time of widespread disinformation and declining trust in institutions, clear and accessible communication is essential. The Presidency should highlight openness: transparent decision-making, accessible information, and visible links between EU actions and their real-world impacts. Communicating in plain language, using diverse media and formats, and reaching groups who may feel distant from EU institutions will be vital for broad public engagement.

As a national human rights and equality body with strong links to civil society, IHREC stands ready to support this work, in a technical capacity through expert advice, engagement with national and European networks, and provision of space for inclusive public dialogue.

¹⁴ [European Movement Ireland, EU Poll 2025](#)

¹⁵ [Bristelle et al. 2024, How Young People Facing Disadvantage View Democracy in Europe](#)

¹⁶ [The Guardian, 4 July 2025, Young Europeans losing faith in democracy, poll finds](#)



Coimisiún na hÉireann um Chearta
an Duine agus Comhionannas
Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission

The Irish Human Rights and Equality
Commission.
16 – 22 Sráid na Faiche,
Baile Átha Cliath, D07 CR20
16 – 22 Green Street,
Dublin, D07 CR20

Guthán / Phone +353 (0) 1 858 3000
Riomhpost / Email info@ihrec.ie
Idirlíon / Web www.ihrec.ie

✕ @_ihrec

📷 [/irishhumanrightsequality](https://www.instagram.com/irishhumanrightsequality)