Think outside the political cartel: Vótáil Aontú!

Olltoghchán 2020
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## Clár an Ábhair - Table of Contents

- Leader's Foreword 4
- Réamhrá - Introduction 6
- Health 9
- Housing 16
- Regional Development 20
- Education 27
- Brexit and Irish Unity 29
- Dáil for All 31
- Crime 33
- Mental Health 36
- Enterprise and Jobs 39
- Workers' Rights 46
- Farming and Rural Communities 48
- Environment 52
- Insurance 57
- An Ghaeilge - Irish language 58
A Chairde,

Aontú is a grassroots, people-powered movement building across the 32 counties. We are only one year old, yet in that time we have we have grown significantly. Thousands of people have joined us so far and tens of thousands of people have voted for us. We have elected reps from Wexford to Derry.

This is our first General Election in this state. We are fielding over 25 strong candidates who are not afraid to speak out, stand up for their principles and challenge the damage, division and group-think of the Fianna Fáil-Fine Gael Cartel.

Ireland is a deeply divided country, not just north-south, but in many other ways also. We have an overheating capital with the worst congestion in Europe. We have a sprawling commuter belt where workers spend 3 hours per day commuting from as far as Munster, Connacht and Ulster. And we have a rural Ireland that is emptying out of its young people. Ireland is also divided between those who have access to healthcare and those who don’t, between those who have access to housing and those who don’t, between those who live in safe neighbourhoods and those that are ravaged by crime.

Many pundits are framing this election as a battle between Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, however we are asking:

- Is the Fianna Fáil-Fine Gael Cartel really the best Ireland can do?
- Are we cursed to relive over & over the same government?
- Do we as a people not have the ability and energy to build a fair, prosperous, regionally balanced and kind society?
Leader's Foreword

General Election 2020 provides a much-needed opportunity to think outside the political cartel. Aontú is committed to a fair, prosperous and regionally balanced Ireland. We believe in a society that protects the most vulnerable and where every person is valued. We all live under the same sky. We are all responsible for each other, no matter how small, weak or vulnerable.

Aontú is committed to better living standards and the empowerment of ordinary citizens in the affairs of the country. We are committed to accountability, tackling the vested interests and golden circles.

Aontú is committed to a united Ireland, not just in north-south terms, but in a holistic sense. We believe in a prosperous Ireland where the vulnerable are protected and where the economy serves the needs of the people.

We believe in a regionally balanced Ireland, not one where Dublin is overwhelmed and the rest of the country serves as an extended congested commuter belt.

Aontú is committed to protecting the environment and biodiversity. We believe that each generation has a responsibility of stewardship towards the environment and that we ensure that the next generation can live in a healthy and clean world.

We are contesting this election to make a long-term difference for the good of Ireland and our people. We are asking you to vote Aontú #1 on 8th February.

Le gach deá-ghuí,

Peadar Tóibín TD
Aontú is Ireland’s fastest growing political movement

We stand for Economic Justice, Irish unity and a society where every individual is valued. Our country should not be a place where anyone is deemed of less innate worth for any reason.

We seek to break the stifling group-think that has taken over Irish politics in recent years, and the culture of looking after elites at the expense of the many. There is no insurmountable reason why our communities are not thriving and why our economy is so imbalanced. Aontú seeks a future where the economy serves the needs of people, rather than people serving the ‘needs’ of the economy.

The establishment parties constitute a political cartel. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael are mirror images of each other. Voting for one equates to voting for the other. There is no substantive difference between them. They have carved up political power in Ireland between themselves for far too long. Some other parties, like Labour and the Greens, have acted as mudguards for Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, enabling them to exercise power in return for ministerial seats, but with nothing to show in terms of policy results. Aontú represents a long-term and growing challenge to the political establishment. We need your support to mount that challenge.

As we approach the centenary of the partition of Ireland, it is abundantly clear that partition has stunted our nation’s collective potential and ruptured society north and south. The case for unity is growing stronger and stronger, especially in the context of Brexit. Aontú is unambiguously committed to a reunited and independent Ireland. We believe that measures to pave the way for Irish unity must be set in place across Irish society.

We have consistently called for the establishment of a New Ireland Forum to discuss our nation’s future. We have taken the practical steps of launching our All-Ireland Representation Bill, with a view to ensuring 32-county representation in the Dáil. 101 years since the establishment of the all-Ireland Dáil, we believe that the end of partition is long overdue and that its demise may soon occur, despite the wishes of the establishment political parties.
Our progress to date

Thousands of people in every town and village across the country are joining our new party. New cumainn are forming on a regular basis. Aontú had some notable successes in local elections with the election of Aontú deputy leader Dr. Anne McCloskey (Derry), Cllr Sarah O’Reilly (Cavan), Cllr Jim Codd (Wexford) and Cllr Emer Tóibín (Navan). Cllr Denise Mullen (Dungannon) joined Aontú recently.

In November 2019 Aontú contested the Cork North Central and Wexford by-elections and six Aontú candidates contested the December general election in the north, solidifying our position on the national stage.

We are working hard to continue to offer a genuine and imaginative alternative at the ballot box to those who realise Irish politics is failing to provide for the needs of both the community as a whole and individual citizens.

Ireland is a divided country in more ways than one

- An overheating, congested capital where housing and services are out of reach;
- Sprawling commuter belts where mothers and fathers drop their kids off at 7.30 in the morning and fight up to 3 hours of traffic every day just to make ends meet;
- Whole swathes of Ireland, particularly in the west, are emptying of young people;
- Cost of living is causing harm to individuals, families and communities;
- Local business is being hammered by massive input costs;
- Vested interests in the insurance and legal industry are protected.

Ireland’s broken political system is a significant root cause for the problems facing our society. TDs all too often just stick their finger in the air to see which way the wind is blowing and then they just go with the flow. Aontú is different. Our representatives and candidates have real backbone. We are not payroll politicians. We will not fiddle around the edges of a broken system. We will not move the chairs around a sinking political culture.

In this state, 760,000 people survive below the poverty line, 230,000 of them are children. Official statistics say that 10,500 people are homeless. Mental health difficulties arise from the systematic failures of the system and the suffering that those failures perpetuate. Fianna Fáil-Fine Gael has been found wanting when it comes to tackling the root causes of mental health difficulties and funding mental health services.

Income for the farming community is collapsing. The state’s finances are overdependent on the spin-offs on Foreign Direct Investment and we are increasingly a hostage to the profit motive of multinational corporations. Our creaking health service is being held together by nurses and staff who are underpaid and burnt out.
Brexit and Partition: Hindering our Potential, Jeopardising our Future

Brexit has shown clearly the damage done to Ireland by the continued sway of the British government over part of Ireland. Tories in Westminster, who know nothing about Ireland and care even less, have acted recklessly in Ireland through their pursuit of Brexit-at-all-costs. Any efforts to embed the failed policy of partition are a direct threat to our national interest and the interests of individual citizens. The Brexit debacle underscores the harm and stagnation stemming from partition. Aontú is determined to pave the way towards Irish unity.

Failure of the Political Establishment

The Irish political establishment oversees crisis after crisis. It does not tackle root causes, it simply papers over the cracks at best. Crises of the scale society is facing demand a huge political response, however to date we have only phoney blame-games, with the establishment parties slinging mud at each other, while the underlying dysfunction continues and reduces citizens' living standards. Aontú is determined to tackle the dysfunction and improve citizens' prospects.

Where we can go from here with your vote?

Aontú means Unity. Unity of vision, unity of this country. The problem with having no vision, like establishment politicians, is that with no destination there is no need for a map... muddling through till the end of the term or until the largest parties feel their electoral chances are at their best is sufficient.

With a vision, we have a definite place we wish to reach and a map to get there. That is where Aontú is at; we see a thriving country, and we see the changes needed that can help to get us there.

As we reflect on the events of 100 years ago and the courage displayed by those who sacrificed so much for our country's freedom, we commit ourselves to achieving Irish unity and justice. We are determined to tackle the challenges of our time and to ensure greater empowerment of citizens, not elites. We need your vote to do it.
Health

Aontú: for a new realism and a fresh start in healthcare reform

The health system is broken. Aontú is pledged to work to fix what is a national crisis, a crisis for which Fianna Fáil-Fine Gael has abdicated responsibility. Medical, nursing and allied healthcare professionals struggle to keep the health system functioning, yet Fianna Fáil-Fine Gael have demonstrated time and time again an inability to engage positively and proactively with professionals to strengthen the system, to increase productivity and to improve its capacity to deliver better health, social and economic outcomes.

These developments reflect deeper structural problems that have not been properly addressed. They include:

- Lack of accountability;
- Mismanagement;
- Shortages of staff;
- A lack of capacity in our hospitals;
- Under-investment in Primary Care and Community-based services.

Sláinte Care – the government’s long-term strategy for reforming the system - lacks credibility without the necessary funding and staff buy-in. Aontú stands for a new realism and a fresh start.

Aontú is committed to working with stakeholders to reshape healthcare through targeted investment in high-priority initiatives and through working with healthcare professionals to ease bottlenecks in access to the system. This approach will also strengthen our capacity to better manage medium and longer-term pressures related to an ageing population profile and longer life expectancies.
Primary Care

Fianna Fáil-Fine Gael and the HSE have long pointed out that investing in primary care leads to better health outcomes at lower costs. They have not delivered. The Sláintecare Report set out a target for people to receive 70% of their healthcare needs in their community, rather than having to travel to the nearest acute hospital. However, only 4.5% of the current Health Budget is spent on primary care.

This means that the critical mass of primary care locations and staff – such as doctors, nurses, physiotherapists, psychologists and social workers – that are needed to deliver integrated care in their community are simply not in place. Aontú believes that addressing this will require resolving supply-side issues relating to the training and location of GPs, especially in areas of greatest social need. Aontú will consult closely with GPs who have established innovative and socially responsive practices in order to replicate such models more widely.

As part of its strategy to pivot healthcare away from its overdependence on the acute system, Aontú will press for 10% of the current health budget to be assigned to the development and delivery of primary care in communities.

GPs interact with every individual and every family. They should be at the heart of a responsive, proactive and cost-effective health system. Aontú believes GPs should be incentivised to offer a wider range of services, either directly or through an Integrated Group Practice. It is clear that with increased investment in facilities and staff, GPs can offer a much wider set of services, from minor surgical procedures to mental health, if facilities and space are provided. This makes sense, both in terms of patient-friendly delivery of care and also relieving pressures on the acute system. Pharmacists must also have a greater role in the delivery of healthcare to citizens.

Midwife-led care needs to be looked at as something that could take pressure off maternity units in large hospitals by having low risk pregnancies managed by community midwives at primary care centres, initially through 35 weeks of pregnancy, with a view to creating midwife led pregnancy centres that can take a woman through from early pregnancy to postpartum care, as is seen in other countries. There is strong research to show midwife led care in low risk pregnancies is more beneficial than consultant or doctor led care in a hospital.

A more balanced and responsive healthcare system will require greater integration of Primary, Secondary and Tertiary care. Indicative Care Pathways, based on Best Practice, should be used to channel patient flows between Emergency Departments (EDs), Out-Patient Departments (OPDs) and to deliver care that is more appropriately provided in a community setting.
Health

Acute Care

Ireland has 2.8 acute hospital beds per 1,000 of the population, compared with an Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) average of 4.3 per 1000. Even with a significant increase in day-case surgery there is still a significant shortage of beds to an extent that is wholly out of line with best international practice. Around 1,600-1,800 hospital beds were lost in austerity-era cutbacks overseen by a Fine Gael/Labour Coalition government. The effects of short-term “savings” through the closure of beds and cuts in staffing are still evident. These cutbacks were implemented notwithstanding all of the evidence that such cutbacks are radically counter-productive, both in terms of health and the long-term costs of rebuilding the system, including staff morale and public trust.

Action is needed in the short term, as well as the medium term. ED services are not functioning as they should – the same cycle of “crises” occurs year after year. Repeated promises by Fine Gael to “fix” the system have been empty. A record number of 110,000 people were forced onto trolleys last year in 2018 because of a lack of capacity and bottlenecks within the wider system.

We know that being on a trolley often leads to delayed diagnosis, delayed treatment and patients who have an increased risk of morbidity and mortality. According to the Irish Association for Emergency Medicine “some 300 to 350 of our citizens die avoidably every year as a direct result of the failure to address this issue”. This is a wholly unacceptable situation but one to which the government has become desensitised.

Aontú believes that overcrowded EDs are a blight on our health system. They impose enormous pressures on medical and nursing staff and highlight a lack of bed capacity, as well as inefficient and poorly resourced discharge programmes. They are part of a wider systemic failure. 750,000 people are currently on hospital Waiting Lists. People are now forced to wait for years in bad health. Many have to withdraw from work, many require carers and most will have to have more expensive, and in some instances invasive, treatment in the long run. There is no humanitarian, medical, or economic logic to leaving people waiting on hospital waiting lists.
Health

Public patients are faced with long waits for outpatient appointments because of a lack of capacity, including unfilled staff appointments. There is an additional problem: under-funded public hospitals are given targets for maximising private patient income via Private Health Insurance (PHI). This is unfair, regressive and willfully inefficient. Aontú seeks a publicly funded health service. We are, however, practical in our approach and realise that this is not going to be achieved in the short term. In the short term all available capacity – private as well as public – should be used to mitigate and then eliminate our excessive waiting lists and that the public system should be properly funded.

This means an end to the annual charade of underfunding/“overspending”, leading to Supplementary Budgets. It also provides a robust and sensible platform for a dialogue with healthcare professions on the very necessary challenge of increasing the productivity of the system.

Lack of Step Down Facilities

Ireland’s bed occupancy ratio is excessively high by international standards. Over and above the shortage of capacity this reflects constraints on discharges. The Government have failed to adequately address the scarcity of “step-down” services from acute care. Addressing this issue would facilitate earlier hospital discharges and ensure that the best use was made of scarce, and expensive, hospital beds. Aontú believe that additional “Home Care” services, together with more nursing home capacity, would deliver a more balanced and cost-effective healthcare service. This is a long-standing problem where new thinking and closer integration of Acute and Community care is required. Aontú is fully supportive of this approach.
Inequality and Poverty

Notwithstanding the imperative of delivering non-elective healthcare solely on the basis of medical need, access still depends, to an unacceptable extent, on income, location (whether urban or rural) and health status. Those caught in a poverty trap or homeless, and frequently with the greatest need, all too often have the greatest difficulty in accessing care.

Voluntary organisations play a crucial role in providing support for individuals and families caught up in addiction. The scale and depth of Ireland’s addiction crisis – with all of its devastating consequences including the burden on our Healthcare system – requires a much more proactive response by the state in supporting their work. New models, such as “Safety Net” established by GP Dr Austen O’Carroll, which delivers primary care to those most in need including those in hostels and on our streets, need to be developed.

There should not be a situation in Ireland where having more money allows a person to receive better care. In any context this is a two tier system. Private hospital care should not be better or quicker than public hospital care. Put differently, public healthcare should be at least as efficient, timely and experienced as private healthcare. This would mean that while a private system may exist, no person accessing the public system is at a disadvantage medically speaking for having less money. Anything less than this is facilitating a fundamental inequality.

Using all Available Capacity

Aontú is committed to working to strengthen the Public system in the interest of fairness and equality of access. This will require more capacity, not just to “catch up” on previous under-investment but also to meet emerging needs.

Aontú also understand that what the public and healthcare staff want is less rhetoric and more realism and practicality. Building up the Public system to the extent that Aontú believe is necessary now, and even more so looking to the future is imperative. In the meantime, the overriding need is to use all available capacity, including private capacity, to meet the non-elective needs of our public patients. Funding for the National Treatment Purchase Fund (NTPF) should be front-loaded, not randomly rationed year after year, so as to eliminate the present unacceptable waiting times for public patients. Private hospitals must provide a full range of services on a 24/7 basis and commit to readmission of complicated patient care episodes where clinically necessary so that the burden does not fall back on the public system.

Governance, Management and Accountability

The governance and performance of the HSE is central to delivering the best quality, and most cost-effective care to patients and families. This requires a stronger system of oversight and accountability. This means ensuring that all Board appointments have relevant experience and operate within a culture that is robust in terms of risk management, at every level. We have seen the human costs of falling short. In this context, the recommendations of the Scally Report must be resourced and implemented.
Health

Equally, line management is opaque and overly complex. It would be strengthened by more external recruitment. There is also a bureaucratic burden that needs to be addressed. Each government that introduces significant restructuring creates never ending change management. This invariably sees an increase in senior management posts with little effect on front line services.

Aontú will press for realistic funding for the HSE in terms of commitments set out in Service Plans. Systematic underfunding inevitably leads to so-called “overspending” – triggering a deeply negative bureaucratic process to correct the “overspend” and Supplementary Budgets. Proper accountability can only function in a realistic funding environment and in the absence of scapegoating by government.

Aontú also supports rolling three year budgeting, based on multi annual projections to give greater certainty to service providers, to respond to emerging needs and to avoid damaging cutbacks in service provision. Many sections within the HSE only find out what their budget allocation will be on Budget day. This makes it impossible to plan in advance.

The National Children’s Hospital debacle is a prime example of the lack of accountability within both the health service and the political systems responsible for its oversight. The scale of the problems, the failure to identify and mitigate emerging pressures at a much earlier stage and the opportunity-cost of the overruns demonstrate just why healthcare is broken and “reform” a recurrent failure.

There will, as usual, be numerous Committees investigating what happened and, as usual, there will likely be no consequences within the political/policy process. Aontú have a very different perspective. We will hold staff, management and Ministers to account.

Aontú will press for the establishment of an independent “Oversight and Risk Management” team, tasked with constantly monitoring for systemic problems in the Health service. This would help to minimize the possibility of events such as the Cervical Scan tragedy, with all of its harrowing consequences, arising. If they did arise, it would also enable the HSE to manage them effectively at a much earlier stage.

Information Technology and Communications

The HSE has not embraced Information Communications Technology (ICT) to the necessary levels. The Health Service needs to have the ability to manage all aspects of the delivery of healthcare in a digital environment. One of the oldest truisms of management is; what can’t be measured cannot be (effectively) managed, and this remains of compelling relevance to Healthcare. This includes staffing and administration, the digitising and transferability of patient records electronically across different domains and developing the capability to align to rapidly evolving E-medicine.
Health

Staff retention and Recruitment

One of the many damaging consequences of austerity on our Healthcare system was the forced migration of thousands of health professionals. Nurses and midwives, doctors and medical consultants as well as allied health professionals were forced to emigrate. The effects are still evident on service provision, difficulties in retaining existing staff and attracting much needed consultant and specialist staff. There has been a breakdown of trust in relation to contractual arrangements, including the first strike by our nursing profession in more than a generation.

Aontú believes that rebuilding the health system requires rebuilding trust between government and the health professions. Implementing reform and increasing real productivity of the system necessitates engagement in good faith.

The health sector now operates internationally. To retain and recruit staff means competing internationally on pay and conditions and ensuring parity between equivalently qualified staff. The same government who claimed “inability to pay” presided over the biggest single financial overspend in the history of the state. If the government does not live up to its responsibilities then expensively trained staff will continue to be lost to countries only too willing to welcome them.

Aontú will therefore advocate for an independent national analysis to examine and report on all aspects of contractual arrangements between Government and healthcare professionals and their representative bodies. This will include training, retention, recruitment and capacity-building, and will encompass our health professionals working abroad. It will also seek views and insights as to how best to increase the productivity of the health system especially in the fields of risk management, ICT and innovation.

Conscientious Objection

Aontú defends the right of everyone to conscientious objection where abortion is concerned. Aontú is committed to upholding the right to life of everyone. We advocate for legislation that would oblige the administration of pain relief to preborn babies that are due to be aborted and for legislation obliging all possible treatment for babies that survive abortions. Aontú seeks legislation that would prohibit abortion on the basis of disability and abortion on the basis of gender.
Housing

Action needed to address our National Housing Emergency

A basic human need

Housing is a basic human need. Without housing many aspects of a citizen’s life break down. Physical and mental health starts to deteriorate. A family’s ability to provide healthy nutrition falls apart. Education and work life are next to impossible without a home. The human condition disintegrates without a home.

Ireland is suffering from a prolonged National Housing Emergency. The level of human misery being caused is unprecedented in housing terms. Up to 1 million people are in housing crisis either through mortgage distress, homelessness, spending years on housing waiting lists or grossly unaffordable rents and mortgages. This crisis has been going on so long that the media and the political establishment have become desensitised to it.

It is one of the primary responsibilities of a government to make sure that families have access to reasonably priced homes and that those who cannot afford market prices have alternative routes to a home. In this the government have completely failed.

Speculation: Houses as Commodities

Housing and homes have had another role within Irish society for the last 3 decades. While the housing market always contained a speculative aspect, this aspect has become radically more pronounced in recent years.

The investment and speculative aspect of housing has been fuelling property bubbles and crashes that have in part destroyed the Irish economy. Only 10 years after the last devastating crash, house prices in this state are dangerously close to property bubble proportions again. While the collateral damage of the last crash – those in serious mortgage distress – are still winding through the courts system we have prices rocketing throughout the country yet again.

House prices have on average risen by €100,000 throughout the state since 2012 and have increased by well over €160,000 in Dublin. These radical swings in house prices are a disaster for families and they are dangerous for the economy. Shockingly, Fine Gael has gone so far as to admit that spiraling house prices are a strategic objective for them.
Housing

Housing Dysfunction

An of housing dysfunction is the sprawling commuter belt. Many families have had to surf a wave of affordable rent westward in order to stay housed. This has often meant multiple moves from counties such as Louth, Meath, Kildare and Wicklow to towns and villages in Ulster, Munster and Connacht. These multiple moves are disruptive to family life and education. It has also led to long commutes and significant traffic congestion due to the lack of public transport alternatives in these areas and it is adding significantly to transport-related carbon emissions.

The Economic Effects of Housing Dysfunction

House price inflation and the increasing costs of commercial buildings are damaging Ireland’s cost competitiveness. Public and private sector workers are being forced to seek wage increases due to the fact that the price accommodation in the areas that they are working in is spiralling. House price inflation is a direct cause of wage inflation and is damaging to the economy. Foreign Direct Investors have publicly made known their concerns with regards housing unavailability. There is no doubt that housing dysfunction is a brake on economic development.

Damaging Government Policy

Fine Gael pride themselves on being the party of the Free Market. Ironically much of the dysfunction in the housing market is due to Fine Gael distortion of market function. At the bottom of the housing slump Fine Gael rolled out the red carpet to International Residential Investors and vulture funds in an effort to put a floor under the market and to improve the balance sheets of the Irish banks. They achieved this through extremely generous taxation policy and light touch regulation. As a result International investors have piled into the market, made above average profits, have pushed prices through the roof, and pushed first time buyers out of the housing market.

These international investors have taxation advantages over indigenous small landlords, they have interest advantages over first time buyers in this country and they have significant power within the market. This power needs to be reduced by reducing their unfair tax advantages. Vulture Funds have been allowed to buy distressed mortgages at knocked down prices. Families, small business owners and farmers who have invested lifetimes into their homes and farms are being refused when they offer to buy their debts at the same level that the vulture fund could sell them at after repossession. These same Vulture Funds have refused to come before the Finance Committee in Leinster House but have direct access to the Department of Finance.
Housing

Potential Shocks to the Market

While the credit bubble does not exist in the same manner that it did during the Celtic Tiger, there are still significant exposures within the market to international shocks. The business model of Real Estate Investment Trusts (REITs) relies on low international interest rates and low taxes. Interest rates will increase and taxes on REITs should increase. It's important that these changes are carried out in an orderly fashion to ensure an increase in supply to the market and protect against shocks.

Solutions

Social and Affordable Housing

A significant increase in the supply of housing is the key element of resolving the housing crisis. The state has a massive role in achieving this. Firstly, the supply of social and affordable housing needs to be ramped up. In the 30s, the 50s, and the 80s in tough economic times social and affordable housing was built at far higher rates. Fine Gael has been allergic to the building of social and affordable housing. They radically reduced output at the start of their administration. This cut in supply has led in part to where we are today.

While we hear practically every day about government plans to increase social and affordable housing the truth is last year only 60 houses were built on average by each Local Authority. 70% of the government's Rebuilding Ireland policy is provided for by private tenancies. This does absolutely nothing to increase the social housing supply and actually pushes up prices in the general rental market. The government have provided zero affordable houses in 2016, 2017 and 2018.

The truth is funding is still not sufficient to achieve the 10,000 new social and affordable housing units that need to be built on an annual basis. If the state invested €2.2 billion in capital spending a year the 10,000 housing units per year objective of the Oireachtas Housing Committee could be surpassed.

It is paramount that the government reduce the approval, tendering and procurement process for the building of public housing. Local Authorities must be tasked with the development of mixed income public housing estates with Affordable Purchase homes, Affordable Cost rental and Social housing. Approved Housing Bodies have been to the fore of the delivery and management of Social Housing. They need to have their capacity and ability to deliver more housing enhanced.
Housing

End Speculation

Large land banks are lying idle around the country. Some of these banks are in areas of high need. With prices increasing there is an incentive to sit on land banks and watch the price increase. The government must not allow a situation arise that makes it is more profitable to sit on land than to build on land. Since 2014 we have been promised a functional Vacant Site Tax. Only 17 Local Authorities have populated a Vacant Site Register and out of these only 140 Vacant Sites have had a tax applied to them.

1 in every 33 houses in the state is vacant. This is a shockingly high rate of vacancy in a housing crisis. A carrot and stick approach needs to be employed to get these houses into circulation. Funding must be made available to allow home owners who cannot afford to get housing fit for habitation to do so. The state must seek to buy some of these houses and return them to occupancy. It also must be accompanied with a Vacant Property Tax to be applied to vacant houses where owners for no good reason allow a house to remain vacant.

End the Eternal Regulation Change

The current housing minister has changed building regulation a number of times. As a result many builders expect further change which will allow more units to be achieved per site. This has the effect of slowing down the building of houses. We need a cast-iron commitment to regulatory stability over the next five years.
Regional Development

Ireland's regional imbalance needs to be addressed with targeted investment and infrastructure improvements

Where Ireland is now

Ireland is becoming a city-state. The population size of Dublin in proportion to the rest of the country is decidedly imbalanced in comparison with other countries in Europe. Economic vitality, investment, infrastructure and population are concentrating in the Greater Dublin Area. Dublin is overheating, much of the east coast is a commuter belt sprawl without necessary public transport and the west and border region is emptying. Centralisation is suffocating the capacity of regions and communities to promote enterprise creation and to plan for sustainable development based on their own embedded strengths. Decisions on revenue and investment are almost wholly outside of their control.

Young people are relocating at startling rates from rural areas to large urban areas, mainly to Dublin. This relocation is driven by the concentration of jobs in the capital and the necessity for young professional couples to achieve two incomes to buy a house.

This population shift is leading to a parallel migration of services. It is estimated that currently 500 Post Offices are economically unsustainable. 139 Garda Stations have been closed. We have also seen the closure of many banks, shops and pubs in rural Ireland. Schools are closing in the west leading to pressure and new builds on the east coast.

Infrastructural funding must meet the needs of today's demand, but it also needs to disrupt trends and create and anticipate future demand. The government must decouple the strict relationship between infrastructural investment and current demand. What is occurring across rural Ireland is a consequence of the neglect and underinvestment of the government in these regions; running down the population and capabilities of towns on the basis of centralisation, and flawed planning and spatial strategies. Aontú will campaign to reverse this deeply negative process and spearhead the revitalisation of rural Ireland, including ensuring that these needs are incorporated into the European Regional Development Fund and European Social Fund after 2020, while ensuring Dublin continues to be a great international city with sustainable levels of growth.
Regional Development

Aontú’s Priorities

National Infrastructure funding must meet the need for homes, jobs and ICT services countrywide. It must also dampen existing unsustainable trends and anticipate, as well as plan for future demand. Aontú’s priorities are shaped by key trends and opportunities, specifically:

(a) Dublin is a great international city. It is in many ways the economic engine of the state. We must ensure its continued development and growth, however this must happen in a sustainable fashion. Dublin has already become overheated resulting in a shortage of housing, inadequate water supply, unaffordable rents and severe traffic congestion. The M50 is already unfit for purpose; taking both the inward and outward city traffic as well as the north-south traffic flows and the arterial routes to the rest of the country. An accident on the M50 disrupts all of these traffic flows at once and movement comes to a standstill. Within the Greater Dublin Area infrastructure must be provided to meet demand and the National Transport Authority needs to apportion investment to immediate needs.

(b) The Construction Industry Federation stated that the Greater Dublin Region attracts 48% of all the state’s infrastructural spending, including on motorways, rail and utilities. Large urban populations such as Cork and Limerick came fifth and eighth in the distribution of infrastructural spend. This infrastructural imbalance needs to be addressed with a higher level of regional investment. This would energise the regional hubs, which could then support Dublin in its position as a strong capital city in a European and global economy.

(c) The island of Ireland can expect to hit a population of 10 million by 2050. We need an ambitious plan to ensure that this expansion of the population occurs in a balanced way that addresses existing regional disparities in jobs, per capita incomes and service provision.

(d) Ireland is second from the bottom of the EU in infrastructure spend. A renewal of disadvantaged regions which have not benefitted proportionately from government EU funded spending will require significant additional investment. The key to resolving this imbalance lies in significantly increased investment regionally. Firstly existing infrastructural demands need to be met. Infrastructure also needs to be built to disrupt current demand patterns and provide for future spatially balanced demand that does not exist currently. A special formula or weighting mechanism must also be provided for the provision of infras.
Regional Development

The Regions: Urban

International Cities

To counteract the over-dominance of Dublin and Belfast in the social and economic development of the island, Aontú believes that the National Planning Framework should consider the development of two major international cities in the western sector of the island that have the necessary economic and population mass, to be internationally competitive in their own right and to energise their own regions. The selection of these International Objective Cities is of course politically fraught. Their selection needs to be on the basis of independent competition. The spatial criteria for this competition should be decided upon by international planning experts.

Denmark had found itself in similar demographic distribution difficulties and yet it has achieved its aim of developing Aarhus, a new significant urban centre able to act as a balance to Copenhagen.

The urban areas outside of Dublin should be the framework for four Development Designations as follows:

International Objective Cities

Two International Objective Cities should be developed. One in the north of Ireland and one in the south of Ireland. These cities should become the default cities for new technology, infrastructural innovations and pilots. A specific Spatial Development Fund for infrastructural investment should be focused on these two cities. It should include the necessary road, rail, air, water, waste, energy and communications infrastructure that supports them.

National Objective City

These cities will act as an economic substructure to the International Objective Cities in a mutually energising economic relationship. There should be no more than three of these cities selected.

Regional Development City/Town

These towns will ensure an even spread of the social and fiscal benefits that come from effectively planned and costed decentralisation. It is important that no region should be left behind at this level. There should be no more than 4 of these cities/towns.

County Development Town

No county should have to face the next 20 years without an opportunity to grow. As a result, each county that has not met the criteria of the previous 4 categories will have the town best suited to growth within it designated as an Opportunity Town.
Regional Development

The Regions: Rural Ireland and the Agri-economy

Agriculture, which remains the backbone of rural areas, is flatlining. The small number of very large factories and retail chains leverage enormous supply power over farmers, thereby dictating prices. Added to this, Area Aid is distributed in a manner that favours larger farmers. For rural Ireland to remain sustainable it is important to make small and medium size farming economically viable. This requires farmers receiving a larger proportion of the income that they generate. This can be achieved by the development of farmer co-operatives and fairer supplier-buyer profit splits, as well as expanding more into foreign markets and alternative or supplementary enterprises such as energy.

Given the untapped natural energy resources farmers could avail of, it is ludicrous that no feed-in tariffs have been created by the government to allow farmers to supplement their incomes from anaerobic digestion, bio energy, solar or small scale wind generation. This results in Bord na Móna importing millions of euro of biomass every year. Farmers are well placed to meet a portion of Ireland’s energy needs. Small scale wind generation, solar power, bio energy and bio digestion can be integrated into traditional farming practices and add significant income to farming families. The urgent creation of a feed-in tariff is needed to allow this sector to develop.

There is also a steady flight of young couples to the Greater Dublin Region leading to a significant age gap between east and west. The average age of a person in Killarney is ten years older than that of someone living in Balbriggan. This demographic reprofiling is subverting farming and the agri-economy across rural Ireland. In addition, it is contributing to an erosion of the capacity of rural farming communities to develop competitiveness in specialised niches including organic farming. Aontú advocates a significant expansion of the Organic Farming Scheme.

An Post management have declared that 500 post offices are not economically sustainable. 139 Garda stations have been closed. Credit Unions have been prevented from matching the billions of euro at their disposal with housing needs and rural business development.

Broadband speeds in certain parts of the country are up to 36 times slower than other areas in the state which is seriously hindering economic progress in the regions. Yet the government do not seek to accelerate the Broadband delivery date and cannot guarantee that we will all be connected by 2022.

The Western Development Commission is a successful development organisation and the government should consider the rolling out of this structure to other regional and rural areas.
Regional Development

Additional Investment Micro-initiatives on an All-Ireland basis

Aontú urge a number of specific initiatives to complement and reinforce our Regional and Spatial strategy, including an all island dimension.

Both Governments should immediately release the promised funding for the Dublin to Derry (N2/A5) dual carriageway.

An island-wide Flood Defence Plan must be developed. Many of the border areas currently suffer from a lack of joint management of rivers and flood plains.

An island-wide Coastal Erosion Management Plan must be developed, which should include a National Greenway and Blueway Plan.

An All-Ireland strategy that seeks to develop our local water ports should be established. Investment in and upgrading of Rosslare Europort is essential. In the context of Brexit, this port is our closest point to the European mainland. It needs to be upgraded to become a Tier One port and management of the port should be taken from Irish Rail and vested in a publicly owned Port Authority.

The Dublin to Belfast rail route needs to be upgraded to an hourly service and trains need to start earlier. The morning service into Belfast does not allow for citizens to attend 9am meetings in Belfast. This is in contrast to the Edinburgh to Glasgow route which has a 15 minute service.

Create Memorandums of Understanding between third level education institutes on both sides of the border to identify what shared services could be provided more efficiently.

Educational Training Boards and Local Enterprise Offices in the South to plan, deliver and accept applicants on an All-Ireland basis.

There must be All-Ireland Spatial Planning and Development. A joint spatial planning process drawing from both parts of the island would benefit from the harmonisation and integration of key datasets such as population, employment, transportation, housing, retailing and environmental indicators.

Aontú supports the conducting of a feasibility study into a high speed rail connection along the Derry-Belfast-Dublin-Cork line.
Regional Development

Government Departments in both jurisdictions need to be directed at a statutory level to collaborate and proof development on an All-Ireland basis. Local Authorities north and south need to be jointly responsible for achieving national and regional spatial planning objectives through the delivery of local plans, programmes and projects. The Local Authorities who are responsible for the 11 Border counties need also to be directed on a statutory level to collaborate and proof development on an All-Ireland basis.

Border Development Zone

The border runs for a total of 499 kilometres from Lough Foyle in Donegal to Carlingford Lough in County Louth. The creation of the Border had the effect of cutting off hinterlands from their market towns and cities and creating two separate economic jurisdictions where originally there was one. This particular region is also most affected by the Troubles, and Brexit is an immediate threat to this region.

Distance and Remote Work

Many jobs and professional roles can now be delivered remotely by workers. This provides advantages to employers in that it can reduce accommodation overheads. It also relieves transportation congestion, reduces CO2 emissions, reduces housing pressure in cities and can breathe new life into rural communities. There are examples around the state where it has been achieved in a structured hub based system. This is useful as it allows for cross pollination of ideas amongst workers. It also can happen with workers working from home. The key ingredient is good telecommunications infrastructure. Broadband needs to be upgraded significantly across regional Ireland in order to facilitate and support remote working, both in rural areas and in town based hubs.

All-Ireland Agriculture Market

Brexit is a significant threat to agriculture in the whole of Ireland. If the north of Ireland is taken out of the EU the agriculture sector in the north of Ireland will operate under different regulations. This will mean that products will have to be stopped and checked along the border. This will radically damage a whole range of industries from beef to milk powder. The government must ensure that the north of Ireland operates under the same regulatory system as the south.

International Trade Agreements

A number of international trade agreements from CETA to the Mercosur negotiations seek to allow access to the EU market of tens of thousands of tonnes of beef and other agricultural products from Canada and South America. These products will not be produced under the same regulatory standards as Irish agricultural produce, and so to allow these products into our market makes it considerably more difficult for Irish farmers to sell their produce while undermining our own required standards. It is important that competition function on a level playing field and that sub regulatory product not be allowed access to the EU market.
Regional Development

Sustainable Towns and Villages

Out of town shopping centres have contributed to the emptying of towns and villages. This is in part due to free and abundant car parking. It is necessary for the government to consider imposing a commercial rate on out of town car parking spaces. It is also necessary for the government to consider the inclusion within the business rate of a financial weighting to incentivise businesses to operate in certain locations.

New Internet Shopping Networks

Retail is migrating online. This is having a negative effect on business in general in Ireland as the majority of this retail is to locations outside of Ireland. It is also negatively affecting rural retail centres. Local Enterprise Offices should be tasked with helping towns provide online retail platforms for local retail outlets. The provision of broadband in rural areas is also important to allow these platforms to compete.

Credit

Current sources of commercial investment are naturally impatient. They seek repayment timelines that do not necessarily suit long term rural development projects. The state needs to introduce a culture of prudent ‘Patient Investments’ in certain rural projects. Credit Unions are currently highly regulated and are prevented from participating in large areas of banking activity. It is necessary for the government to help provide the management and governance expertise to the Credit Unions to facilitate the development of critical mass within the sector and to allow them to meet the needs of people in rural areas.

Outreach University Campuses

3rd Level Education is a significant driver of enterprise development. The lack of 3rd Level Education in certain regions is one of the causes of ‘youth flight’. Encouraging 3rd Level Institutions to provide outreach campuses in regional towns would allow for young people to remain living in local areas and could facilitate the development of enterprise and industry in those same areas.
Education

The educational policy of Aontú is to eliminate all barriers and restrictions on the fulfilment of every Irish child’s intrinsic right to an education as enshrined in Article 42 of Bunreacht na hÉireann. The elimination of these barriers can only come about by ensuring the proper provision of resources for our schools, sufficiently funding our schools, reducing class sizes, protecting parental choice on school ethos, and removing children’s socio-economic background as a factor in achieving the best quality education.

Primary Education

- Aontú pledges to increase funding of our primary schools to ensure that a quality primary education is provided to every child in the country;
- Aontú shall take measures and increase funding to reduce class sizes and teacher-to-child ratios, to ensure our classrooms are properly supplied and that the new technologies, materials and resources are being made available to teachers and children alike;
- Aontú shall support measures to ensure that Gaelscoil education at all levels is available to all families that seek it.

Secondary Education

- Aontú pledges to increase funding of our secondary schools to ensure that a quality education is provided to every child in the country;
- Aontú shall take measures and increase funding to reduce class sizes and teacher-to-child ratios, to ensure our classrooms are properly supplied, and that the new technologies, materials and resources are being made available to teachers and children alike;
- Aontú shall take measures to ensure the continued status of both history and Irish as mandatory subjects at the leaving cert level to protect, preserve and pass on our heritage and history to the generations to come;
- Aontú shall commit to the review and reform of the leaving cert to accommodate the mental health of students, to remove restrictions on the potential of students, and for subjects to be of the most practical continued utility to students after completion of their secondary education.
Education

Third Level Education

- The educational policy of Aontú aims to reduce the tuition fees of Universities to remove financial barriers to vindicating our students’ right to education;
- Ireland’s most valuable resource has always been its people. Aontú will work to make third level education more accessible, particularly to areas and families with low percentages of people going on to third level education. This shall be achieved by educational grants, scholarships, and schemes;
- Aontú will campaign to increase funding of our universities to ensure adequate resources on campuses in terms of on-campus accommodation, recreational and sporting facilities, and lecture halls to accommodate the level of students;
- Aontú shall also ensure greater regulation of rental properties being rented by students and of jobs being worked by students to guard against the exploitation of students.

Provision of Education for Children with Autism, Autism & Special Needs

- Aontú will guarantee the right of special needs and autistic children beyond their leaving cert, guaranteeing their right to a third level education the same as any other child;
- Our educational policy shall also provide proper funding for special needs schools, invest in new resources, materials and technology to aid children, and recruit more Special Needs Assistants (SNA) and professionals to directly work alongside special needs and autistic children;
- Assessments for intellectual disabilities, Asperger’s, Autism, and special needs must be more readily available to parents to quickly assess children and where necessary ensure adequate funding, resources and services are made available;
- Aontú will oppose any cuts to the rights, benefits and resources provided to children with intellectual disabilities, Aspergers, Autism, and special needs, their schools, and the teachers & resources provided.
Brexit and Irish Unity

Aontú will strive for Irish unity and the development of a strong All-Ireland economy as a remedy to Brexit uncertainty

Practical Steps to Irish Unity

Four years ago the Tories held a referendum on Brexit without a plan and without any thought on how it would impact on Ireland, north or south. Brexit has given rise to an array of challenges and difficulties for Ireland, due mainly to the continuation of partition. Brexit has highlighted the common sense of Irish unity as a way forward for the country as a whole. The most obvious way to overcome the challenges of Brexit is to begin preparation for Irish unity and ending the failed Westminster policy of partition.

Self-determination

Aontú seeks the independence of the Irish people. We believe in self-determination; believing that decisions made closer to the people that they affect are better decisions. Irish people can influence those decisions and they can hold the decision makers to account. When decisions are made in London, Brussels and Berlin, the odds are that they are not made in Ireland's interest.

London treats the north of Ireland's economy like an economic backwater. At the time of partition, over 80% of Ireland's industrial output came from three counties around Belfast. Belfast was the largest city in Ireland and the north was by far the richest part of Ireland. Resulting from London's lack of concern, the north of Ireland was impoverished in the 20th century in the same manner the south of Ireland was in the 1800s.

Irish Unity is an opportunity to improve people's quality of life

Unity is the key to unlocking Ireland's potential. Economies of scale, efficiencies of delivery, increased market size, larger EU representation are all obvious outputs. There is also the question of the undemocratic and unjust nature of partition.

Given that the opinions of Irish people north and south are changing significantly in support of Irish unity, and given ongoing demographic change, it is foolish and irresponsible for the governments in Dublin and London not to start to plan for Irish unity.

Brexit will bring about substantial economic shocks, Irish unity and an All-Ireland economy are the best remedies for this

It is shocking that 101 years after the First Dáil, the whims and egos of the Tories in London are determining whether the people of Ireland, north and south, can govern ourselves, develop our economy and run our agricultural sector.
Brexit threatens to radically damage our ability to move people, products and services around the country. It is evident through opinion polling that the Irish people are aware of this. North and south, people are seeking unity in greater numbers. Greater support for all-Ireland economic and civic structures will be crucial markers in preparing for Irish unity.

**Practical Preparations are Necessary Now: Supporting the All-Ireland Economy**

Not preparing for Irish unity will prove a serious mistake. The direction of travel is very much towards Irish unity - it would be irresponsible not to prepare for it. Aontú in government will initiate practical steps to plan and prepare for Irish unity.

The All-Ireland economy was promised under the Good Friday Agreement, but it has received precious little attention from the establishment. Aontú in government prioritise the All-Ireland economy.

An All-Ireland economy means planning together, funding together and delivering services together on an All-Ireland basis. We need to be practical in the development of convergence across the Ireland in terms of taxes, enterprise, health care and supports. Better, more effective and more efficient infrastructure and services threaten no one.

The British and Irish governments' approach of placing their own heads in the sand is no longer sustainable. In an Amárach poll for the Claire Byrne Show, 87% of people in the south stated that they would support unity in the case of a hard border. In the north, the figure in favour of unity has exceeded 50% for the first time.

Despite the significant Brexit threats, the obvious logic of self-determination and unity, and significant growth in support for unity across Ireland, the establishment continue to exist in a bubble of denial.

Liam Mellows correctly predicted that partition would give rise two establishments on both sides of the border that would come to depend on the border for their power. The establishment parties all rely on the border for their own legitimisation. Without the border establishment parties in the north would become regional parties, would disappear altogether, or would lose the unique selling point that buys them leverage with voters. The establishment parties in the south would lose much of their power and become regional parties in the case of Irish unity. The self-interest of establishment parties north and south directs them away from fulfilling the wishes of the Irish people.

The Dublin and London governments need to create a mechanism where citizens on both sides of the border can start the process of mapping out what a post-Brexit, post-unification Ireland will look like. Aontú in government will initiate a New Ireland Forum to facilitate broad discussion on an all-Ireland future.
The Right to Representation in the Dáil for All Ireland

2019 marked the centenary of the establishment of Dáil Éireann. The decision to create an Irish national parliament was a powerful action that put into practice the right of the Irish people to determine our own affairs. It is again time to take bold, assertive and practical steps towards national self-determination. While establishment parties are content to endorse others that do so, Aontú offers practical and principled steps towards Irish self-determination.

The Right to National Self-Determination

Self-Determination is a civil and human right that should be afforded to all Irish Citizens across Ireland. Brexit has highlighted the drastic cost of allowing Westminster to determine the future of the people of the north of Ireland. Tory MPs know little and care even less about society here. Yet they determine the future of everyone in Ireland, north and south.

Ireland’s future, north and south, ought to be determined in Ireland. Westminster’s sway remains a millstone around the neck of our country. The Westminster establishment has for too long stunted our evolution, distorted relationships between fellow countrymen and women and harmed our collective development. We are committed to forging an independent and united Ireland in Ireland.

An All-Ireland Dáil

101 years ago, Irish MPs, north and south, refused to attend Westminster and established the First Dáil. This was a practical step towards Irish Self-Determination. These men and women took this step because they knew that decisions made close to the people that they affect are better decisions. Citizens can influence those decisions and hold decision makers to account. The first TDs also knew only too well that London would never make decisions in Ireland’s best interest. This has not changed in 100 years.

The formation of the First Dáil was a watershed event in Irish history. The decision to create an Irish national parliament was a powerful action that put into practice the right of the Irish people to determine our own affairs. The Dáil that Countess Markievicz, Cathal Brugha and others established was a national parliament, not a partitionist one. Aontú affirms the right of all the people of Ireland, north and south, to representation in a national parliament.
A Dáil For All

Practical Steps to Achieve All-Ireland Representation

In recent weeks Aontú proposed the All-Ireland Representation Bill. The purpose of this Bill is to provide for Dáil representation for of citizens in the north. Aontú affirms the right of all Irish citizens throughout Ireland to have democratic representation in the Dáil. This Bill would be the first practical step toward the re-establishment of a truly national parliament on the lines of the one established by Markievicz and Brugha, and foreseen before them by Tone and Emmet. The All-Ireland Representation Bill would allow those who are elected as MPs in the north of Ireland to speak in the Dáil.

The Cost of Westminster Rule

In recent months, Westminster undemocratically imposed an extreme abortion regime on the north. That was a tragic development, and one which was shockingly welcomed and celebrated by Sinn Féin, a party which claims to oppose Westminster’s rule. Westminster’s undemocratic actions were facilitated by the SDLP, a party claiming to be both pro-life and in favour of Irish self-determination. Aontú is the only all-Ireland party committed to both Irish self-determination and the human right to life.

Westminster is intent on imposing a decision taken in Britain to leave the EU upon the people of the north, despite a majority in the north being opposed to such a measure. Westminster’s actions will further embed partition. To remove the politics of austerity, boom and bust economics, to deliver adequate services related to housing, health, education, agus le forbairt na Ghaeilge a chur chun cinn, people in Ireland, north and south, must move beyond the crippling politics of colonial rule and make decisions for ourselves. We can only do that with an all-Ireland approach. All-Ireland representation in the Dáil is crucial to achieving that.

Practical Steps to Irish Unity: The New Ireland Forum

Aontú is also calling on the Irish government to invite all shades of political opinion across the whole of Ireland to attend a New Irish Forum to plan and build for the future. The Forum would begin the practical planning to map out the process of economic and service convergence in both parts of the country and to prepare for the final constitutional settlement in the north.

Aontú’s strategy is based on the understanding that positive change in the north and south, such as ending poverty and providing greater educational opportunities, can realistically only come about in Ireland, not in Westminster.
Crime and Anti-Social Behaviour

The brutal dismembering and burning of 17 year old Keane Mulready-Woods; the murder and sexual assault of 14 year old Ana Kriégel; two people in a car shot near Dublin Airport; a never-ending murderous feud in Dublin; armed Gardaí patrolling the streets of Longford; guns being discharged in broad day light in Drogheda; petrol bombs being thrown at a courthouse in Trim; a gun-murder rate six times higher than England’s; 2,248 weapons and explosives offences in 2018, an increase of 10% according to the CSO; increases in the attempted rates of murder, sexual assaults, kidnappings, and drug offences.

Violent crime is terrorising the people of Leo Varadkar’s Ireland.

Aontú’s Proposals

Restore the Numbers & Morale of An Garda Síochána

Under Fine Gael, the so-called Law & Order Party, the numbers and infrastructures of the Gardaí have been decimated leaving the Gardaí in a state of crisis and the citizens of Ireland increasingly vulnerable. Garda numbers are down, this is especially affecting community Gardaí. In 2009, the state's population was 4,459,300 with approximately 14,377 Gardaí. In 2019, the state's population stood at 4,880,000. Garda numbers should have been increased to 16,000 to keep Garda numbers in line with population increases.

As of now, there are 14,500 Gardaí. Garda resources have been left unevenly distributed. Vast areas of rural Ireland are served by only a handful of Gardaí. Hundreds of towns and villages have no Garda stations at all. Growing urban areas have no Garda stations either. In growing urban areas, communities are served by part-time Garda Stations.

The decimation in Garda presence throughout communities has contributed to the decline in Garda morale – in addition to scandals involving mismanagement and abdications of responsibility. The Association of Garda Sergeants and Inspectors have said that they "are now witnessing the human impact of ... seven years of austerity".

Aontú calls for the recruitment of additional Gardaí and dispersion of these additional Gardaí to tackle crime across the country, and restore morale and faith in An Garda Síochána.

Investment in drug rehabilitation and detox services

Villages, towns and cities throughout Ireland are awash with drugs. In an eleven-year period there were a total of 6,697 poisoning deaths and deaths among drug users. This is an equivalent to the population of the town of Ballinasloe being wiped out. Drug related deaths increase while government investments decrease. Ireland has now one of the highest rates of drug use in Europe and rising as resources go down.
Crime and Anti-Social Behaviour

Two people die from drug-related causes in Ireland every day. In towns and cities throughout the state the scale of this humanitarian disaster is not being met by the corresponding response. In the centre of our streets in broad day light drugs are being sold and consumed with all the resulting consequences. It is not being policed sufficiently and neither are there the necessary detox or rehabilitation services available.

Invest in local communities that are blighted by criminal gangs

Ensure that there are real economic alternatives for young people who are being preyed upon by drugs gangs. This must not just happen in fits and starts. Economic investment must be weighted to reduce deprivation and inequality.

Actual Community Facilities

Community facilities need to be provided to keep children productively occupied. There are so many publicly owned buildings not in use. Throughout Ireland there are empty school buildings, due to excessive red tape and insurance issues regarding which people can use the facilities. Services must be central to these communities. Community groups such as scouts, sports clubs and youth clubs are drip-fed funding, making the provision of positive productive activities for young people extremely difficult.

Mandatory Drug-Driving Tests

Make drug-driving tests mandatory where requested by Gardaí. This will reduce demand for drugs and protect safe and conscientious drivers on the road. The fight against drugs cannot be won by tackling supply alone.

Mental Health Services

Aontú calls for the adequate funding of, and necessary expansion of mental health services. The reality is that addiction is a mental health issue, and cannot be resolved by law enforcement alone. To combat addiction, to prevent the exploitation of addicts, and to prevent the seduction of young people into lives of crime, it is imperative to have in place the requisite mental health services. The provision of these services will work in tandem with detox and rehabilitation facilities to bring addicts back into our society, and deprive criminal networks of the supplies of buyers they need to keep their criminality on the road.

A New Derelict Sites Act

The Derelict Sites Act has seldom being used by councils. According to some councils it is far too cumbersome to achieve its stated objective. It needs to be reformed to allow for more efficient use, which will make it an effective tool to combat anti-social behaviour. More use of Compulsory Purchase Orders on vacant derelict properties should be made. The government should introduce a Derelict Site Tax.
Crime and Anti-Social Behaviour

Enforce the Public Order Act (1994)

Aontú calls for the consistent and persistent application of the Public Order Act (1994). Enforcement of the legislation will curtail anti-social behaviour, prevent behaviour, particularly amongst young offenders, from escalating into more violent conduct, and will help take back our town centres and ensure our communities’ safety.

Witness Protection Schemes

Reform the in-place witness protection schemes. Proper protection and relocation must be ensured for those who bravely agree to provide evidence in criminal trials. Without their testimony, successful prosecution could not be sustained. Furthermore, harsher penalties should be enacted to punish witness intimidation or witness-tampering.

Neighbourhood Watch & Residence Association Schemes

Strengthen our community protection schemes, namely Neighbourhood Watch and Residence Association groups by providing proper funding, training and support from members of An Garda Síochána. These organisations greatly supplement community policing, and strengthen community bonds in the fight against crime.

Parental Responsibility

Aontú believes that parents/guardians have a role to play to ensure that children do not engage in criminal behaviour or engage in activities that are likely to lead to criminal acts. Parents/guardians need to be supported as they raise their children and act as role models for them. Aontú is developing policies that would be conducive to parents/guardians’ playing a strong role in ensuring that young people do not get diverted towards crime.
Mental Health

Services have been neglected and underfunded for decades. Aontú will change that.

A Vision for Change was published in 2006 as a guide for the direction of mental health services in Ireland. It set out the standard of care across mental health services, but in most areas of Ireland, the Government has not resourced services to the level recommended by this document. This is not surprising when funding allocation is considered: despite consistent evidence that mental health problems account for 13% of the burden of disease internationally, in Ireland only 4.3% of the total health budget is assigned to the treatment of mental illness. Aontú is committed to allocating 10% of the overall health budget to mental health.

Our health services are staffed by highly qualified clinicians, many with training/experience from international centres of excellence. Unfortunately they cannot perform to their optimal level as a result of the constraints under which services attempt to operate. This is one reason why many Irish psychiatrists, mental health nurses, psychologists and other health care professionals employed overseas have little interest in returning to a stretched service where they cannot properly use their skills. There are currently 101 unfilled consultant psychiatrist posts in Ireland.

A bed crisis

In 1985, there were over 12,000 acute psychiatric beds in Ireland, by 2010 the Mental Health Commission recorded 1,138, and since 2010 there have been further reductions in numbers. This reduction was part of the much-needed shift of focus of care from institutions to the community. Unfortunately, this community-based side of this care has not been provided at the level that is required, and furthermore we have too few beds. In recent years, mental health services around Ireland have had to buy beds in the private system due to persistent bed crises in their local services. This means that some patients are being treated over 100 miles from their families and supports.

A knock-on effect of the lack of bed availability is a higher threshold for admission, i.e. people need to be more severely unwell before their admission can be justified, which results in patients suffering from mental health difficulties waiting longer, and some of the most vulnerable ending up homeless or even in the criminal justice system. A shocking 8.3% of remand prisoners have active severe mental difficulties, with a lifetime rate of 17.9%. A Dublin study found that 70% of the homeless population have a formal diagnosis of a mental illness.

Community services – secondary care

Despite the recommendations of the HSE's A Vision for Change (HSE, 2006) and commitments given in HSE Mental Health Operational Plan 2017, the provision of 24/7 community mental health services remains aspirational. In the main, out of hours services are accessed in Emergency Departments (EDs). Given that the policy set out in the National Emergency Medicine Programme states that the ED should not be “the pathway of access to mental health care for
patients with mental ill-health who have no acute medical need”, there is an urgent need for a more appropriate pathway, namely community based 24/7 services. Community mental health teams need to be adequately resourced, adequately staffed and need to have a maximum wait list time of 4 weeks.

Primary care mental health services

People with mild mental difficulties or distress are more appropriately managed in Primary Care than in specialist psychiatric settings, and research suggests this is in line with patient preference. There is a need for urgent expansion of the Counselling in Primary Care programme, which in many areas has a waiting list of many months (in which time the problem has either resolved or deteriorated to the point where secondary care services are required).

Child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS)

The under-resourcing of CAMHS has become a national scandal, with over 3600 on waiting lists and 386 children waiting over 1 year for assessment. This is particularly concerning as delay in treatment of mental illness is associated with poorer long-term outcomes. The Taoiseach has stated this is “not acceptable”, but the government he has led has not taken action: waiting lists have grown since he first took office as minister for health.

Suicide prevention by means reduction

The international experience tells us that when access to lethal means is reduced, suicide levels fall. This was first observed in Britain with the changeover from lethal coal gas to the less toxic natural gas during the 1960s. Not alone did the numbers of people dying by suicide by gas drop, the overall suicide rates dropped by one-third.

Similarly, the reduction of paracetamol pack sizes resulted in a reduction in death by paracetamol poisoning by 43%: 68 lives are saved per annum in the UK alone. In Ireland there have been a number of very progressive initiatives to address self-harm in hospitals via the excellent National Clinical Programme in Self Harm (self-harm is one of the risk factors for death by suicide), and to address suicide via a number of public health initiatives. However, means reduction is another facet of prevention which needs to be implemented in areas where there are patterns of intentional deaths. For example, in areas where there are high numbers of drownings, tracts of water from which rescue is difficult need to be made inaccessible to the public.

Acute or General Medical Hospital Settings

There is growing evidence which demonstrates that the integration of mental and physical healthcare results in improved outcomes across both domains. The speciality of Liaison Psychiatry is central to such developments, both in terms of services development and the underlying research.
Mental Health

Other specialist services and settings

The publication of the Specialist Perinatal Mental Health Model of Care is welcome, but many maternity units in Ireland remain without specialist perinatal mental health teams. International best practice for mothers with postnatal mental health issues who require inpatient treatment is specialist Mother and Baby units, where a mother can be admitted with her baby. In Ireland we have no such units, meaning that new mothers who require inpatient treatment are separated from their babies. This is a scandal from a government that has claimed to care about pregnant women and mothers.

Eating disorders are common in Ireland, and are serious, life threatening conditions, but services remain non-existent in Ireland with only public 3 beds for South Dublin. Inpatient beds may be bought in the private hospitals if local non-specialist treatment fails, but they cannot accept the most severe patients who remain in general units. This is a serious gap in the service and needs to be addressed as a priority.

Ethnic minority groups

Although ethnic minorities internationally have similar rates of major mental illness to that of the general population, certain groups are at increased risk of mental health problems, for example refugees have higher rates (10-fold) of PTSD. In the UK, white people have been found to be more likely to receive treatment following self-harm. Minority groups report barriers in accessing services, including a lack of understanding of the socio-economic context, paucity of information and communication and language barriers.

In addition, our own indigenous ethnic minority group, Irish Travellers, suffer higher rates of mental ill-health and a significantly elevated suicide rate compared to the rest of the population: Traveller men are 7 times more likely to die by suicide than non-Traveller men. The All-Ireland Traveller Health Study found that Travellers were less likely to use mental health and counselling services, and more likely to report they found them to be inadequate. Given the significant disadvantage that such groups are at, it is essential that there are services designed to optimise engagement of high-risk groups, and that they are culturally appropriate and accessible.

Sláintecare

In devising the Sláintecare programme, which sets out Government policy for healthcare in Ireland over the next 10 years, the Government established an Advisory Council, which did not include any psychiatric expertise, or indeed any input from secondary care mental health services. It also fails to make any provision for the integration of mental and physical health treatments for comorbid conditions, despite this being a priority in international health. This suggests that mental healthcare is not a priority for this government.
A new dynamic for Irish enterprises and the economy

Irish Enterprise and the Economy

Enterprise enables the economy to serve the needs and meet many of the aspirations of the Irish people. Aontú seeks to attract and retain Foreign Direct Investment while affirming, supporting and rewarding Irish companies in creating jobs and generating exports. Aontú celebrates Irish enterprises that are sustainable and make the best possible use of our natural resources. Equally, we support those who build Ireland’s capabilities to engage with the opportunities of the global digital economy. All of this requires identifying and addressing those factors relating to Ireland as a hub for Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) as well as those that are holding back our Irish companies.

Foreign Direct Investment

Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) is a crucial component of Irish enterprise policy. FDI accounts for just over 10% of total employment, much of it in high-tech, knowledge-intensive sectors employing our young graduates. FDI generates some 65% of our exports which is vitally important to a small trade dependent economy like Ireland.

Aontú acknowledges FDI policy as a success story. It has brought employment and higher living standards to many people around our country. It’s important that the state safeguards FDI and all of the hard work invested by the IDA over the decades attracting Multinational Companies (MNCs) to our country.

Corporate Tax and Multinational Companies

Corporate Tax (CT) accounts for about 15% of total tax revenue. Nonetheless, MNCs pay 80% of CT, contributing to the funding of our public services. These are all important measures in terms of our national welfare.

The reality underlying all of this is that MNCs are mobile. They operate within a highly competitive environment, both within the EU and globally. They have options in terms of where to locate. That, of course, works both ways. We in Aontú will pursue a sustainable strategy to continue to attract FDI into Ireland and to work with different stakeholders, including our third level institutions and local democracy to engage with MNCs.

The Management of Foreign Direct Investment

We are also realistic. There are important FDI policy challenges that must be confronted and resolved in the national interest. In particular, the importance of supporting our domestic companies, fairness in taxation and, also, mitigating the vulnerability of our economy to the impact of external “shocks” on FDI. Over dependence on individual MNCs carries risks.
Jobs and Enterprise

There are also other issues that need to be better managed. Currently, FDI inflows are primarily drawn to Dublin. This has exacerbated pressures on infrastructure in the capital from housing to road traffic. The resulting dysfunctionality within the housing market has created enormous problems of affordability for young families. It is also a humanitarian crisis in terms of homelessness.

This is an enterprise crisis in the making. That's important for existing companies and for our capacity to attract and retain companies into an uncertain and volatile future. The lack of housing acts as a break on balanced development not alone in Dublin but across the country. It contributes to wage inflation and undermines our international competitiveness.

Ireland is moving towards becoming a ‘City State’, with Dublin increasingly semi-detached from its national hinterland, not unlike London. Aontú believes this phenomenon has not been properly recognized let alone addressed. A continuation of existing trends would undermine and subvert our cohesion as a country. It is intrinsically regressive. We will press for more balanced national development, one which relieves pressure on our major cities and which benefits the whole country. There are now three Ireland’s; Dublin, a sprawling commuter belt and regions under significant pressure. Aontú opposes this fundamentally. We believe in one Ireland.

MNC’s make an important contribution to Irish enterprises in communities across the nation. It is important to acknowledge this contribution. At the same time, Aontú is clear that the links between FDI aided companies and Irish enterprises could and must be significantly enhanced. We will advocate strongly for policies that strengthen these links, both operationally and strategically.

EU Pressures on Ireland’s Business Model

There is also a wider and pressing reality that Aontú believes must be addressed. Ireland’s industrial and enterprise policy, our “Business Model”, is over-dependent on ‘bargain basement’ effective CT rates. This leaves us exposed to EU and international pressures aimed at greater tax harmonization and preventing unfair competition for FDI. These pressures will inevitably increase in post-Brexit Europe.

The debacle of Apple Inc and the pressures being exerted by the EU on Ireland’s CT regime all leave Ireland vulnerable. Aontú are especially conscious of EU pressures to remove the national veto on taxation. CT rates that are excessively low, that may even be close to zero, mean that MNCs are not contributing their fair share to the economy. This is not acceptable. It has also invited criticism from larger EU member countries, including France and Germany, to target Ireland’s CT regime, directly and through the Commission.

Economic Sovereignty

Aontú is the party of Irish political and economic sovereignty. We believe Ireland’s success in attracting FDI from outside of the EU benefits the wider EU. Also, compared with the dominant EU states, Ireland has a small population. Our location on the periphery puts us at competitive disadvantage compared with countries located at or adjacent to the EU “core”.
Jobs and Enterprise

In addition we have ceded our monetary and much of our fiscal autonomy to the EU. It is imperative, therefore, that we retain our limited policy instruments in the interests of our country. Aontú will defend Ireland’s right to determine economic and tax policy 100%.

However, the Irish political establishment is itself one of the largest threats to Ireland’s tax sovereignty. Had the establishment opted in the past, when it had the opportunity to do so, for an effective rate of CT at 12.5% it is unlikely that Ireland would today be in the international crosshairs.

Building Competitive Advantage

Ireland’s FDI exposure must be tackled by developing key competitive advantages in areas other than our CT. This means significant infrastructural investment in Housing, Information and Communications Technology, Broadband, Roads, Rail, Sustainable Energy, Research and Development, Education and in healthy living environments will help reduce our dependence and move us towards a more sustainable strategy to build national competitive advantage.

Aontú believes we should go further and manage our national physical infrastructure in the same way as we now manage our financial reserves, debt and investments. These investments will in turn boost indigenous enterprise and the wider economy while also significantly enhancing the lives of Irish people and, in particular, rural Ireland which is increasingly being left behind.

Indigenous Enterprise, still the Poor Relation

FDI is widely seen by Government as the glamorous domain of state enterprise policy. Small to Medium Enterprises (SMEs) and micro-enterprise are the worthy but ‘poor relation’. Currently, indigenous SMEs are represented by a Junior Minister without the necessary clout to press forward proactive innovative policies. This stale mind-set is not acceptable. The results of the Irish SME Quarterly Business Trends Survey for Q4’18 indicate that 9 out of 12 ‘confidence indicators’ show declines, on a par with the previous quarter. Aontú believes that the time has come for SMEs to have a Cabinet Minister with a separate Department to ensure that indigenous industry receives the priority it deserves.

National Infrastructure

Both Indigenous Enterprise and FDI will benefit from improvements in National Infrastructure. However, our SMEs benefit even more. SMEs are distributed more evenly throughout the state than FDI and, as a result, suffer more from the current imbalanced distribution of infrastructure. Road, Rail, Energy and Water all play a role in the location of businesses. They need significant investment and new innovative support.

The prevalence of Post Offices, Schools, Garda stations and other state services determine footfall in regional and rural areas. They are also vital elements in the social infrastructure. While change is a necessary part of development, allowing the social infrastructure to wither on the vine demonstrates a failure to understand the importance of these institutions and to re-imagine their functionality.
The uneven distribution of Broadband throughout the state underlines, more than most other factors, the disparities that exist between enterprise and locations.

**The National Broadband Plan**

The National Broadband Plan (NBP) is a national failure. The current government is simply not able to manage large infrastructural projects. The failure to manage the cost of the National Children's Hospital is mirrored in a similar failure to manage the NBP. Between them, these failures will cost the Irish people billions of euro. The projected cost of the National Broadband Plan is now anything between €500 million and €3 billion. The procurement process started in 2012 and has still not been completed. The technology is moving faster than procurement and, as a result, a number of private sector firms are already making provisions for broadband supply into much of what was covered by the NBP.

The stark reality is that expenditures to date are “sunk costs”. It is necessary to start again. Tenders should now be sought for far smaller geographic areas. This would allow more firms to compete. Solutions should be tailored to both topography and demography. State infrastructure should be used where at all possible. An efficient national broadband supply is crucial to the growth of our economy. A 2018 Ofcom report indicated that the adoption of broadband and speed improvements to UK GDP resulted in an annual increase of 0.47%, or a rise in GDP of 6.7% over the fifteen years of the study.

**Increase in the Cost of Doing Business**

Labour costs are increasing in Ireland, impacting on our competitiveness. A major cause of wage-push inflation is the dysfunctionality that has been allowed to build up in the Housing market. Wage inflation will continue as long as the current government fails to deal with the underlying imbalance of the demand for, and supply of, housing. A related cost factor is Commercial Property rent inflation. This is having a serious impact in many areas of the country. Currently rates for empty commercial sites are set by local councils, but are set low enough to leave owners under little added pressure to find new commercial leaseholders. An increase in the rates for empty commercial premises, and a minimum set at government level albeit applied by local councils would see a drop in rent amounts as owners are encouraged to lease out their sites to avoid paying the increased vacancy rates. In turn these sites then become locations of viable enterprise and re-energise local areas.

Congestion is now near crisis proportion. This imposes multiple, and very real, costs. Dublin is the most congested city in Europe. This is paid for through extra fuel and labour costs, as well as time wasted. Time is the most precious resource for business and family. Sitting in a car or lorry on congested roads is not a good use of time.

Legal costs also represent a significant burden on business. World Bank analysis suggests that enforcing a commercial contract in Ireland costs more, and takes more time, than the Office of Economic Co-operation and Development average.
Jobs and Enterprise

The appreciation of the euro-sterling exchange rate in the last number of years has created a serious challenge for Irish exports to the British market, eroding the competitiveness of Irish companies. This is, of course, a consequence of the loss of exchange-rate control arising from our membership of the Eurozone. Exchange rate risk will be prolonged if uncertainty about Brexit continues.

Cost and (non-)availability of Credit

The current government has created a near banking duopoly where two banks control some 85% of the market. Even in an era of on-line banking, this gives these banks very significant ‘supplier power’ over the costs and availability of credit. There are also “switching costs”. All of this bears especially heavily on SMEs and start-ups.

The reality confronting Irish enterprises is that the very necessary stabilisation of the banking system has not been accompanied by a conscious effort on the part of the banks to re-imagine their role in repairing the damage inflicted by their behaviour on lives, businesses and the national interest.

Too many start-up and early stage Irish enterprises find it hard to access credit. Venture capital is risk-averse and scarce. The cost of credit compared with prevailing low interest rates is high. The discretionary powers of branch management have been replaced by inflexible ‘management by algorithm’.

The problems and the lack of creative thinking go even deeper. The national network of Post Offices is being run down, eroding the social capital of rural Ireland. The scope for Credit Unions, with their embedded sense of social purpose, to play a larger role in serving the national interest, continues to be constrained by government, despite some liberalisation since 2016. The current government still impedes the development of a ‘Public Banking’ system in Ireland despite the fact that this sector works well in a number of EU countries, including Germany.

Input Costs: a burden on Enterprise

Escalating Insurance costs are imposing enormous pressures on SMEs. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that thousands of jobs are at risk from rising insurance costs. The pace of reform in this area has been glacial.

Aontú supports the Alliance for Insurance Reform in seeking to prevent exaggerated and misleading claims and believes these should be pursued through a Garda Insurance Fraud Unit. Aontú also seeks consistency in the calculation of awards at realistic levels and also transparency on how premiums are calculated and claims are settled.
Jobs and Enterprise

Business Rates

A priority for Aontú is a systematic review of commercial rates across Ireland in a cost-neutral reallocation exercise. We believe businesses should pay rates for the services provided by the state, but that rates should be reflective of the size, scale and profitability of a business. This is not the case at present and it is a major burden on domestic enterprises.

E-Marketplace

The Irish are the biggest international online shoppers in the world. In total, Irish consumers spent over €6.5 billion in 2017, and this is set to rise to over €10 billion by 2020. Meanwhile, local spend, particularly in town centres continues to struggle. Shops are closed and jobs are shed.

Aontú will work to establish an online e-commerce platform, providing local businesses an opportunity to compete in the digital age. E-marketplace would make local products and services available to consumers across the county and into the global marketplace within a click of a button. A countywide, united approach would ensure it is a cost-effective, professional and mobile friendly service for the consumer, while also maximising online traffic for the retailer. Technology should not be a burden – it should be a platform.

Mis-use of Irish Branding

For years, the agri-food sector has provided evidence that the ‘Ireland’ brand is being mis-sold to confuse consumers who do wish to buy Irish, for example, by labelling something as ‘Irish’ when it is simply packaged here.

Aontú believe that “Brand Ireland“ is a national resource that is being misused. We will initiate a campaign to urge the food catering industry to use domestic suppliers and to increase monitoring of ‘Irish goods‘ labelling.

Strengthening Linkage of Irish Enterprise to MNC

The ‘Linkage Programme 1985’ was established to develop a supply base in Ireland that would maximise local purchases of Irish materials, components and services by foreign-owned enterprises located in Ireland. Reports show the programme was successful for a short period. However, the inability of Irish companies to enlarge their scale for a variety of reasons constrains the potential of the linkage programme to create more jobs as well as added value for MNCs. Aontú strongly affirms work by the state enterprise agencies to achieve this objective.
Jobs and Enterprise

improve Access to Public Procurement Contracts for SMEs

Public procurement acts as a critical stimulus for the domestic economy. It is an important driver of Ireland’s economy, both in terms of employment and employment standards across the economy. Aontú seeks a system of managing the procurement process that creates opportunities for enterprises and value for the public and society. We believe government has to be more ambitious in generating an economic return on public spend on goods, services and capital projects. This can be achieved by making public procurement more visible and more accessible to Small to Medium Irish Businesses.
Workers' Rights

Committed to fair pay for fair work to allow fair living conditions.

Workplace Justice

Aontú is committed to justice in the workplace and the rights of all workers on the island of Ireland to get fair pay for fair work to allow fair living conditions. We affirm the dignity of work and the right of workers to equitable pay and working environment.

Low pay and precarious work affects the lives of many workers across the island of Ireland. In many sectors and firms workers are treated without respect and with limited guarantees to paid hours. Recent legislative provisions on zero-hour contracts and banded hours are welcome, however it remains to be seen how these provisions will be applied in practice and what loopholes will appear.

We need a strong and well-resourced agency to inspect compliance with labour legislation including practices in relation to minimum pay, contract work and rights to parental leave and sick pay.

Zero hour contracts should be outlawed once and for all across the whole island of Ireland with no opt outs by employers.

Exploitative work such as ‘bogus self-employment’ where workers are forced by employers to declare themselves as self-employed in order for the employers to avoid tax and PRSI needs to be rooted out. This type of exploitation also results in workers being denied rights and safeguards that should go with their contract, as well as the state losing out on millions in tax.

The national minimum wage must be sufficient to lift the 100,000 working poor out of poverty. The living wage in Ireland is calculated as EUR11.90 per hour whereas the current minimum wage for those over 20 years old is €9.80. A ‘living wage’ is what is deemed the necessary earnings to allow the average person to achieve a minimum acceptable standard of living. The minimum wage should reflect the living wage, albeit with separate formulae for the Greater Dublin Area and the rest of the island given the massive differences in cost of living.

Availing of work, education or training should be a right for all, worker and non-worker alike regardless of socio economic background, location, age or gender. Lifelong learning needs to be encouraged both for the benefit of the economy and society as a whole. Finland is a good case study for this, where one in five adults are engaged in self-motivated study at any one time. Implementation of a ‘Job or Training’ guarantee should start with persons under 25 and be extended gradually to the entire workforce.
Workers' Rights

A right to decent income during retirement must be established. While progress has been made over recent decades, many workers are extremely vulnerable to losing pension rights due to ever changing market conditions. The current pensions structure also means that state contributions rather than residency are the primary driver behind pension payments. The way to secure pensions is to link employee, employer and government contributions as part of a reformed social insurance model based on residency. All residents of pensionable age should receive a full state pension rather than partial payments. Like the minimum wage and the living wage; the minimum pension needs to reflect a living pension. No person in Ireland should be choosing between food and heat.

It is vital that workers have access to a range of services and supports including payment during periods of sickness, parental leave and study leave. We should be moving towards best practice in Scandinavian countries.

Finally, it is imperative 101 years since the establishment of the First Dáil that workers have an unambiguous right to collective bargaining and trade union membership across the whole island. A constitutional referendum should be held to enshrine this right in Bunreacht na hÉireann.
Farming & Rural Ireland

Farming is a key sector of Irish society. It is key to our food security. It is the backbone of our rural communities and it generates significant economic activity and employment. It produces 7% of the gross value added (€13.9 billion), 9.8% of merchandise exports and it provides almost 10% of all employment.

There are 162,500 farms throughout Ireland. That figure has been falling continuously over the last number of generations. This is happening in large part due to the economic difficulties involved in farming. Like most sectors of the Irish economy statistical data on Ireland as a whole is in short supply.

In 2019, beef farmers were plunged into crisis. The Fine Gael-Fianna Fáil Cartel has washed its hands of responsibility towards beef farmers and their families. In contrast, Aontú has been to the fore in defending the rights of farmers to make a living. We launched the Equitable Beef Pricing Bill to ensure that farmers receive a fair price from the powerful processors and supermarkets for their produce. We are committed to pursuing the Equitable Beef Pricing Bill in 2020 as the first step in the right direction towards rebalancing market disparities and dysfunction.

Farming and rural communities across Ireland would benefit much more from joint north-south approaches. Currently there is a hard border when it comes to joined-up information in Irish agriculture. This is a major challenge in the economic management of Ireland. Aontú is committed to rectifying the information gap.
Farming & Rural Ireland

**Aontú’s Equitable Beef Pricing Bill and Farm Incomes**

Farming is not in good shape. Only 35% of farmers are considered to be independently economically sustainable. That means that in only 35% of cases, farm income is sufficient to cover all the costs of the farm. A further 35% of farms are only economically sustainable because a family member supplements the income of the farm by working outside the farm. According to Teagasc the remaining 30% of the farms are not economically sustainable.

The average wage of a farmer is €24,000. This is less than the average industrial wage. Average farm income in 2018 fell by 15% while dairy incomes fell by 22%. Tillage incomes bucked the trend and rose 6%.

Aontú’s Equitable Beef Pricing Bill is aimed at ensuring sustainability and fairness for the beef farm sector. For too long, beef barons have held unchallenged dominance over beef farmers, generating hundreds of millions of euro in profit while family farms struggle to remain viable. These entities exert massive buyer-power and significantly determine the terms of trade and the price of beef.

The power of the beef processors is having a knock-on effect in rural communities as very low levels of farm income is causing stagnation in local economies. Aontú is committed to rectifying this economic injustice. **Aontú’s Equitable Beef Pricing Bill** is a necessary first step in achieving fairness for Irish farmers. The race to the bottom driven by the disproportionate power of beef processors needs to be challenged.

Unlike the establishment political cartel, Aontú will stand up for farmers and rural communities. No other party has given the necessary support to make the Equitable Beef Pricing Bill a reality. We need citizens to support Aontú so that we can make the necessary positive changes for Irish farmers and society generally that other parties are not willing to make.
The potential effects of Brexit remain threats to the economy of Ireland as a whole, but no sector is more vulnerable than that the agri-food sector. Difficulties in this sector have already started to manifest themselves. The Euro/Sterling exchange rate has already changed, reducing export competitiveness and increasing import competitiveness.

Brexit will reduce the size of the EU budget. Agriculture comprises 40% of the EU budget. Lower CAP spending will lead to lower farm incomes in Ireland. Higher trade costs will develop between Ireland and Britain in the case of tariffs barriers and non-tariff barriers.

Irish beef will be particularly exposed to Brexit’s economic effects. 90% of Irish beef production is exported and more than half of this is to Britain. 90% of Irish milk is exported and more than half of Irish cheddar is exported Britain.

Farmers in the north face massive fall in their incomes. Real farm incomes have already fallen in 2018. No replacement has been identified for the £286 million of payments to farmers from the EU’s CAP. Sheep is a large segment of Farming in the north. 50% of sheep are sold south of the border for processing and are then shipped to France.

Aontú is committed to all-Ireland approaches in farming. It makes sense that the agri-food sector in Ireland is treated as one. Aontú will support measures that erode the north-south partition of the agri-food sector. The sector is each jurisdiction is heavily dependent on the other. It is time to move towards a system of farming where the border becomes obsolete.
Aontú’s Proposals for Irish Farming

• Aontú will pursue meaningful north-south convergence in the Irish agri-foods sector.

• Aontú seeks a future trading relationship between EU member states and Britain based on regulatory convergence and smooth customs arrangements.

• Aontú in government will work with other states to provide a comprehensive package of supports to the agri-food sector to protect the sector from Brexit’s negative economic effects.

• Aontú will work to ensure that there are new supports for market diversification in the Irish agri-foods sector. This is important in order to reduce Irish farmers’ and agri-food companies’ dependency on the British market.

• The shortfall from CAP that will arise from Brexit must be replaced by state supports in the short to medium term.

• Given that the average farming wage is €24,000, CAP needs to be reformed to protect small family farms, many of which are struggling to survive in poverty. The government must join the dots. Ireland needs to decarbonise our energy. Farmers are well placed to produce small scale wind energy, small scale solar energy and bio digestion. This could add as much as €10,000 to their annual income. Ireland is the last country in Europe to provide a feed-in tariff to allow this to be done.

• Aontú in government will root-out unfair trading practices in the food-supply chain that allow factories and large supermarkets to abuse their buyer-power. There needs to be transparency with regards the margins in the food supply chain. If a firm is taking excessive profits then customers should know this information to allow them to make their purchasing choices accordingly. Uncompetitive trading practices need to be rooted-out by the Competition Authority.

• There are a range of negative practices that arise due to the inordinate buyer-power of a few large buyer-firms and processors: Late payments for perishable food products; last minute order cancellations; unilateral changes to contracts; refusal to enter into a written contract; returning unsold or wasted products; and payment for buyer’s marketing. These must be brought to an end to achieve fairness for Irish farming.

• We urgently need a new deal for farmers to support them to protect our threatened habitats and species. Biodiversity and agriculture go hand in hand. It is necessary that Farmers are given an explicit role in the protection of that biodiversity and they are financially supported in taking on this role.
Environment

Building a sustainable and environmentally friendly nation.

Our Inheritance

We have all been passed this earth we live on and will pass it on again to each new generation, and have a moral responsibility to hand it forwards in at least as good a shape as we received it. Given that today’s earth has been made ill with pollution, fumes and toxic bi-products we have the obligation not only to hand it on as we have received it, but to remedy the damage done to date due to recent decades of rapid industrial and commercial momentum. We are living in a time of mass species extinction, manmade global warming, and unprecedented pollution of our oceans, all of which threaten the lives, futures and cultures of people and habitats around the world. Aontú seeks to build a sustainable and environmentally friendly nation while not strangling our small enterprises and traditional skills.

Energy Efficiency

Much of Ireland’s housing, residential and commercial properties are subpar with regards energy efficiency and while some work is being carried out in the insulation of these properties, it is not to the scale or the depth that is necessary.

The Transport System

The transport system is almost exclusively powered by fossil-fuels. While there is a larger uptake of electric vehicles this year, this increase is from a tiny base. The process has been a failure to date. The recharging infrastructure and incentives are not sufficient to kick start the sector. Many of these incentives do not have to be of a significant financial scale. Time limited parking, bus lane use and toll benefits could help this process.

Public transport is the most efficient way to move people around our country, it relieves congestion and radically reduces our carbon footprint. It should, if it were run ethically, be accessible to people from different income backgrounds. Aontú will significantly increase the provision of public transport, including the most functional timetabling of services, while significantly reducing the cost to the consumer.
Aontú is committed to rail transport for the whole country. Rail has a crucial role to play in developing a more environmentally friendly Ireland and positively affecting people’s lives by providing a reliable alternative to unsustainable and dangerous levels of congestion on roads. Expansion of railways in commuter-belt counties is a major Aontú priority. With Peadar Tóibín as the chairperson of the Meath on Track Campaign, Aontú is committed to the construction of a railway connecting Dublin to Meath and beyond.

Similarly, light rail models must be developed for cities throughout Ireland. Providing improved public transport must be a priority if Ireland is to become a healthier and better-planned country.

Alternative Travel

In most cities, towns and rural areas cyclists compete for road space with cars, vans and heavy articulated trucks. As a result, the vast majority of children no longer cycle to school. This creates traffic pinch points at schools in towns, cities and villages throughout the state, and makes arrival at those schools hazardous for children even walking from car door to gate. The lack of safe walking and cycling routes has added to the obesity epidemic that is hurting our children and adults alike. National cycling routes incorporate roads that vary dramatically in their safety and so stretches of these are unsuitable for families or groups.

Irish Native Biodiversity

Ireland’s biodiversity is being hammered. This is dangerous at a number of different levels. Even if you set aside our responsibility as a society to protect the diversity and richness of the flora and fauna in our natural environment, there is still a significant economic cost to the destruction of our environment. It is estimated that Ireland’s biodiversity contributes €2.6 billion each year to the Irish economy through ecosystem services. Ireland has traded for generations on its image of being a green and natural island. We have made billions of euro from food and tourism on the basis of this image.

Inland Waterways and Fisheries

The native freshwater fish population in many of Ireland’s rivers has been decimated by netting, sewage, silting and agricultural pollutants. Half of Ireland’s rivers have had angling prohibited due to lack of fish stock, though angling in itself is not a major contributory factor due to the very low return.
Environment

Many of the problems lie in coastal fish farming where disease and lice breed and spread to the wild fish stocks. Mortality of salmon stocks at sea has increased due to fish farming and fishing practices so that only a tiny fraction of salmon are now returning to our Irish rivers to spawn. This all has a negative impact on our ecosystem but also on our tourism and organic, wild caught produce.

Ireland's Green Public Bank

Aontú proposes the creation of a publicly-owned Irish Green Bank. This new initiative would be instrumental in ensuring that families, communities and small businesses are afforded the necessary financial supports as part of a just transition to a green economy.

People throughout Ireland want to do the right thing for the environment in all areas of their lives. Unfortunately, the cost of living means that many environmentally friendly options are off-limits for too many people.

A publicly owned Green Bank would provide the necessary finance to enable individuals, families and businesses to contribute towards environmentally friendly outcomes without bearing the additional financial burdens that are too often associated with a green future.

For example, Ireland’s Green Public Bank would pursue the public and environmental interest by providing finance for small-scale wind, solar and biodigestion projects, home retrofitting, electric cars and other environmentally friendly and emissions-reducing initiatives.

For-profit banking is not compelled to take sufficient account of the positive externalities that green projects represent when deciding how to allocate their funds. Ireland’s Green Public Bank will play a key role in lowering emissions, ensuring that the goals of the climate action plan are met, and building up a new green economy for Ireland.

Green Public Banking Elsewhere

Green public banking has been successful in the US states of Connecticut and New York, as well as in Germany, Australia and Japan.

Germany’s third-largest bank, KFW, is state owned, and has underwritten energy efficiency upgrades for more than 3.5 million homes.
The Connecticut Green Bank (CGB) has both directly funded green energy projects and stimulated private investment in renewable energy and clean energy. In its first five years of existence the CGB dramatically increased clean energy investment in the state and saved taxpayers money compared to the previous scheme of government grants alone.

Ireland’s Green Public Bank, as proposed by Aontú, would be physically present throughout the country with branches across the thirty-two counties.

**Branches**

Branches based in communities across Ireland will enable Ireland’s Green Public Bank to better respond to the needs of those communities, rather than the central government micromanaging lending. Ireland, as a country, needs to be more responsive to the needs of ordinary people at grassroots level, rather than being driven by the detached thinking of central government.

**Synergy**

In tandem with Aontú’s regional development plans, Green public banking can help focus investment into rural Ireland and bolstered long-neglected regions and communities, such as the midlands.

**Agriculture**

Agriculture would be supported by Ireland’s Green Public Bank to pursue opportunities in environmentally friendly and sustainable areas, such as the promotion of biodiversity and native forestry.
Environment

Agricultural Practices

Given that state funding favours large farmers and that small farms are generally not economically sustainable solely through farming, it follows that survival of farming has meant an industrialisation of practices and acreage in order to produce on a scale large enough to be viable. This requirement on agriculture to produce volume has had the effect of encouraging many unsustainable practices in farming, including destruction of natural habitats, redirection of water for irrigation, soil and water pollutants such as nitrates, soil degradation and bacterial pollutants in well water.

On the other hand, farming has branched out to include the farming of liquid biofuels and forestry, which reduces carbon footprint. There is more work to be done in these areas to encourage farmers to reduce negative impacts whether through grant monies for land set aside for forestry or planted to encourage pollination, crop rotations and green manures to add non artificial nutrients back into the soil, or tax reductions for production of organic products.

The Future

There are obvious and effective ways in which Ireland could quickly make a positive impact on the local environment, and in time on the global environment, saving money and reducing ecological damage over coming years. The benefits would be seen by us but also handed down by us to future generations. The positive impact of an ecologically aware government would improve our tourism economy, our agriculture, our inland fisheries, our native biodiversity, our native traditional skills, and our health. We stand to gain hugely and lose little by making an effort in this area, and given Ireland’s natural beauty and moderate climate we could very easily become a world leader in sustainability.
Insurance

Our general objectives and measures for real reforms in the insurance sector are:

1. PREVENTING exaggerated and misleading claims from being pursued

   - Set up the Garda Insurance Fraud Unit.
   
   - Link Sections 26 and 25 of the Civil Liability Act 2004 so that exaggerated and misleading claims are automatically forwarded to the Gardaí for potential prosecution.
   
   - Oblige lawyers to comply with the duties of candour and inquiry now being applied to Asylum cases.

2. CONSISTENCY in the calculation of awards at realistic and affordable levels

   - Recalibrate the Book of Quantum to reflect international norms and norms already established by the Court of Appeal.
   
   - Redefine and re-balance the “common duty of care” to require the occupier to take a duty of care that is reasonable, practical and proportionate.

3. TRANSPARENCY on how premiums are calculated and claims are settled

   - Produce a schedule of forecast reductions for reforms
   
   - Reinstate the 2003 IIF/IBEC protocol on dealing with claims
   
   - Publish an up to date Key Information Report on Employer and Public Liability insurance claims
   
   - Make a Claim-by-Claim Register available.
An Ghaeilge

Tábhacht na Gaeilge

Is tábhachtach agus is luachmhar le muintir na hÉireann an Ghaeilge toisc gur cuid bhunúsach díonn í. Ceanglaíonn sí lenár dtimpeallacht muid. Is stór saor thar litriocht, ealaíon, amhránaíocht, stair, miotaseolaíocht agus seanchas í. Struchtúr smaointeoireachta atá atá atá uathúil i ndomhan ina bhfuil éagsúlacht teanga á chailleadh ar bhonn bliantúil. Tá an Ghaeilge greanta ar ár n-ainmneacha agus ár dtírdhreach. Tá an Ghaeilge ar na teangacha is sine sa domhan agus ar an teanga choitiantann scríofa is sine san Eoraip.

Teanga phobail atá sa Ghaeilge. Teanga theaghlaigh agus teanga chairde atá inti. Is é an Ghaeilge an dtíracha bhúcháis agus an gcéad teanga oifigiúil. D'ainneoin go bhfuil buntáistí le huileláithreacht an Bhéarla maidir le cumarsáid idirnáisiúnta a éascú níl aon amhras ann go bhfuilimid ag cailleadh, mar náisiún, naisc lenár bhféiniúlacht agus lenár n-oidhreacht shaibhri chultúrtha féin.

Is íorónta é gurb é tionchar na Gaeilge a bhí taobh thiar den chlú a thuill scríbhneoirí móra Béarla na hÉireann – blas sainiúil agus nathcainte ar tugadh ‘Hiberno English’. Dúirt W.B Yeats i dtaca le haistriúcháin ar sheanlitríocht na hÉireann a léamh go raibh siad mar “chief illumination of all my life”. Tá rud éigin an-tochtmarh mhoineas cumais seo Chun dhlí i ngleic le saibhreas na teanga agus go bhfuil an fhéintiúntacht a lú le teanga is léargas seo ar an Ghaeilge a Séanadh.

Bhí an Ghaeilge, áfach, ag meath faoi thús an 20ú haois. Bhí baint mhóir ag córas na scoileanna náisiúnta, a bunaíodh in 1831, le coimisiún leanúnach na Breataine ar Éirinn – oideachas Briotannach chun sochaí, teanga agus féiniúlacht náisiúin a cheimeadh. Tá an t-oideachas go fóill ar na gnéithe is tábhachtaithe de thodhchaí na Gaeilge maidir lena forbairt sa Ghaeltacht agus sa Ghalltacht ar aon. Má bhíonn ní chursaí oideachais i gceart beidh an chumhacht ag ainm abainn scéal agus cinniúint na Gaeilge a mhúiníú.

Tá Aontú tiomanta do mhargadh nua a forbarraithe don Ghaeilge. Ba mhin leathan go mbeadh an Ghaeilge i réim arís mar theanga labhartha a furadh na Gaeltachta agus na bpobail 4ódh agus na hÉireann. Ba mhaith linn go mbeadh a fhos ag teaghlachtaí atá ag smaointeoireacht ar a gcuid páistí a thógáil le Gaeilge go bhfuil todhcháil gheal bhreithmhar i ndán don teanga. Cuideoimid le linn na gcainteoirí agus an bpobal Gaeilge a bhróbaireann go suntasach.

Tá bród agus spreagadh lárnach sa cheist seo. Ní féidir bród agus spreagadh a bhaint amach agus an rialtas de shíor ag laghdú luach na teanga maidir le hinfheistíochta agus le stádas de.

Oideachas mar chróí i bpobail atá ag feidhmiú trí mheán na Gaeilge

Is í an chuid is bunúsach de seo ná deireadh a chur le Béarla éigeantach mar dhea agus an rogha a bheithe ar fáil do gach duine oideachais i nGaeilge a bhláth. Tá tábhacht air atá bearta le hoideachas a sholáthar go luath trí mheán na Gaeilge. Is iomaí sin trácht atá déanta ar na buntáistí atá ann do pháistí a thógáil an dara teanga. Tá go leor fionainn ann a leiríonn go mbíonn buntáistí teanga, smaointeoireachta agus acadúla ag páistí a thógáil go d дальthearghach le Gaeilge ar pháistí ar i an Béarla an t-aon teanga atá acu.
Tá an t-éileamh le haghaidh caighdeáin agus soláthair feabhsaithe Ghaeloideachais ag teacht ó na scoláirí agus ó na tusmitheoirí féin. Faigheann 5% de scoláirí Oideachas i nGaelscoil in ainneoin go bhfuil breis agus 23% de thuismitheoirí á lorg. Is léir go bhfuil rialtas i ndiaidh rialtais ag seasamh in aghaidh an dúshláin le haghaidh breis oideachais trí mheán na Gaeilge.

Dealraíonn sé arís agus arís eile go bhfuil rialtas i ndiaidh rialtais ag fágáil na Gaeilge i leataobh i dtéarmaí tábhachtach de. Nil aon amhras ann mar gheall ar na héilimh bhreise atá á ndéanamh ar achmhainn oidechasála in aismsir seo na gceócháime. Nil aon amhras ann ach oiread go bhfuiltear ann sa bhunaíochta pholaitiúil den tuairim gur caithmeann aimsire í an Ghaeilge nach bhfuil ach béalgrá den chineál contráilte tuillte aici. Ní hionann caighdeáin agus soláthar breise Ghaeloideachais ag gach leibhéal de chónaithe oideachais agus dul san iomaíocht le hoideachas leathan atá úsáideach ó thaobh an gheilleagair de. D'fhéadfadh an dá rud a bheith fíor.

Éileamh feabhsaithe le haghaidh oibrithe atá líofa sa Ghaeilge

Tá deiseanna méadaithe fostaíochta ag teacht chun cinn i mórearnáil na Gaeilge. Tá tóir ar fhoireann atá líofa sna seirbhísí stáit, san Aontas Eorpach, i seirbhísí príobháideacha aistriúcháin, i gcúrsaí scannánaíochta, teilifíse, beochán agus sna Gaeltachtaí. Fágtar go leor post a bhfuil Gaeilge fheidhmüil mar riachtanas iontu gan a bheith líonta. Beidh gá le tuilleadh cainteoirí Gaeilge sa tseirbhísí poiblí nuair a thugtar reachtaíocht isteach, ar nós Acht na Gaeilge agus Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla, thuaidh agus theas.

Oideachas sa Ghaeltacht

Gan an Ghaeltacht caillteann an Ghaeilge go leor doimhneacht agus do saibhreas a bhaineann léi. Mura mbionn an Ghaeilge ina teanga phobail, beidh todhchaí chéad teanga na tíre seo i mbaol beag beann ar láidreacht an chórais oideachais. Tá sé ráite ag sochtheangeolaíochta nach mairfidh an Ghaeilge mar teanga phobail níos faide ná deich mbliana sna Gaeltachtaí de réir an ráta reatha aistrithe teanga.

Is í an fhadhb is suntasaí sa chóras oideachais sa Ghaeltacht agus sa Ghaeltacht ná caighdeán measc an Ghaeilge i measc múinteoir bunscóile agus meánscoile. Is doiligh le scoileanna sna Gaeltachtaí agus le Gaelscoileanna muinteoirí a earcú a bhfuil Gaeilge acu ní amháin ábhair chasta ar nós na fisice agus na bithéolaíochta a theagasc do pháistí. Go rialta biónn ar Ghaelscoileanna agus ar scoileanna Gaeltachta muinteoirí a earcú ó phainéil nár léirigh muinteoir an bith gur féidir leo a bheith ag teagasc trí mheán na Gaeilge.

Anuraidh, nuair a foilsíodh is suntasaí sa chóras oideachais sa Ghaeltacht agus sa Ghaeltacht ná caighdeán measc an Ghaeilge i measc múinteoir bunscóile agus meánscoile. Is doiligh le scoileanna sna Gaeltachtaí agus le Gaelscoileanna a muinteoirí a earcú a bhfuil Gaeilge acu ní amháin ábhair chasta ar nós na fisice agus na bithéolaíochta a theagasc do pháistí. Go rialta biónn ar Ghaelscoileanna agus ar scoileanna Gaeltachta muinteoirí a earcú ó phainéil nár léirigh muinteoir an bith gur féidir leo a bheith ag teagasc trí mheán na Gaeilge.
An Ghaeilge

Meon an Rialtais i leith na Gaeilge sa chóras oideachais


Áirithear leis na gnéite oidechasúla den straitéis seo a chur chun cinn nó páirt-tumoideachas sa Ghaeilge a bheith ar fáil do gach páistí agus Ionad Náisiúnta a bhunú le hagaidh Forbairt Ghaergic Múinteoir Gaeilge, agus ní ceachtach acu siúd á gcur i bhfeidhm ar bhealach ar bith fiúntach. Léiríonn sé seo eapais feidhmí leis an châipéis mar gheall ar easpa achainní, cuí, pleánan agus monatóireacht. Bhí cáipéisí chun dul chun cinn na Straitéise a mheas le bheith amuigh sa samhradh, ach táimid ag fanacht i bhfeidhm go féin. Sa ‘Plean Gníomháchaíochta don Oideachas 2017’ níl aon trácht ar Ghaelscoileanna lasmuigh de cheantair Ghaeltachta.

Tugadh faoi athbhreithniúí ar Ghaeloideachais ó thuaidh in 2008, agus foilsíodh athbhreithniúí an-chuimsitheach ar Ghaeloideachais lár-bhunscoile in 2014 faoi threoí an Aire Oideachais ag an am, John O'Dowd, CTR. Is suntasach nár tugadh faoi athbhreithniúí mar seo, a bhfuil gá leis, ó dheas. Sa tsraith seo cáipéisí, bhí mní linn a chur in iúl an bhail átá ar an Ghaelscoilócht sa tír seo faoi láthair, agus moltaí a chur ar fáil faoin dóigh is fearr chun freastal ar riachtanais Ghaeilgeoirí sa chóras oideachais ina iomláine.

Buntáistí an Ghaeloideachais

Baineann an-chuid páistí a bhfuilí a bhfuilí amach de dheasca na buntáistí cognáoch atá ag gabháil le sealbhui an dara teanga, agus bíonn sise i bhfad níos fearr freisin go bhfuilí an dara teanga acu teangacha eile a fhoghlaímh.

Is cosúil freisin go bhfuilí cumas matamaiticítíúil níos fearr ag páistí a bhfuilí dán-theachtach. Ar a bharr sín, is iomáin sise buntáiste sóisialta agus cultúrthta a bhaineann leis an dara teanga a bheith agat. Léiríonn taighde ar páistí a fuair oiliúint i nGaeilgeanna an méid a bhfuilí amach a freastal ar scoileanna Bhéarla. De dheanta na firinne, rinne páistí 8 mbliana d'aois a d'fhreastail ar scoileanna Bhéarla chomh maith le, nó d'éirigh níos fearr leo, páistí 10 mbliana d'aois as scoileanna Bhéarla i réimsí áirithe.

Léirítear freagraí ar an bhuntaighde go spreagann an Ghaeilge scileanna breise ó thaobh scileanna cumarsáide, léitheoireachta agus pearsanta, msh. obair forne, réiteach fadhbanna agus scileanna cur i láthair. Creideann freagróirí go dtacaíonn an t-áthair leis an dáthachtachas agus go bhfeabhsaíonn sé feachadh chultúrthta na ndaltaí.

Léiríodh i staidéar a foilsidh ag Ollscoil Luimnigh in 2011 go mb'fhéidir go gcuirfeadh staidéar ar an nmatamaitic trí mheán na Gaeilge ag an bhunscóil le tuiscint agus le gnothachtáil fhadtéarmach sa nmatamaitic agus an oideachas trí mheán an Bhéarla ag an dara leibhéal.
An Ghaeilge
An chéad chéim eile don Ghaeloideachas

Creideann Aontú gur ceart é Gaeloideachas ó naíonra go hiarchéim agus gur chóir dó a bheith ar fáil do cibé duine a roghnaíonn é thuaidh agus theas. Creidimid gur chóir go mbeadh an rogha ag gach tuismitheoirí a pháiste a chur ar Ghaelscoil. Tacaíonn Aontú le tumoideachas ar gach leibhéal den chóras oideachais, go háirithe na luathbhlianta.

Tá Aontú ag moladh go ndréachtóidh an Roinn Oideachais dréachtpholasái cuimsitheach ar Gaeloideachas ó naíonra go tríú leibhéal. Is ríthábhachtach go mbíonn straitéis uileghabhálach againn chun chun úsáid na Gaeilge a fheabhsú agus a mhéadú inár n-earnáil oideachais ag gach céim. Sa tsraith seo de cháipéisí polasaí léireoidh ar an bhfís chun an aidhm seo a bhaint amach.

An Ghaeilge san Earnáil Réamhscolaíochta

Tá ról ríthábhachtach ag oideachas trí mheán na Gaeilge i suíomhanna réamhscolaíochta maidir le sealbhú teanga. D'ainneoin go n-aithnítear an tábhacht, áfach, tá go leor constaicí roimh réamhscóileanna lán-Ghaeilge a bhfheidhfaí go leor acu a shá而出 le beagán toil pholaitióchta agus infheistíochtóchta.

Tá méadú ar an éileamh i measc tuismitheoirí ar naíonraí óir is eol dóibh go mbeidh buntáiste ag a gcuid páistí go cognáích, go hacadúil agus go sóisialta má fhaigheann siad oideachas trí mheán na Gaeilge.
Mar sin de, tá fás ollmhór san earnáil réamhscolaíochta lán-Ghaeilge i ndeisceart na hÉireann agus 202 naíonra bunaithe anois taobh amuigh den Ghaeltacht, i gcomparáid le go díreach 12 naíonra a bhí ar an fhód thiar in 1978 nuair a bhunúodh Forbairt Naíonraí Teoranta.

Tá fás ollmhór den chineál chéanna sa tuaisceart – tréimheas dhlúth fós a bhí sna cúig bliana dheireanachta agus méadú 58% ann ó bhreis agus 760 páiste ag freastal in 2012 go beagnach 1,200 páiste in 2017. Tá 44 réamhscoil agus 17 gclár ag feidhmiú trí mheán na Gaeilge.

Tá 55 réamhscoil Ghaeilge bunaithe ar fud na Gaeltacha agus tacaíocht acu ó Údarás na Gaeltachta. Ach nil i gceist leis sin ach 46% de na suíomhanna luath-ógige a mhainítear go poiblí sa Ghaeltacht. Nuair a chuirtear san áireamh an baol atá roimh an Ghaeilge mar theanga phobail sa Ghaeltacht, is náireach a isle atá an figiúr seo.

Tá ról ríthábhachtach na naíonraí i gcomhshuntas an Gaeilge aitheanta ag an rítalas i ndoiciméid bheartais amhail an Stráiteis 20 Blain le cois tagairt dó sa Chlár Rialtais. Níl, áfach, próiseas aitheantaí a chur i bhfeidhm le stádas ar leith mar scoileanna Gaeltachta a thabhairt do réamhscóileanna faoin Pholasái don Oideachas Gaeltachta. Níl aon cheanglas ach oiread ar réamhscóileanna faoi scéim ECCE i gceantair Ghaeltachta Gaeilge a bheith ar an churaclam acu, d'ainneoin go bhfaigheann siad maolniú rialtais.
An Ghaeilge

chóir gurbh í an Ghaeilge an teanga oideachais i ngach réamhscoil a fhaigheann cúnamh stáit i réigiún Ghaeltachta. Méadú ar chaipitíocht a bhronnadh ar naíonraí ina ngnóthaíonn a mbaill foirne an Teastas Eorpach Gaeilge (TEG) nó cáilíocht chomhionann sa Gaeilge mar aitheantas ar an obair aitheanta ar an obair bhreise ar fad atá i gceist.

A chinntiú go gcuirtear clár Gaeilge ar fáil dóibh i ngach réamhscoil mar chuid dá modúil oiliúna Leibhéil FETAC 5-8. Modúil ar an Ghaeilge agus ar an tumoideachas le cur ar fáil i gcomhair leibhéal 7 agus cúrsaí céime.

Naíonraí cloí le pleánáil oifigiuil teanga i ngach ceantar. Tá láidreacht agus inbhuanaitheacht naíonraí ag brath ar a ndóthain baill foirne ag a bhfuil na cáilíochtaí agus an oiliúint chuí. Cigireachtai de chuid na Roinne Oideachais agus Scileanna, Tusla agus Poblacht le déanamh trí mheán na Gaeilge.

Maoiniú a chur ar fáil d'oifighí forbartha a bhfuil de shainchúram orthu naíonraí a fhorbairt agus a fheabhsú. Oiliúint éigeantach ar chosaint leanaí agus ar gharchabhair a chur ar fáil trí mheán na Gaeilge i réamhscoileanna taobh amuigh den Ghaeltacht.

Tá aitheantas mar scoileanna Gaeltachta iarrtha ag 80% de na bunscoileanna agus 95% de na scoileanna dar leibhéal sa Ghaeltacht. Beidh samhail lán-tumoideachais tríd mheán na Gaeilge ag na scoileanna seo. Níl aon amhras, ós rud é nach bhfeidhmionn ach 46% de na soláthraithe luath-óige sa Ghaeltacht tríd mheán na Gaeilge, go mbeidh tionscarn aige seo ar na sprioicanna ata leagtha amach sa Pholasai don Oideachas Gaeltachta. De réir figiúirí daonáirimh, ní labhraíonn ach 19% de pháistí d'aois tríd mheán na Gaeilge go laethúil taobh amuigh den chóras oideachais sa Ghaeltacht agus leíririonn sé seo an phráinn atá le tuilleadh tacaíochta ag an leibhéal seo.

Bíonn go leor constaicí roimh na naíonraí reatha atá laistigh agus lasmuigh den Ghaeltacht. Tá go leor fadhbanna ag an earnáil luath-óige féin. Is beag infheistíocht dháiríire sa chúram leanaí a rinneadh sa stát agus an caiteachas poiblí air i bhfad ar gcúl thorthaí elle de chuid ECFE. Tá go leor den obair neamhchinnnte agus ar phá íseal. Mar sin de, is deacair le soláthraithe luathóideachais baill foirne a earcú agus a choinneáil, gan trácht ar bhaill foirne a bhfuil ardchumas Gaeilge acu.

Moltaí
Pleanáil straitéiseach lena chinntiú gur féidir tacú le fás leanúnach na hearnála agus go bhfuil baill foirne ag a bhfuil na cáilíochtaí agus oiliúint chuí acu ar fáil.

Níos mó comhoibrithe idir tuaisceart agus déarmaí pleanáil fhadtéarmach oideachas Gaeilge luath-óige, comhroinnt acmhainní agus eolais.

Oiliúint agus forbairt ghairmiúil cleachtóirí a mhéadú i suíomhanna oideachas luath-óige Gaeilge sa Ghaeltacht, agus i ngach ceann den tír. Soláthar deiseanna FGL tríd mheán na Gaeilge a mhéadú chomh maith le speisialú i modheolaíocht tumoideachais do chleachtóirí cúram leanaí agus do
An Ghaeilge

stíúrthóirí naíonraí araon.

An Próiseas Aitheantas Scoileanna Gaeltachta a shíneadh le go gcuimseofaí réamhscoileanna agus tuilleadh acmhainní agus tacaíochta a thabhairt dóibh siúd a chomhlíonann na riachtanais. Ba chóir gurbh í an Ghaeilge an teanga oideachais i ngach réamhscoil a fhaigheann cúnamh stáit i réigiún Gaeltachta.

Na Ranna dul i dteagmháil le heagrais oideachais Ghaeilge ina dteanga oibre féin. Formáid Ghaeilge a bheith leis an gcomhfhreagrais oifigiúil ar fad, lena n-áirítear foirmeacha a chuirtear chuig naíonraí nó ar líne. Baineann sé seo le gach roinn agus gníomhaireacht rialtaí a bhíonn ag plé le naíonraí, idir an Roinn Oideachais agus an Roinn Leanaí, Tusla agus Pobal agus chomh fad a le comhlachtáid deonacha a fhaigheann maoiniú rialtaí.

Rannóg shainiúil a bhunú sa Roinn Leanaí agus Gnóthaí Óige le freagra a thabhairt ar cheisteanna i nGaeilge.

An Ghaeilge san earnáil bhunscoíóchta

Tá na buntáistí suntasacha cognaíochta, cumarsáideachta agus sóisialta a bhainean leis an nGaelscoíócht léirithe san éileamh ollmhór fásmhar ar Ghaelscoileanna ar fud oileán na hÉireann.

Fuair suirbhé a rinn Kantar Millward Brown in mbliana gur aontaigh 78% de dhaoine sa deisceart agus 67% de dhaoine sa tuaisceart gur chóir go mbeadh an ceart ag gach leanbh a n-oideachas a fháil trí Ghaeilge.


Tá tuilleadh fadhanna ann maidir le riocht foirgneamh scoile reatha – tá 39% Gaeilge leis an éileamh agus sa scoilbhliain buan scoile. Ina ainneoin seo, tá beagnach aon cheathrú de thuismitheoirí agus deisceart na hÉireann toilteanach a leanai a chur chuig Ghaelcoin dar le torthaí ESRI in 2015.

Moill ar fhás in ainneoin éilimh


Ghlac 79% de scoileanna leis an Scéim Aitheantais mar Scoil Ghaeltachta faoi dheireadh na bliana seo caite, scéim inar lorg scoileanna rannpháirtíacha aitheantas speisialta de bhun critéir shonrach a thenga an chur i bhfeidhm mar threimshí ó chogadh ón bháiliúcháin. Ach tá a feidhmiú “ar bhonn chéimeithe de réir mar a bhíonn chéimeithe seo mar threimshí ó chogadh ón bháiliúcháin”, rud nach spreagann muinín i dtiomantas an rialtais tacaíochta iomlán a thabhairt don pholasaí. Bhí imní ann freisin maidir ‘acmhainní breise’ a gealladh a thabhairt amach, go háirithe i bhfianaise agus in toimcheachesachtachta a chur i bhfeidhm i scoileanna ina bhfuil beirt nó triúr oidí.

Leis na contúirtí go dtráfaidh fíorthobar na Gaeilge ar an taifead go soiléir, anois an t-am le haghaidh gníomh diongbháilte agus infheistiócht dháiríre.

**Soláthar méadaitheach Gaelscoileanna**

Tá dhá chaoi ann le cur le Gaelscoileanna. Le haghaidh scoileanna nua baintear seo amach trí pháthrua roghnú a bhí ann le chur a chur ar bun. Maidir le scoileanna reatha baintear seo amach trí an bpróiseas difheistithe, ina n-aistríonn scoileanna reiligúna a bpátrúnacht go bpátrúnacht go scoileanna il-sainchreidmheach agus neamh-shainchreidmheach.

**Scoileanna nua – próiseas pátrúnachta**

Cé go bhfuil moill mhór ar sholáthar Gaelscoileanna, tá béim níos mó ag an rialtais reatha seo ar rogha níos mó éitis. Ach is féidir rogha níos mó éitis a chur ar fáil in éineacht leis an nGaeilge. Is é An Foras Pátrúnachta an pátrún Gaelscoileanna is mó le beagnach leath dá scoileanna ina scoileanna il-sainchreidmheach ní idir-shainchreidmheach.

Ar an drochadh, ní chuireann an próiseas pátrúnachta scoileanna ar bun ach “nuair a theastaíonn mar gheall ar mhéadú déimeagrafach”. Ní chuireann sé san áireamh an teanga nó éiteas cultúrtha scoileanna. Ní chuireann sé san áireamh éileamh uathu siúd taobh amuigh den scoilcheantar (is minic daoine atá ag iarraidh freastal ar Ghaelscoileanna a bheith sásta taisteal níos faide lene fhail). Ní chuireann sé san áireamh nach ionann riachtanais dhéimeagrafach agus riar ar riachtanais an phobail.

Sáraíonn an próiseas an tAcht Oideachais 1998 agus thug an Coimisinéir Teanga dúsblán rathúil faoi. De thoradh air sin tá an Roinn Oideachais ag déanamh athbhréitheachtaí faoi láthair ar an bpróiseas pátrúnachta "le haird bhreise a thabhairt ar rogha tuismitheoirí le haghaidh Gaelscoileíochta."
Scoileanna reatha – próiseas difheistithe

De réir an chuspóra rogha éitis a mheadú, tá d'aidhm ag an rialtas lión na scoileanna il-sainchreidmheach agus neamh-shainchreidmheach go 400 faoi 2030, le scoileanna nua ina dtrian de seo. Maidir le scoileanna reatha baintear seo amach tríd an bpróiseas difheistithe, ina n-aistríonn scoileanna reiligúnach a bpátrúnacht go scoileanna il-sainchreidmheach agus neamh-shainchreidmheach. Mar a léiritear, tá féidearthacht mhór ann do scoileanna le feidhmiú mar Ghaelscoileanna agus mar scoileanna il-sainchreidmheacha ar aon.

Tá faoi láthair 16 cheantar ag cheaintar ag cur i gcrích suirbhéanna sa próiseas maidir le Athchumrú Scoileanna le haghaidh Éagsúlachta. Lárrtar ar thuismitheoir pátrún is rogha leo a chur in iúl agus ar chóir don scoil a bheith ina Gaelscoil. Táimid ag áitiú go mbunófar treoirlínte nua a bheidh fabhrach do Ghaelscoileanna, seachas an cónas reatha a dhéanann léithcheal ina n-éadan, ionas gur féidir leis an rialtas tosú ag riar ar an éileamh ar Ghaelscolaíocht.

Caighdeáin na Gaeilge i measc múinteoirí i mbunscoileanna

Is fadhb í seo atá ar eolas go leitheadach agus atá á haithint le fada. Léirigh Tuarascáil an Phríomhchigire 2018 ábhair imní maidir le múineadh na Gaeilge i mbunscoileanna nach Gaelscoileanna iad nó lonnaithe sa Ghaeltacht. Measadh caighdeán fhoghlaim na Gaeilge i mbunscoileanna in Éirinn a bheith neamhsúil in 26% de cheachtanna.

Tá seo i bhfad níos isle nach Béarla agus Mata, mar ar measadh caighdeán foriomlán na foghlama a bheith míshásúil in 17% agus 15% de cheachtanna faoi seach.

Léiríodh an céadadán céanna seo (26% de cheachtanna Gaeilge míshásúil) sa tuarascáil 2013-2016 ina raibh gnóthachtáil i nGaeilge arís eile go suntasach níos isle ná i mBéarla agus i Mata. Dúradh sa tuarascáil seo go raibh “féidearthacht mhór ann le cáillocht an teagaisc agus na foghlama i nGaeilge a fheabhsú”.

Creidimid gur chóir go mbeadh dianchúrsaí Gaeilge ar fáil dóibh siúd a mheasann an cigire nach bhfuil siad ag an gcaighdeán riachtanach Gaeilge. Ba chóir go mbeadh níos mó deiseanna forbartha gairmiúla ann do gach múinteoir bunscoile maidir le múineadh an Gaeilge in éineacht leis na modhanna foghlama ar lín is deireanaí.

Támid i dtéagmháil faoi láthair leis an Roinn Oideachais, an Chomhairle Mhúinteoireachta agus an tÚdarás Ardoideachais le straitéis a cheapadh trínr féidir múineadh na Gaeilge a fheabhsú. Creidimid go bhfuil sé go háirithe tábhachtaí mar is í an bhunscoailíocht burchloch an oideachais agus má tá caighdeán go holc ag an gcéim seo beidh tionchar diúltach ar eispéireas foghlama na Gaeilge le linn na codach eile den tsraith oideachais.

Creidimid freisin gur chóir go mbeadh caighdeánú ar scrúduithe Gaeilge i gcoláistí oiliúna múinteoiríche le hardcháilíocht torthaí céimítte a chinnitíú.
An Ghaeilge

Curachaí na Gaeilge i scoileanna Béarla

Tá feabhsú mór le déanamh i gcuraclam na Gaeilge i scoileanna nach Gaelscoileanna ná scoileanna Gaeilcha iad. Aithnítear nach bhfuil an curachaí reatha chomh héifeachtach agus ba chóir dó a bheith. Níl aon torthaí foghlama daingne ann na curachaí maidir le teanga ó bhéal – níl ann ach clocha mile doiléire le haghaidh gach pháirtí bhliain, mar ‘tuiscint a léiriú ar cheisteanna druídte’, nó ‘taitneamh a léiriú as éisteacht le scéalta gairidh simplí.

Tugadh an Curaclam Teanga Bunscoil nua isteach ar bhonn céimithe ó 2016. Déanfar gach snáithé den curachaí, ó bhéal go léamh agus scríobh, a theagasc go leanaí sna naíonáin shóisir go dtí an dara bliain faoi Mheán Fómhair 2018. Is beag an difear idir na torthaí foghlama i mBéarla i gcomparáid leis an nGaeilge, atá ina teanga ná d'fhormhór nó mar freastal ar na scoileanna seo. Rinne saineolaithte teanga, a thugann breac-chuntas ar an gcréitlach láidir do mhúineadh na Gaeilge le cuspóirí foghlama leagtha amach go daingean gach bliain, ceap magainn den chur chuige seo.

Creidimid gur gá cur chuige iomlán nua a bheith ann i leith mhúineadh na Gaeilge i mbunscóileanna. Ba chóir do mhúineadh na Gaeilge a bheith ina eispéireas taitneamhach don dalta agus don mhúinteoir araon leis na acmhainní is fearr maidir le téacsleabhair, cluichí agus uirlísí ar lár.

Creidimid go bhfuil curachaí ná rithabhachtach leis an mbealach ina múinteoir an Ghaeilge a athfhinnmhiú agus múinteoirí a chumasú le ranganna socraithe agus clúchtaí a theagasc ar bhealach struchtúrtha. Creidimid chomh maith gur chóir palp-tumoideachas a bheith ar fáil go dach duine mháthair sa Sláinte ar chéad d’fhaisil do gach leanbh sa Deisceart don chéad d’fhaill do gach leanbh sa ranganna socraithe agus clúchtaí a theagasc ar bhealach struchtúrtha. Creidimid chomh maith gur chóir palp-tumoideachas a bheith ar fáil go dach duine mháthair sa Deisceart ar cheacht ar an chumhacht na Gaeilge le floinn mhóir mhúineadh na Gaeilge.

Mhol Straitéis 20 Bliain don Ghaeilge 2010-2030 “bogadh i dtreo cás ina dtairgfeair palp-tumadh Gaeilge go gach leanbh.” As siocair nach bhfuil an Straitéis seo curtha i bhfeidhm níor tháinig ann don bhreat seo. Luaigh Plean Gníomhálaíocht a foilsíodh in Mheathimh 2018 le haidheanna na Straitéisíse a chur chun cinn “páipéar scoípe” ar fheidhmiú mhúineadh na Gaeilge trí bhreuil eile agus go bhforbrófar “plean gníomhálaíocht” ar feidhmiú FFÁT. Tacaímid go hionlán le FFÁT a thabhairt isteach ach táimid ag éileamh ar an rialtas luas an fheidhmithe píolótaí a ghéarú.

Moltaí

Plean cuimsitheach le bheith dearta go ag an Roinn ag aithint mireanna riachtanacha i gcur chuige straitéiseach le riar ar an éileamh ar Ghaelscolaíocht.

Athbheithniú eacair na Pholasai um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus cur síos le déanamh ar thacaí agus acmhainní do na chéad chúig bliana eile.
An Ghaeilge

Cur i gcrích tráthúil an athbhreithnithe ar an bpróiseas pátrúnachta scoile mar a bhaineann sé le Gaelscoileanna.

Bunóidh an dá Roinn Oideachais ó thuaidh agus ó dheas clár pleanáilte le haghaidh Gaeilscoileanna a thógáil bunaithe ar éilimh agus inmharthanacht.

Tacaímid le páirt-tumadh (nó FFÁT) a bheith ar fáil do gach leanbh sa Deisceart sa chead dá bhliain den scoilíocht le bheith á theagasc trí Ghaeilge agus go ndéanfar dhá ábhar trí Ghaeilge i mbunscoil (ealaín agus spórt).

Gach scóil sa Ghaeltacht oifigiúil a bheith ag feidhm trí Ghaeilge amháin. Ba chóir rogha a thabhairt do scoileanna atá díreach taobh amuigh den Ghaeltacht ach a fhreastalaíonn ar chohórt leanaí Ghaeltachta dul isteach sa Scéim Aitheantais mar Scoil Ghaeltachta.

Struchtúr foirmiúil a chur i bhfeidhm idir An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta & Gaelscolaíochta (COGG) agus Comhairle Curáclaim, Scrúdúcháin agus Measúnaithe Thuaisceart Éireann le háiseanna teagasc a dhéanamh agus a chomhroinnt ar mhaithe le hearnáil na Gaeilge, oideachas agus luach ar airgead.

Caighdeánú ar scrúduithe Gaeilge i gcoláistí oiliúna múinteoireachta le hardcháilliclócht torthaí a chinntiú.

Aonad le bunú sa Roínn Oideachais le haistriú seolta scoileanna Béarla go Gaeilscoileanna a éascú.

Soláthar cuí riachtanas speisialta oideachais don Ghaelscolaíocht.

Cúrsa foghlama teanga a dhearadh don Ghaeilge a chuirfidh ar a gcumas do thuismitheoirí tacú le foghlaim Gaeilge a leanaí ar scoil.
Think outside the political cartel: Vótáil Aontú! Olltoghchán 2020