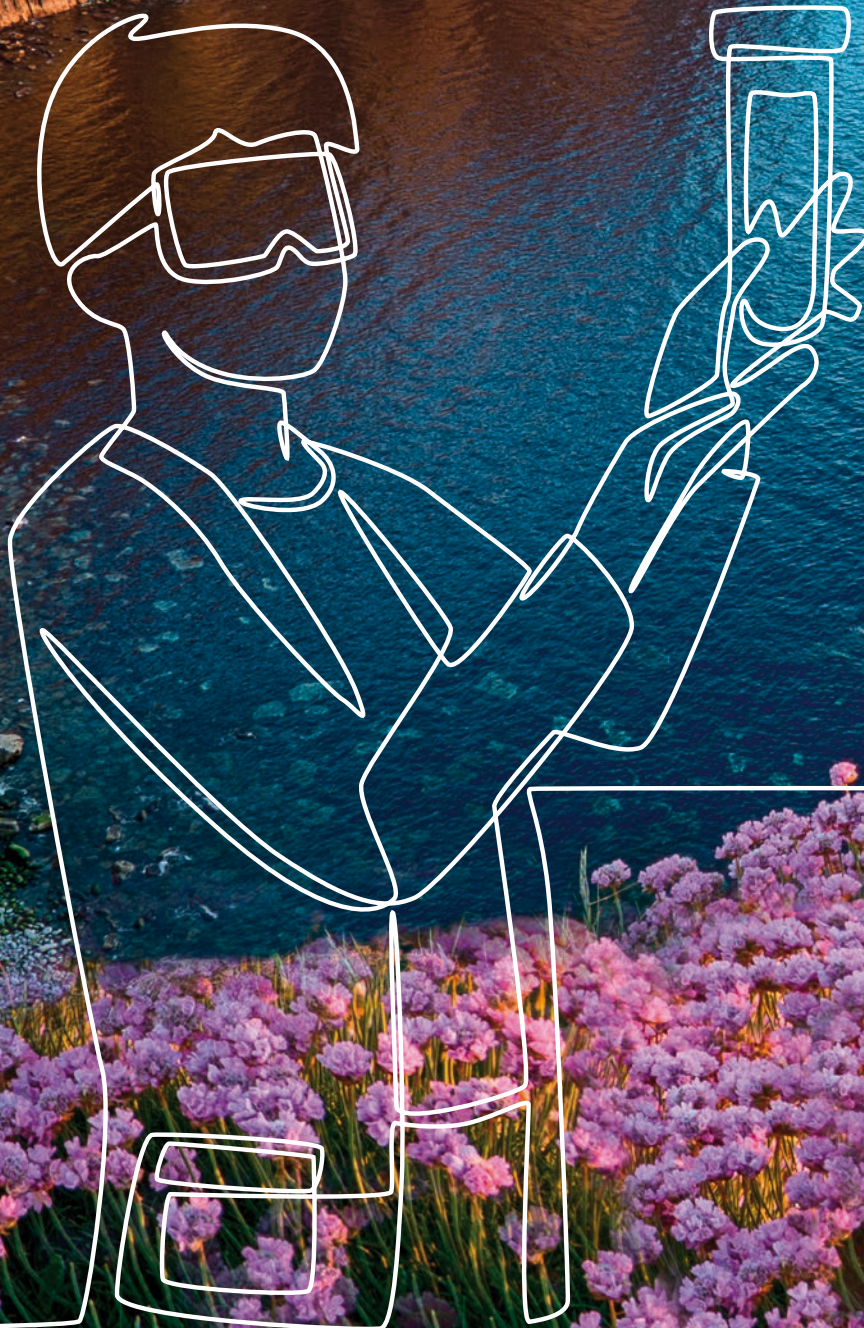# Chapter 17:
Conclusions

Conclusions

1. Introduction

The Irish state has been in existence for a little over a hundred years. In that century Ireland has changed radically, with more citizens now living longer, healthier lives in a safe society. These changes have become especially pronounced since Ireland joined the European Union (EU), with the value of exports increasing from just over €1 billion in the early 1970s to over €200 billion in 2022. Our population has also seen a dramatic increase from fewer than 3 million 50 years ago to over 5 million in the most recent census. Life expectancy in Ireland has grown significantly over the period of EU membership, from 71 years in 1971 to 82 years in 2022. The number of people enrolled in third level education also grew sevenfold over a similar time frame.[1] All of these signals indicate the substantial progress that has been made by Ireland as a country.

Looking ahead to the next 50 years, if we want to continue to be a successful and thriving country, then we must intensify our actions to restore our environment. A recent assessment shows that Ireland has achieved 80% of the 169 targets linked to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (DECC, 2023a). However, this success is set against the backdrop of climate and biodiversity emergencies and growing pressures on the environment. This is clear from the SDG targets that are not being achieved, which are associated with the goals on clean water and sanitation, affordable and clean energy, sustainable cities and communities, responsible consumption and production, and, critically, climate action.

As an active member of the EU over the past 50 years, Ireland has committed to EU targets and objectives to achieve clean air, healthy waters, less wasteful production and consumption, and climate change mitigation. The environmental scorecard for Ireland (Table 17.1) shows the challenges we face on climate, air, nature, water and the circular economy. While we are complying with existing EU limits on ambient air quality, we have a significant challenge in meeting the interim World Health Organization (WHO) guideline limits by 2026, as set out in the national Clean Air Strategy. Our water quality is not meeting the requirements of the Water Framework Directive (2000/60/EC) and trends in nutrient concentrations in water are not improving. Consumption of material resources has increased, and our recycling rates are not keeping pace, increasing the likelihood that we will not comply with EU recycling targets. Ireland generated 750,000 tonnes of food waste in 2022 and this has not significantly decreased over the first 3 years of national reporting. Critically, we are not on track to meet national and EU targets for climate mitigation, although some progress is being made. In summary, we are not meeting our legal requirements or, more importantly, the objective of those requirements, namely to provide a healthy environment.

The development of this report has led to insights on some of the key elements of change and action that are needed to set us on a trajectory to a sustainable, healthy future for Ireland. The five key priorities, informed by the insights emerging from the report, are set out in Figure 17.1.

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1   www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-ieu50/irelandandtheeuat50/ (accessed 6 September 2024).

Figure 17.1 Five key priorities from the State of the Environment Report 2024

## Delivering a national policy position on the environment

We urgently need to have a national policy position on the environment to address the complex interactions, synergies and trade-offs across environmental policy areas and to deal with its interactions with other policy domains.

Driving policy implementation

We must rigorously implement existing environmental plans and programmes to achieve the benefits that they were developed to deliver.

Transforming our systems
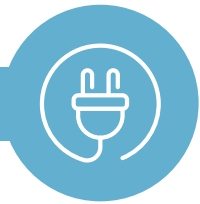
Transformation of our energy, transport, food and industrial sectors is critical to achieving a sustainable future.

Scaling up investment in infrastructure

Investment in water, energy, transport and waste management infrastructure is essential to protect the environment now and into the future.

Protecting the environment to protect our health

Protecting the environment is key to protecting our health and we must act to reduce the modifiable risks to our health from environmental exposures.

2. Environmental scorecard for Ireland

Table 17.1 sets out the overall assessment and outlook for Ireland across key environmental policy areas.

Table 17.1 Ireland's environmental scorecard

INDICATOR	CURRENT ASSESSMENT	OUTLOOK	NOTES
Climate	🟠	🔻	While there has been progress in terms of beginning to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and in strengthening adaptation governance structures and support services, overall current assessment for climate is 'poor' (a slight improvement from 'very poor' in 2020). Full implementation of actions set out in the Climate Action Plan and additional actions are needed if Ireland is to meet its 2030 and 2050 climate targets.
Air quality and emissions to air	🟡	➖	The overall current assessment for air is 'moderate' (the same as in 2020). Ireland is compliant with current air quality standards for many air pollutants. However, Ireland is not meeting the guidelines set by WHO for multiple pollutants, including $PM_{2.5}$, and Ireland is non-compliant with the EU reduction target for ammonia and will remain so in the short term. Achieving the ambitions of the Clean Air Strategy and complying with the limit values of the proposed EU Air Quality Directive from 2030 onwards will be challenging, but will have a significant and positive impact on health.
Nature	🔴	🔻	The overall current assessment for nature is 'very poor' (the same as in 2020). Deteriorating trends dominate, especially for protected habitats and bird populations, and Ireland is not on track to achieve policy objectives for nature. While the recent expansion of marine protected areas is welcome, additional far-reaching measures are needed to address the declines in nature and biodiversity.

INDICATOR	CURRENT ASSESSMENT	OUTLOOK	NOTES
Water	🟠	🟡	Overall current assessment for water is 'poor' (the same as in 2020). Trends remain mixed, with no net improvement in river or lake water quality in recent years, a sharp decline in the number of monitored estuaries in satisfactory ecological condition and continued direct discharges of raw or inadequately treated sewage to water from 19 agglomerations. Significant challenges remain for achieving full compliance with relevant EU obligations and national policy objectives.
Circular economy and waste	🟠	🟡	The overall current assessment for the circular economy and waste is poor (the same as in 2020) but progress is being made in a number of areas to improve performance. Waste generation continues to grow, in absolute and per capita terms, and Ireland remains overly reliant on export markets for recycling and for treating municipal residual waste. Recycling rates for municipal and plastic packaging waste streams are at risk and need to increase urgently to achieve 2025 targets. Recent interventions, such as the Deposit Return Scheme, statutory roll-out of the organic waste collection service, recovery levy and national end-of waste and by-product decisions, are positive developments but the effects of these remain to be seen. The circular material use rates remains very low by comparison to the European average and Ireland needs to address specific sectoral challenges to accelerate moving from a linear to a circular economy.

SUMMARY OF CURRENT ENVIRONMENTAL PERFORMANCE, POLICY AND IMPLEMENTATION IN IRELAND

🔴 Very poor – significant environmental and/or compliance challenges to address

🟠 Poor – environmental and/or compliance challenges to address

🟡 Moderate – on track generally/local or occasional challenges

🟢 Good – mainly achieving objectives

🟢 Very good – full achieving objectives.

OUTLOOK OF CURRENT PROSPECTS OF MEETING POLICY OBJECTIVES AND/OR TARGETS

🔻 Largely not on track to meet policy objectives and targets. Significant challenges to achieving full compliance remain. Systemic and transformative change needed.

🟡 Partially on track to achieving full compliance or measures in place or planned that will improve the situation. Outlook is dependent on existing and planned actions, measures and plans being fully implemented and effective.

🔺 Trajectory improving but not yet on track to achieving full compliance. Measures in place and planned provide possibility of meeting policy objectives and targets.

3. Key challenges and priorities for Ireland's environment

Delivering a national policy position on the environment

We urgently need to have a national policy position on the environment to address the complex interactions, synergies and trade-offs across environmental policy areas and to deal with its interactions with other policy domains. Since the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) published its last State of the Environment Report in 2020 (EPA, 2020), Ireland has set a national objective to transition to a climate-resilient, biodiversity-rich, environmentally sustainable and climate-neutral economy by 2050.[2] Achieving this multifaceted objective will be the most complex and interconnected environmental challenge for the next 25 years, and each step towards its achievement will present opportunities and challenges.

Environmental policy responses to date have been insufficient to halt environmental decline, and many of Ireland's agreed environmental targets will not be met in the short term or will be delivered late. Despite progress in some areas, the scale and speed of improvements are clearly insufficient to meet long-term EU and national objectives such as those covering water quality, nature protection and the ambition to achieve a climate-neutral economy and climate neutrality by 2050. Tackling these complex and interlinked challenges will require the development of more integrated, coherent and ambitious environmental policy frameworks. In this context, a central message of the 2020 State of the Environment Report was a call for a national policy position on the environment, which to date has not been delivered (EPA, 2020).

A key benefit of a national policy position would be improvements in policy coherency and setting out the country's ambition for the environment for the next generation. The United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development called on all countries to enhance policy coherence as an essential means of implementation of all the SDGs. Policy coherence requires effective and inclusive governance and institutional mechanisms to address policy interactions across sectors, including identifying and managing trade-offs and aligning actions between different levels of government. To avoid inefficiencies and duplication of effort, there is a strong need for clarity around roles and responsibilities and for effective collaboration and engagement.

There will be many complex challenges to overcome and trade-offs to be addressed along the way, which will require a deep level of collaboration to address climate, air pollution and biodiversity issues. This will require all sectors of society to work together to deliver these changes. Some opportunities are clear. We have opportunities to address more than one issue by one action, for example by tackling climate and air quality issues together. Ireland's Climate Change Assessment[3] also emphasises that tackling climate change and biodiversity loss together enhances the many synergies that exist between actions to address these crises while minimising and managing any remaining trade-offs. In this context, the EPA sees a policy position on the environment as a crucial element of delivering a shared, whole-of-government vision to protect Ireland's environment, guide implementation, support integration and provide the policy coherence we need to tackle these complex problems.

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2   Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021.

3   www.epa.ie/our-services/monitoring--assessment/climate-change/irelands-climate-change-assessment-icca/ (accessed 12 September 2024).

The policy position on the environment could also act to engage society in addressing environmental concerns. The EU's Joint Research Centre suggested that a just transition and a new social contract founded on sustainability are essential for Europe to seize sustainability transitions as processes that can inspire positive change and improve well-being. The national policy position could serve as the starting point for the development of an inclusive national contract across the economy and society so that we live sustainably in a healthy environment that is valued and protected by all.

Driving policy implementation

We must rigorously implement existing environmental plans and programmes to achieve the benefits that they were developed to deliver.
Ireland has an extensive and expanding suite of legislation, policies, strategies and plans to safeguard the natural environment and protect human health. Environmental regulation of our industry has delivered significant reductions in pollution and places Ireland among the EU Member States with the lowest air emissions intensity of industry and has virtually eradicated serious water pollution. However, serious deficits remain in Ireland's implementation of other environmental legislation and related plans and programmes such as the Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive (91/271/EEC), Water Framework Directive and European Climate Law (Regulation (EU) 2021/1119). Ireland is not making adequate progress towards meeting its own nationally

set targets and objectives. Our assessments show that substantial gaps remain between what is planned and what is being delivered. Our overall water quality and nutrient levels in waters are not improving, recycling is not keeping pace with the growth in consumption and we are not achieving our climate targets. We are also currently not achieving our ammonia emissions reduction target under the National Emissions Reduction Commitments Directive ((EU) 2016/2284). Existing plans and programmes already in place, if fully implemented, would go a long way towards resolving these persistent environmental issues.

The EU's Environmental Implementation Review for Ireland in 2022 highlighted challenges for Ireland relating to compliance with EU waste water treatment legislation, access to justice in environmental matters, conservation measures on marine natura sites and conservation of bogs.[4] The review noted the need for effective, swift and full implementation of EU legislation and strategies on the environment and the climate and striving for excellence in environmental performance at European, national, regional and local levels, as well as the prioritisation of enforcement of environmental law.

An essential part of implementation is the enforcement of environmental laws. While the EPA has a broad remit on environmental regulation and enforcement, local authorities also have a vital statutory responsibility in the protection of our local environment. They are responsible for enforcing much of Ireland's environmental protection legislation in their areas. The scale of environmental

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4   eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=comnat%3ASWD_2022_0260_FIN (accessed 9 September 2024).

enforcement work carried out by local authorities is significant, but in many aspects it is not delivering the necessary environmental outcomes, such as improved water and air quality, reduced noise exposure and improved circularity in the management of our resources. The EPA evaluates local authority performance against the national enforcement priorities, which are focused on achieving environmental outcomes. In 2022, only ten local authorities achieved the required standard of strong or excellent in 70% or more of the 20 national enforcement priorities. This EPA evaluation highlighted the need for local authorities to prioritise enforcement of the roll-out and use of three-bin systems to improve segregation and to undertake more farm inspections and follow-up enforcement to reduce the impact of agricultural activities on water quality. Moreover, local authorities also need to ensure that only approved solid fuels are available for sale in order to safeguard public health from harmful air pollutants. In the local authority context, one critical issue is the continuation of illegal industrial-scale peat extraction. These operations are leading to uncontrolled destruction of the natural environment. To protect Ireland's peatlands as a vital ecosystem and carbon sink, planning policy must proactively address the issue of unauthorised peat extraction operations. Full implementation of, and compliance with, legislation is a must to protect the environment.

Transforming our systems

Transformation of our energy, transport, food and industrial sectors is critical to achieving a sustainable future. Ireland, like Europe, faces persistent problems in areas such as biodiversity loss, inefficient resource use, climate change impacts and environmental risks to health and well-being. The European Environment Agency has identified that the most important factor underlying Europe's persistent environmental and sustainability challenges is that they are inextricably linked to economic activities and lifestyles, in particular the societal systems that provide us with food, energy and mobility (EEA, 2019). As a result, society's resource use and pollution are tied in complex ways to jobs and earnings across the value chain; to major investments in infrastructure, machinery, skills and knowledge; to behaviours and ways of living; and to public policies and institutions.

Since the first State of the Environment Report in 1985 we have seen, in Irish law and policy, a progression from seeking to be less polluting towards become more efficient (in terms of energy use, waste generation and material use). This has delivered substantial transformations; for example, our waste management system in Ireland has been completely transformed in the past 25 years, and smog in our cities is no longer an issue. While important, there is a need to go beyond reducing pollution and incremental efficiency improvements. Efficiencies alone will not get us to where we want to be in protecting the environment. Collectively, we must transform many of our entrenched wasteful systems to shift our society on to a sustainable trajectory, such as moving from transport based largely on private vehicles to sustainable mobility enabled by good planning and accessible public transport, delivering more efficient buildings and replacing fossil fuel-based heating in our homes and businesses.

Taking action now makes good economic sense as well as environmental sense. The Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research has estimated that the world economy will see an income reduction of 19% within the next 26 years independent of future emission choices as a consequence of climate impacts (Kotz *et al.*, 2024). These damages already outweigh the mitigation costs required to limit global warming to 2°C by sixfold over the near term. Given that internationally we are seeking to limit global warming to 1.5°C, this is a stark warning of the need to rapidly move away from the highly consumptive and fossil fuel-based economies and systems to achieve regenerative systems that deliver beneficial social and ecological outcomes.

Many of the activities set out in this report in relation to energy, food and transport are endeavouring to make this shift to more sustainable societal systems. A focus in the draft National Planning Framework on transport-oriented development is an element in this transformation. Progress is not, however, keeping pace with the pressures and is happening too slowly to address the growing locked-in pressures for the next decade. Consequently, the acceleration of transition is key to achieving a sustainable future. This will require immediate and concerted action, engaging diverse policy areas and actors across society in accelerating transformation in the core areas of energy, the circular economy, food systems and the just transition.

The revised Industrial Emissions Directive ((EU) 2024/1785 is the main EU instrument to reduce these emissions to air, water and land and to prevent waste generation from large industrial installations and intensive agriculture. The directive provides for transformation plans to be developed by operators that must contain information on how the operator will transform the installation during the 2030-2050 period to contribute to the emergence of a sustainable, clean, circular, resource-efficient and climate-neutral economy.

The role of land use in making the necessary transitions is key. Delivering climate neutrality (in the agriculture and land use sector) would need diversification, restoration of degraded peatlands and water table management across many thousands of hectares of organic soils under grassland, together with planting extremely large amounts of new forest (Styles *et al.*, 2024). The EU Biodiversity Strategy, the CAP Strategic Plan (including the Agri-Climate Rural Environment Scheme), EU Nature Restoration Law (Regulation (EU) 2024/1991) and Food Vision 2030 all set targets for space for nature within agricultural land.

There are many plans and programmes in place, with positive action being implemented on farm, but there is no clear evidence that the current measures will achieve the scale of environmental outcomes that is needed. Land will also be required to accommodate the increasing population's need for housing and services and the ongoing drive to provide renewable wind and solar power. While land-related policies and targets are often set at the national level, their implementation depends on the local scale: different locations are suited to different land use options. The development of mechanisms to allocate national targets at more granular levels is needed. The approach to allocation of renewable energy targets contained in the draft National Planning Framework may be an exemplar for such allocations, but clearly there is a need to develop extensive dialogue with private landowners who own the majority of land in Ireland.

Achieving transformation of our energy, mobility and food systems will require leadership and engagement across all parts of society, as it will require changes in how we work, travel and enjoy our lives. Consequently, there is a critical need to engage citizens, communities and businesses to work with the state. We need to lock into trajectories that will achieve sustainability across the core systems of our society. Once that has been achieved, Ireland stands to gain significantly by avoiding harm to nature and society and from the economic and social opportunities that sustainability creates.

Scaling up investment in infrastructure

Investment in water, energy, transport and waste management infrastructure is essential to protect the environment now and into the future. The latest population projections undertaken by the Central Statistics Office (CSO) indicate that Ireland's population will reach 5.7 million by 2030. The population is projected to grow further to between 6.5 million and 7 million by 2057 in medium- and high-growth scenarios, respectively (CSO, 2024). Against this backdrop of a growing population, the National Competitiveness and Productivity Council has pointed out that persistent deficits in our energy, water and waste water infrastructure risk future demand from enterprises outstripping supply, representing a significant reputational risk for Ireland (NCPC, 2024).

Water. From an environmental perspective, Ireland has still not met all its obligations under the Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive some 30 years after the country was required to comply with the directive. Waste water continues to reduce the quality of our rivers, lakes, estuaries and coastal waters, and the EPA has highlighted that it will take a multi-billion-euro investment and at least two decades to bring all waste water treatment systems up to standard (EPA, 2023). Similarly, many drinking water supplies still lack robust
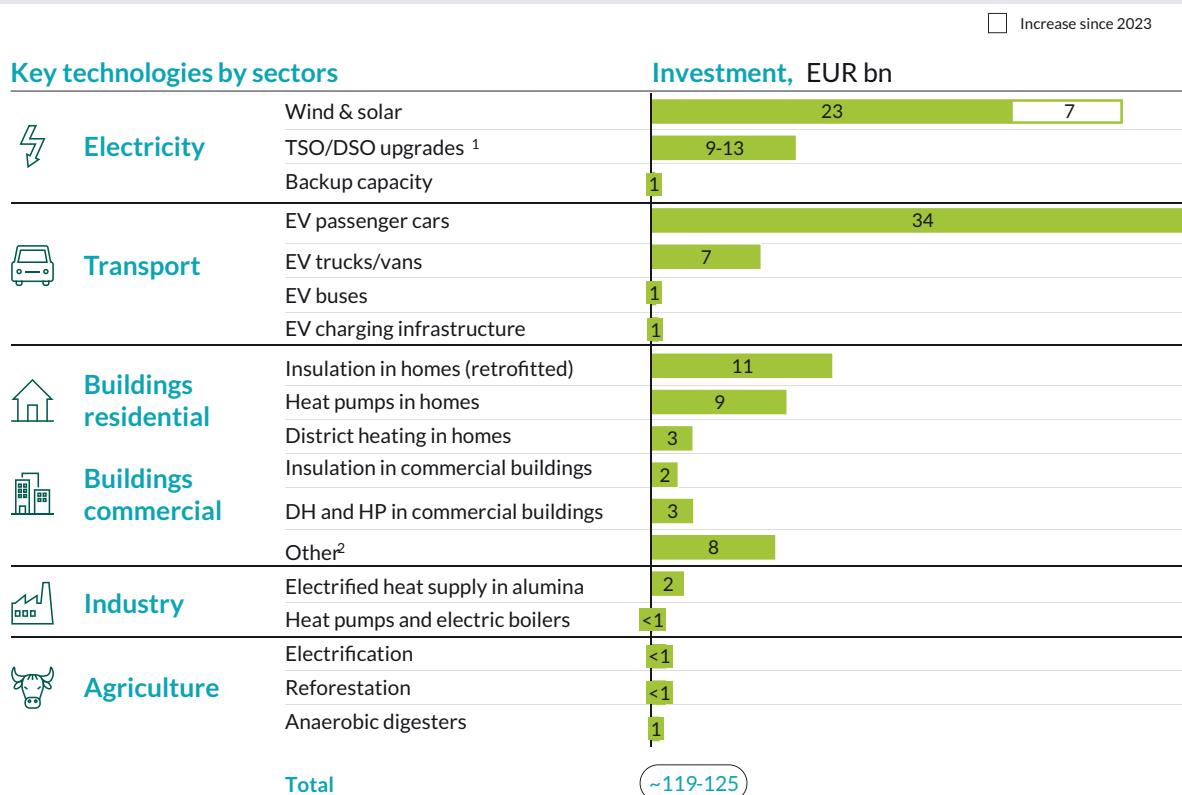
treatment measures to guarantee their long-term resilience and safety,[5] and implementing drinking water safety plans that are crucial to improve the resilience of supplies will require sustained investment in drinking water services if we are to continue to provide a safe and secure supply into the future. The provision of water-related infrastructure must also guard against the impacts of extreme weather events and climate extremes on water services and the water environment.[6]

Energy. While progress is being made in the development of renewable electricity, the national grid requires unprecedented change in the period up to 2030. In 2020, the demand for electricity was twice the amount used in 1990. That demand is projected to increase substantially based on the increasing use of electricity for transport and heating and the increasing demand for electricity from high-demand users.[7] EirGrid has set out that between now and 2030 there needs to be a step change in the volume of network reinforcements delivered to support Ireland's renewable electricity ambition. It anticipates that over 350 projects are needed to reinforce the system and facilitate connections, which represents an investment of over €3 billion in the grids in Ireland and Northern Ireland and a substantial ramping up across the entire life cycle of project delivery. The Climate Action Plan 2023 suggested a total of €119 billion incremental and redirected capital investment in low-carbon technologies and infrastructure will be required in the period 2022-2030. The Climate Action Plan 2024 (DECC, 2023b) revised this figure to between €119 and €125 billion (Figure 17.2).

Figure 17.2 Estimated investment required to mobilise key technologies

Increase since 2023

Key technologies by sectors		Investment, EUR bn
Electricity	Wind & solar	23 · 7
	TSO/DSO upgrades [1]	9-13
	Backup capacity	1
Transport	EV passenger cars	34
	EV trucks/vans	7
	EV buses	1
	EV charging infrastructure	1
Buildings residential	Insulation in homes (retrofitted)	11
	Heat pumps in homes	9
	District heating in homes	3
Buildings commercial	Insulation in commercial buildings	2
	DH and HP in commercial buildings	3
	Other[2]	8
Industry	Electrified heat supply in alumina	2
	Heat pumps and electric boilers	<1
Agriculture	Electrification	<1
	Reforestation	<1
	Anaerobic digesters	1
Total		~119-125

1. Including interconnection | 2. Includes e.g. residential and commercial electric cooking

Source: DECC, 2023b

5   www.epa.ie/news-releases/news-releases-2024/while-water-quality-is-very-high-the-resilience-of-drinking-water-supplies-must-improve-and-will-require-sustained-investment-into-the-future-says-epa.php (accessed 6 September 2024).

6   www.eea.europa.eu/publications/european-climate-risk-assessment (accessed 6 September 2024).

7   cms.eirgrid.ie/sites/default/files/2023-07/Shaping-Our-Electricity-Future_Version-1.1-Plain-English-Summary.pdf (accessed 6 September 2024).

Transport. The National Sustainable Mobility Policy set significant targets of at least 500,000 additional daily active travel and public transport journeys and a 10% reduction in kilometres driven by fossil-fuelled cars by 2030 (DoT, 2022). These were updated in the Climate Action Plan 2024 to a 50% increase in daily active travel journeys, a 130% increase in daily public transport journeys and a 20% reduction in total vehicle-kilometres travelled by 2030 (DECC, 2023b). In delivering on this ambition, key commitments were improving rail infrastructure in the five cities, commencing construction of MetroLink in Dublin, and continuing the design and development of other light rail projects in the Greater Dublin Area and Cork.

Housing. The draft First Revision to the National Planning Framework identifies the need for 50,000 new dwellings per annum to 2040. The recent Housing Commission report suggests an even larger need for up to an additional 1.92 million dwellings, based on population forecasts ranging between 6.25 and 7.25 million persons between 2024 and 2050 (Housing Commission, 2024). The delivery of this housing, together with water and energy services and transport infrastructure, will place an extremely large demand on nationally sourced construction products. In 2019, the Irish Concrete Federation estimated that 1.5 billion tonnes of aggregates were needed to meet the housing and infrastructure targets set down in the government's Project Ireland 2040 plan. Given the increasing population and ambition in the draft National Planning Framework, demand can be expected to grow over the coming years and it is essential that investment infrastructure is sustainable, using secondary raw materials preferentially where possible.

Circular economy. The European Commission's Ireland's Country Report 2024[8] highlighted that there is still an estimated investment gap of €827 million over 2021-2027 if we are to achieve the circular economy transition, with more investment required in eco-design, repair, reuse and remanufacturing and in infrastructure for separating waste and treatment and recycling facilities.

Collectively, these infrastructural projects constitute an extremely large delivery challenge to provide Ireland with the assets needed to meet the challenges of its growing population and economy while providing systems that protect the environment. Investment decisions made in this decade will define the infrastructure that will be available to our society for the next 50 years and need to be fully aligned with achieving the transition to a low-carbon society. Maintaining and enhancing current investment will be key to this delivery and will need to be a critical facet of national development in the coming decade.

Protecting the environment to protect our health

Protecting the environment is key to protecting our health and we must act to reduce the modifiable risks to our health from environmental exposures. Creating healthy places free from environmental hazards is key to creating a healthier and fairer society in which everyone can thrive. There is substantial evidence of the positive impact of engagement with nature and our environment, with links to better mental health and wellbeing, physical activity, stress reduction and social interactions. Our natural environment is also capable of reducing many hazards such as air pollution. On the other side, harmful exposures can have substantial impacts on our health and well-being, with one in ten premature deaths in Europe linked to environmental pollution (EEA, 2023a). In Ireland, more than 1600 premature deaths annually are due to air pollution (EEA, 2023b), and approximately 350 new cases of lung cancer each year in Ireland are linked to radon. Over 1.3 million people are estimated to be exposed to road traffic noise above the WHO guidance levels. Issues related to drinking water quality have persisted for many years, particularly with regard to private drinking water supplies and private wells.

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8   economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/document/download/9f14e528-de10-41aa-8b4d-01c5848784c8_en?filename=SWD_2024_607_1_EN_Ireland.pdf (accessed 6 September 2024).

The impact of environmental hazards and exposures are not equal across society – the young, old, those already in poor health, and groups of disadvantaged socio-economic status tend to be more disproportionally impacted (EEA, 2019). At a European level, environmental inequalities are not well addressed by current policy and are likely to endure, and potentially expand, into the future (EEA, 2019). Research demonstrating that long-term, low-level exposure to fine particulate matter is associated with poorer mental health in older people in Ireland further confirms this (Lyons *et al.*, 2024). The Well-being Framework for Ireland has potential to bring key information into the policy spaces but, as recommended by NESC (2023), there is a need to collect more data to detect inequalities, including environmental ones. In this context, identifying and increasing the visibility of environmental exposure and inequalities at a local scale will be key to informing policies to address health and environment.

One key insight is that, in the main, the impacts of the environment on our health, both positive and negative, are modifiable (i.e. they can be changed) and addressing harmful exposure (to, for example, radon, air pollution, noise and water pollution) will have a beneficial impact on our health. Addressing these risks by reducing pollution, adapting to and mitigating climate change impacts, and restoring ecosystems means that people can be healthier and live longer.

4. Concluding statement

The immense value of Ireland's environment cannot be taken for granted, and societal progress will be severely hampered if our actions damage this essential asset on which we all depend for our air, water and resources. There is only one environment, and this integrated assessment of the state of Ireland's environment shows that the challenges facing it are closely linked and interrelated. Our understanding of these issues is greater than ever before and underpinned by comprehensive monitoring systems and research.

Some progress is being made. Ireland's greenhouse gas emissions in 2023 were at their lowest level in over three decades, signalling the impact of climate action across Ireland's economy and society. While this is positive, we are still well off track in meeting our climate 2030 targets (EPA, 2024b). Critically, this positive delivery is not evident across other areas of the environment, and we need to build momentum to deliver not only on our climate goals but also on our biodiversity, circular economy and pollution reduction goals. Delivering on these goals will require transformational change in many of the core systems of our society and, consequently, will involve everyone in providing a healthy environment for future generations.

Sweden has a goal of passing on to the next generation a society in which the major environmental problems have been solved. In Ireland, we also need to seek to be a generation that changes the path we are on and delivers an Ireland where our major environmental challenges have been solved.

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