



Building a Virtuous Demographic Cycle

National Economic & Social Council

Constitution and Terms of Reference

1. The main tasks of the National Economic and Social Council shall be to analyse and report on strategic issues relating to the efficient development of the economy and the achievement of social justice.
2. The Council may consider such matters either on its own initiative or at the request of the Government.
3. Any reports which the Council may produce shall be submitted to the Government, and shall be laid before each House of the Oireachtas and published.
4. The membership of the Council shall comprise a Chairperson appointed by the Government in consultation with the interests represented on the Council, and
 - Three persons nominated by agricultural and farming organisations;
 - Three persons nominated by business and employers organisations;
 - Three persons nominated by the Irish Congress of Trade Unions;
 - Three persons nominated by community and voluntary organisations;
 - Three persons nominated by environment organisations;
 - Four other persons nominated by the Government, including the Secretaries General of the Department of Finance, the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation, the Department of Housing, Planning and Heritage, the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.
 - Seven people possessing knowledge, experience and skills which the Taoiseach considers relevant to the functions of the Council
5. Any other Government Department shall have the right of audience at Council meetings if warranted by the Council's agenda, subject to the right of the Chairperson to regulate the numbers attending.
6. The term of office of members shall be for three years. Casual vacancies shall be filled by the Government or by the nominating body as appropriate. Members filling casual vacancies may hold office until the expiry of the other members' current term of office.
7. The numbers, remuneration and conditions of service of staff are subject to the approval of the Taoiseach.
8. The Council shall regulate its own procedure.



Building a Virtuous Demographic Cycle

COUNCIL PAPER

No.171 December 2025

Membership

Chairperson

Mr John Callinan, Secretary General, Department of An Taoiseach and Secretary to the Government

Deputy Chairperson

Ms Elizabeth Canavan, Assistant Secretary, Department of An Taoiseach

Business and Employers

Mr Gerard Brady, Ibec

Mr Andrew Brownlee, Construction Industry Federation

Mr Ian Talbot, Chambers Ireland

Trade Unions

Mr Owen Reidy, ICTU

Mr Joe Cunningham, SIPTU

Mr Kevin Callinan, Fórsa

Farming & Agricultural

Mr John Enright, ICMSA

Mr Damian McDonald, IFA

Mr TJ Flanagan, ICOS

Community & Voluntary

Fr Seán Healy, Social Justice Ireland

Ms Brid O'Brien, Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed (INOU)

Dr Naomi Feely, Children's Rights Alliance

Environmental

Ms Karen Ciesielski, Environmental Pillar

Ms Caroline Whyte, Feasta

Mr Jerry Mac Evilly, Friends of the Earth

Public Service

Mr John Hogan, Department of Finance

Mr Declan Hughes, Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment

Mr Graham Doyle, Department of Housing, Local Government & Heritage

Mr David Moloney, Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform

Government Nominees

Mr Seamus Coffey, University College Cork (UCC)

Prof Niamh Moore Cherry, University College Dublin (UCD)

Dr Diarmuid Torney, Dublin City University (DCU)

Dr Chris Van Egeraat, Maynooth University

Prof Colin Scott, University College Dublin (UCD)

Noelle O Connell, European Movement

Nichola Mallon, Ex MLA in the NI Assembly

Colette Byrne, Ex Kilkenny County Council

Secretariat to Project

Dr Larry O'Connell, Director

Dr Gráinne Collins, Social Policy Analyst

A full list of the NESC Secretariat can be found at
www.nesc.ie

Contents

Executive Summary	v
Chapter 1: Demographic Change – An Overview	1
1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 Demographic Trends and Evidence	1
1.3 Peak Population and Peak Child	3
1.4 Intergenerational Dynamics	9
1.5 Regional Variation	11
1.6 Conclusion	13
Chapter 2: Vision – Towards a Virtuous Cycle	14
2.1 Introduction	14
2.2 A Potential Vicious Cycle	15
2.3 Creating a Virtuous Cycle	16
2.4 Population Growth and Planetary Boundaries	19
2.5 A Virtuous Cycle: A Shared Island Perspective?	20
2.6 Conclusion	20
Chapter 3: Reinforcing Ireland’s Virtuous Demographic Cycle – Six Levers	21
3.1 Introduction	21
3.2 Lever One: Fiscal Preparedness	22
3.3 Lever Two: Strategic Family Support Policies	23
3.4 Lever Three: Proactive Migration	24
3.5 Lever Four: Better Work and Increased Participation	25
3.6 Lever Five: Healthcare and Healthy Ageing	25
3.7 Lever Six: Balanced Regional Development	27
3.8 Conclusion	29
Chapter 4: Conclusions	31
Bibliography	34

List of Boxes

Box 1.1: Future Forty – Department of Finance	4
Box 2.1: Demographic Change and Care	18

List of Figures

Figure 1.1: Key demographic deadlines	2
Figure 1.2: Annual components of population change 1951–2024	2
Figure 1.3: Ireland’s total fertility rate (TFR), 2011–2022	5
Figure 1.4: Children in Ireland at each single year of age – 2025	6
Figure 1.5: Overview of immigrants and emigrants in 2020	7
Figure 1.6: All valid permits by reason, absolute numbers	8
Figure 1.7: Life expectancy at birth, 1871–2023	9

Figure 1.8:	Age-dependency ratio	10
Figure 2.1:	A potential vicious cycle of demographic underinvestment	15
Figure 2.2:	A virtuous cycle of sustainable demographic growth	16
Figure 3.1:	Reinforcing Ireland's virtuous cycle – six levers	21

Executive Summary

Ireland's demographic profile is undergoing rapid and profound change. Birth rates are falling, the number of children is declining, and each year the population ages. Within a decade, the ratio of workers to non-workers will narrow, and the population is projected to contract by the 2050s. Without timely, coordinated action, these trends will place increasing pressure on public finances, social protection and essential services, reshaping Ireland's economy, society and environment.

Recent demographic shifts illustrate both challenges and opportunities. Net inward migration rebounded strongly after the 2000s and life expectancy gains have exceeded projections, but fertility rates have fallen faster than expected and now approach the European average. These dynamics highlight that demographic change is not easily predictable. Building capacity for foresight and flexible policy design will be critical.

The challenge is to build capacity and foresight to anticipate and guide demographic shifts, not merely react to their effects. The Council identifies two possible reinforcing demographic pathways: a vicious cycle and a virtuous cycle.

In the **vicious cycle**, short-term pressures – especially on housing and services – create an impulse to aim for lower population growth and migration to allow infrastructure to catch up. The effect of this is that fertility declines further, emigration rises, and the population continues to age. Fiscal and pension pressures mount, constraining future investment and creating a downward spiral of stagnation, as well as intergenerational and regional unfairness. Once established, such dynamics can be very difficult to reverse.

The **virtuous cycle** views demographic growth as an opportunity and invests accordingly. Policies align with higher population projections, signalling confidence and building capacity to meet future needs. The population age structure is stabilised, participation in the workforce increases, leading to fiscal sustainability which in turn leads to higher investment capacity. This eases infrastructure pressures, improves the quality of life, and strengthens integration and retention of citizens. A younger, more balanced population supports fiscal sustainability and sustains the labour force for economic wellbeing. Six key levers reinforce this virtuous cycle, including migration, at least in the short run.

The *Future Forty: Ireland's Demographic Outlook* work by the Department of Finance highlights a narrow window for Ireland to prepare for these changes. Sustaining social cohesion, economic resilience and fiscal sustainability requires coordinated policy action across multiple domains.

The Council has identified six levers that can be used to energise a virtuous cycle:

- 1) **Lever One – Fiscal preparation:** Ireland needs to strengthen its capacity to plan and save for the long term. While the *Future Ireland Fund* is a crucial step, additional measures will be required to meet the fiscal demands that will emerge as the population ages. Building

resilience means developing a stronger framework for long-term budgeting, investing in productive infrastructure, and managing public finances in a way that smooths expenditure pressures over time.

Fiscal preparation is not only about saving more, but also about spending wisely, directing resources toward prevention, innovation, and policies that reduce future liabilities. Ensuring sustainability will require regular review of pension and health systems, alongside strategies that promote efficiency and equity in service delivery. Sound fiscal governance will underpin confidence, stability and the capacity to respond flexibly to demographic and economic change.

- 2) **Lever Two – Strategic family support policies:** Fertility may be stabilised through stronger family supports: affordable childcare and housing, adequate parental leave, and income and welfare policies that de-risk family formation, creating family wellbeing and intergenerational stability.
- 3) **Lever Three – Proactive migration:** Migration is a key lever as it can help replenish the workforce, enrich communities and offset population ageing. Continued success will depend on adequate housing, accessible services and inclusive integration policies, underpinned by an open and confident national outlook. Migration can only ever be a complement to, but cannot substitute for, domestic fertility or workforce participation strategies.
- 4) **Lever Four – Better work and increased participation:** Increasing participation and productivity across the life course depends on access to secure, flexible and rewarding employment. Ensuring that people have opportunities for meaningful work – supported by fair pay, good conditions and progression pathways – will help sustain engagement at all ages. Flexibility should enable participation by parents, older people and those with caring or health responsibilities, recognising that different stages of life require different supports. Lifelong learning must become a central feature of the system, equipping people to adapt as technologies and industries evolve. Employers, educators and government all have roles in promoting continuous skill development and inclusive workplaces. Building a culture of good work will not only enhance wellbeing and cohesion but also increase participation and therefore reinforce fiscal and social sustainability as the population ages.
- 5) **Lever Five – Healthcare & healthy aging:** Essential to meet the needs of a longer-lived population, this plays a major role in shaping public finances and public services. Without change, rising chronic-care demands will create pressures that are difficult to manage. The Council argues that the focus must be on extending healthy life expectancy, prevention across the life course and embedding responsive, community-based care. Supporting active and healthy ageing will also enable people across the lifespan to remain engaged in work and community life, reinforcing wellbeing and fiscal balance.
- 6) **Lever Six – Balanced regional development:** Ensuring population growth and economic opportunities are fairly spread across the country requires aligning housing, transport and employment strategies. Investing in regional infrastructure – such as broadband, public transport, education and healthcare – makes smaller cities, towns and rural areas more attractive, strengthening social cohesion and community connection throughout life.

Government leadership is essential to articulate a coherent and credible vision of Ireland as a thriving, inclusive and sustainable society. Embedding demographic ambition within broader

national goals – economic dynamism, social cohesion and climate action – can build public confidence and mobilise investment in infrastructure, services and community capacity. Such a renewed social contract would connect demographic planning with intergenerational fairness, ensuring that the benefits of growth and wellbeing are shared across society.

The coming decade will be decisive. Population ageing, shifting fertility and continued migration will require integrated approaches to work, care and social supports. With strategic investment, inclusive planning and sustained public trust, Ireland can get ahead of changes and trends, evident across the world, and build a virtuous cycle of participation, wellbeing and opportunity, securing an equitable and prosperous future for all.

The Council's aim is to identify how Ireland can improve the agility and management of long-term demographic changes. Building on a shared understanding of key demographic trends, Ireland must develop the institutional and policy frameworks needed to manage the changes ahead. At the same time, the Council acknowledges that this work must be grounded in the realities of pressure on the system today, recognising that progress towards long-term goals depends on addressing immediate constraints and coordination challenges. These include the need to foster whole-of-government coherence so that housing, healthcare, education and public transport systems are planned on the basis of a shared demographic reality while remaining responsive to short-term pressures within each sector.

This Council report presents a clear, shared and positive vision for demographic change, helping Ireland to be better prepared. It is part of the Council's wider strategy, which includes forward-looking assessments in areas such as energy, AI, affordable housing and remote work.

This report is structured as follows:

- Chapter 1: Demographic Change – An Overview
- Chapter 2: Vision – Towards a Virtuous Cycle
- Chapter 3: Reinforcing Ireland's Virtuous Cycle – Six Levers
- Chapter 4: Conclusions

Chapter 1: Demographic Change – An Overview

1.1 Introduction

Demography sets the contours within which social, economic and environmental change takes place. By planning ahead, Ireland can ensure that demographic change becomes a source of strength, not a source of strain.

This report complements the Department of Finance’s Future Forty programme, a research initiative assessing the long-term sustainability of existing policies and modelling how demographic and other structural trends may affect Ireland’s fiscal position over the next 40 years. The Council supports this work and notes its finding that Ireland’s population is likely to grow faster than previous projections suggested. This calls for a more strategic approach to long-term planning – one that not only safeguards fiscal sustainability but also reaffirms the social contract by ensuring that public resources are used to promote fairness, inclusion and wellbeing across generations and across the country.

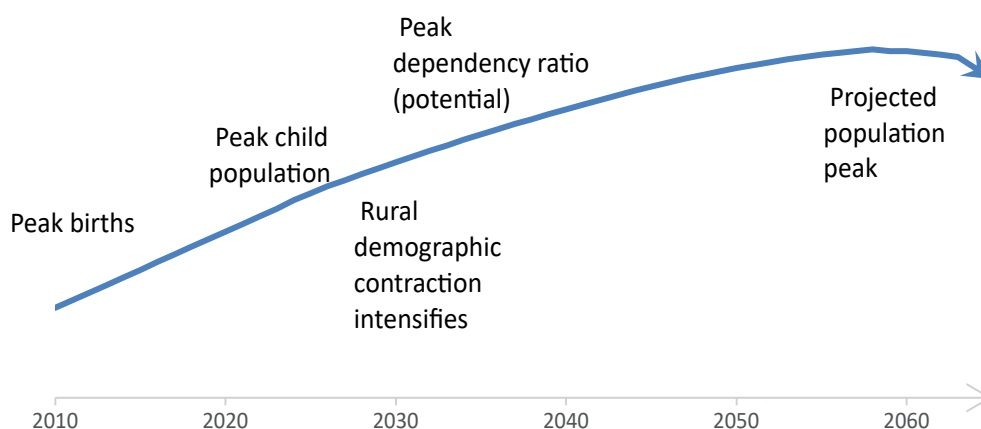
1.2 Demographic Trends and Evidence

Ireland is undergoing a series of demographic shifts and has already passed two notable turning points: ‘peak baby’ in 2010 and ‘peak child’ in 2024, both reflecting a sharp and sustained fall in births (Figure 1.1).

Peak child refers to the point at which the number of children in a population stops increasing and begins to decline. Migration trends represent a different kind of change. Unlike with fertility, there is no single point of ‘peak migration’, since flows in and out of the country are volatile and shaped by economic cycles, global events and policy decisions. Instead of a steady rise and fall, migration in Ireland is better described as a series of peaks and troughs. This volatility is compounded by limited data, particularly on emigration, which makes projecting future trends difficult. Nonetheless, 2007 likely marked the high point of net inward migration, after which emigration has generally risen and immigration has declined, albeit with fluctuations.

Other notable trends include the gradual regional depopulation of certain areas, and the moment, projected as early as 2037, when the number of workers relative to non-workers peaks, and finally the projected peak of Ireland’s total population sometime after 2050.

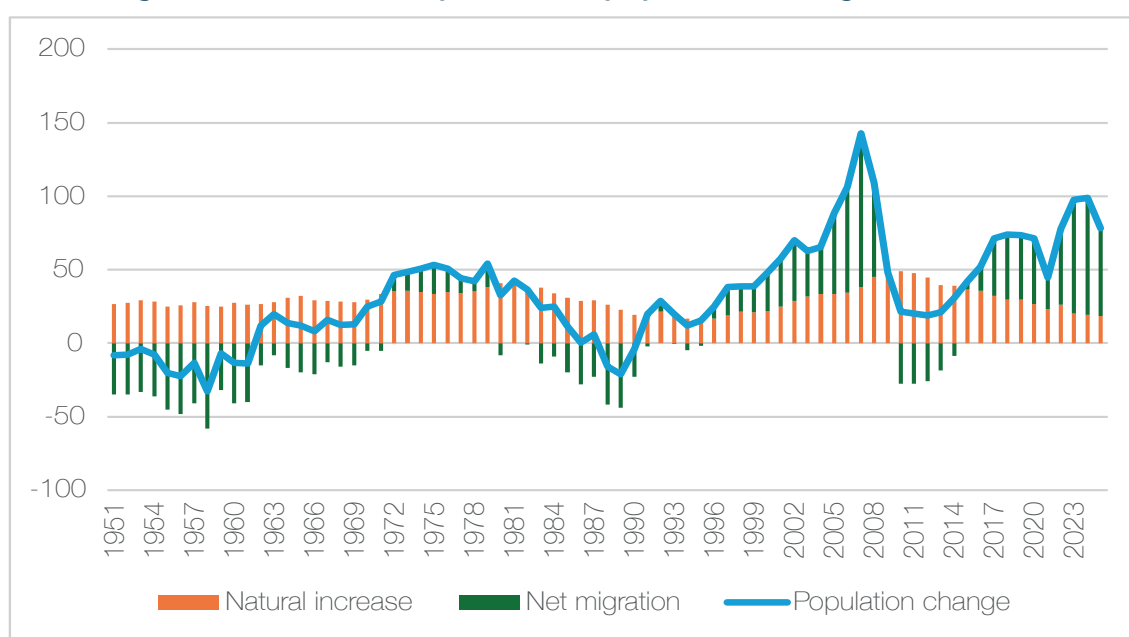
Population projections always warrant caution. Previous efforts have often fallen short, highlighting the need to strengthen modelling methods and rebuild demographic capability in Ireland. However, demographic deadlines are approaching, and policy must act both to buy time and to prepare. Current models place Ireland’s population peak sometime after 2053, ranging widely from 6 to 8 million. While this gap may seem both abstract and unhelpful, it stems from small annual differences compounded over the coming decades. It is prudent to plan on the higher side of projections over the next decade and recalibrate as new evidence emerges.

Figure 1.1: Key demographic deadlines

Source: NESC.

In the last 70 years, the population of the Republic of Ireland has increased by 80 per cent. The highest population growth rate was seen in 2007 (3.4 per cent); this was followed by a period of population slowdown as more people emigrated due to the Global Recession post-2008, resulting in a low of just above zero (0.4 per cent) in 2011. The last 10 years have seen population growth averaging 1.5 per cent per annum, peaking at 2.15 per cent in 2022.

Population change is caused by four components: births and deaths which together make the 'natural increase' in the population and inward migration (immigration) and outward migration (emigration) which together make 'net migration' (Figure 1.2).

Figure 1.2: Annual components of population change 1951–2024

Source: CSO, 2024, PEA15 and NESC calculations.

Over the past 70 years, the natural increase of the population (births over deaths) has added over 2.1 million to Ireland's population, while net migration (immigration over emigration) has contributed just 357,000.

The timeframe of such analyses has a crucial bearing; for example, in the period from 2014 (the last year of net emigration) to 2024, natural increase accounted for 279,000 additional people, while net migration contributed 425,000. In fact, it is only in the past decade that migration has surpassed natural increase as the primary driver of population growth.

Natural increase has diminished in importance, and even within that, its drivers have shifted: historically it was high birth rates, now it is the fewer deaths due to increased longevity.

The rest of the chapter focuses on the three demographic changes that are particularly pertinent to Ireland's future wellbeing.

- Peak population & peak child
- Intergenerational dynamics
- Regional variation

While these sections describe past trends and the projections of what is most likely to happen, it must be remembered that projections remain highly uncertain, especially given Ireland's migration volatility. This uncertainty reinforces the need for flexible, evidence-based planning that can adapt to demographic surprises rather than assume linear continuation of current trends.

1.3 Peak Population and Peak Child

There are a range of projections for Ireland's future population trajectory, produced by the Department of Finance, CSO, ESRI, Eurostat and the United Nations.

These projections converge on a common expectation that Ireland's population is likely to peak somewhere between 2050 and 2065, slightly ahead of the projected peak in global population. For instance, the UN medium projection for Ireland has Ireland's population peaking in 2053.

The Department of Finance's medium projection (central migration and central fertility) peaks in 2065. Higher estimates of migration push out the date of peak population and lower fertility brings peak population closer in every scenario and model.

While inward migration may delay the timing of peak population slightly, the potential to do so is constrained by global demographic trends, particularly the fall in world birth rates and the ageing of the world population. The core demographic group that typically fuels migration flows – people aged in their 20s – is projected to decline and will be increasingly in demand across other ageing societies.

Box 1.1: Future Forty – Department of Finance

Future Forty: Ireland's Demographic Outlook is a long-term programme examining how structural drivers will shape Ireland's economy and public finances over the next four decades. Its first output, Ireland's Demographic Outlook: Trends and Scenarios for the Next Forty Years, explores how population change may unfold under varying assumptions on migration, fertility and mortality.

The work includes a bottom-up approach to migration modelling. Rather than relying on a single net figure or linking migration flows to wage differentials, the Department disaggregates inflows and outflows by categories such as family connection, skill level and visa type. Each pathway is modelled separately, providing a more granular picture of how different forms of migration might influence long-term demographic trends.

The report develops nine scenarios by combining three fertility assumptions (1.5, 1.3 and 1.2 births per woman) with three modelled migration paths (high, medium, low):

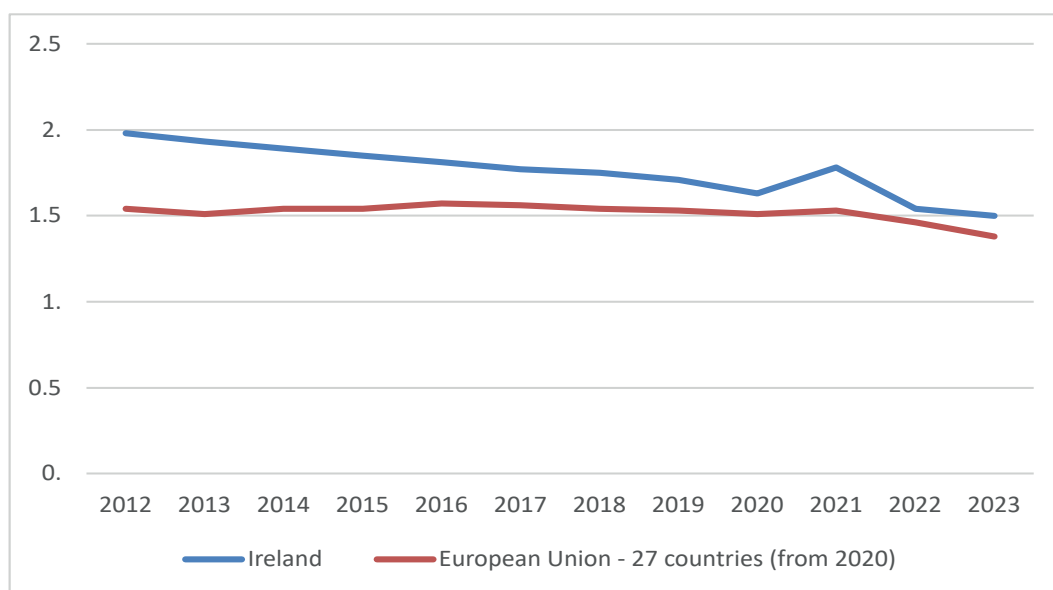
- **High:** Net migration averages 58,400 in 2030 before easing to 53,400 by 2065. Combined with a fertility rate of 1.5, this produces the most expansive outcome, with the population approaching 8 million.
- **Medium/Central:** Net migration falls from current levels to about 41,400 in 2030, and further to 35,000 annually by 2065. If fertility stabilises at 1.3, Ireland's population would reach 6.77 million in 2065, almost 30 per cent larger than in 2023.
- **Low:** Net migration falls sharply to 24,950 by 2030 and 18,550 by 2065. If fertility falls to 1.2, population growth is more modest, peaking at around 6 million by the early 2050s.

In all scenarios the population increases until at least 2053. The only difference is if the Irish population will be an extra 3 million (highest scenario) or an extra 1 million (lowest scenario), and the date of 'peak population'.

The report highlights significant data gaps, particularly on migrant outflows and return migration. In the absence of robust Irish data, modelling drew on Australian assumptions, whose applicability to Ireland remains uncertain. The Department therefore recommends the creation of an integrated cross-departmental migration data system, linking visa, employment permit, Revenue and Social Protection records, to enable real-time analysis and evidence-based policymaking.

The projections of peak population between 2053 and 2065 reflect the reality that birth rates in Ireland are declining. Ireland has excellent historic records on births so can accurately track trends. In 2010, 77,000 babies were born in Ireland. This is the highest recorded number of annual births. The number has fallen consistently since, with 54,000 births in 2024.

The declining birth rate is reflected in Figure 1.3 which shows the total fertility rate (TFR), which represents the average number of children a woman is expected to have over her lifetime. A fertility rate of 2.1 children per woman is considered the replacement level necessary for a stable population (UN, 2024).

Figure 1.3: Ireland's total fertility rate (TFR), 2011–2022

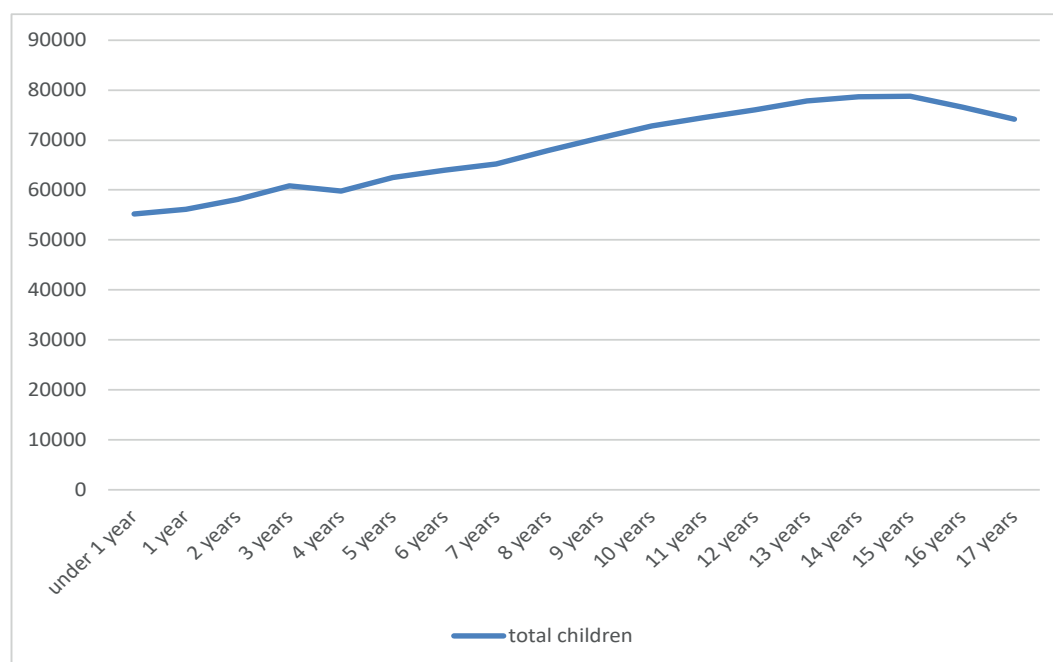
Source: Eurostat (demo_find).

Although Ireland's fertility rate remains above that of other European countries, it has now fallen below the replacement level. As of 2024, the TFR was approximately 1.5, down from 2.0 in 2012. This represents a decline of 25 per cent in the total fertility rate in just over 12 years.

The decline in the number of births has been slightly offset by an increase in the number of young children entering the State (Figure 1.3). In 2024, there were 54,000 births registered (CSO, VSQ15), yet the CSO estimated 55,500 children under the age of one residing in the country (CSO, PEA11). Much of this discrepancy reflects the arrival of babies born abroad, who may or may not be Irish citizens. This highlights that, in the case of people who have a right to reside in Ireland (such as British citizens or Irish citizens who previously emigrated), there is no adequate means of tracking their movements into and out of the country. Ireland, therefore, has to use a patchwork of other sources to close this gap – such as child benefit records.

Immigrant children add to the numbers of children born here – most notably the arrival of Ukrainian children from 2022. This temporarily delayed a downturn in the number of children; 2024 was the year when Ireland witnessed 'peak child'.

From now on in every year, Ireland will have fewer children in the Irish population as over 70,000 children become adults but 55,000 children are born – indeed, this decline will accelerate in the near term (Figure 1.4).

Figure 1.4: Children in Ireland at each single year of age – 2025

Source: CSO PEA11.

Ireland's experience fits within a broader global pattern. Births peaked worldwide in 2012, and fewer than half of all countries now have fertility rates above replacement levels. Even in those countries (mainly in Africa), fertility is falling rapidly. The global fertility rate is estimated at 2.24, only marginally above replacement levels, pointing to a peak in world population within decades.

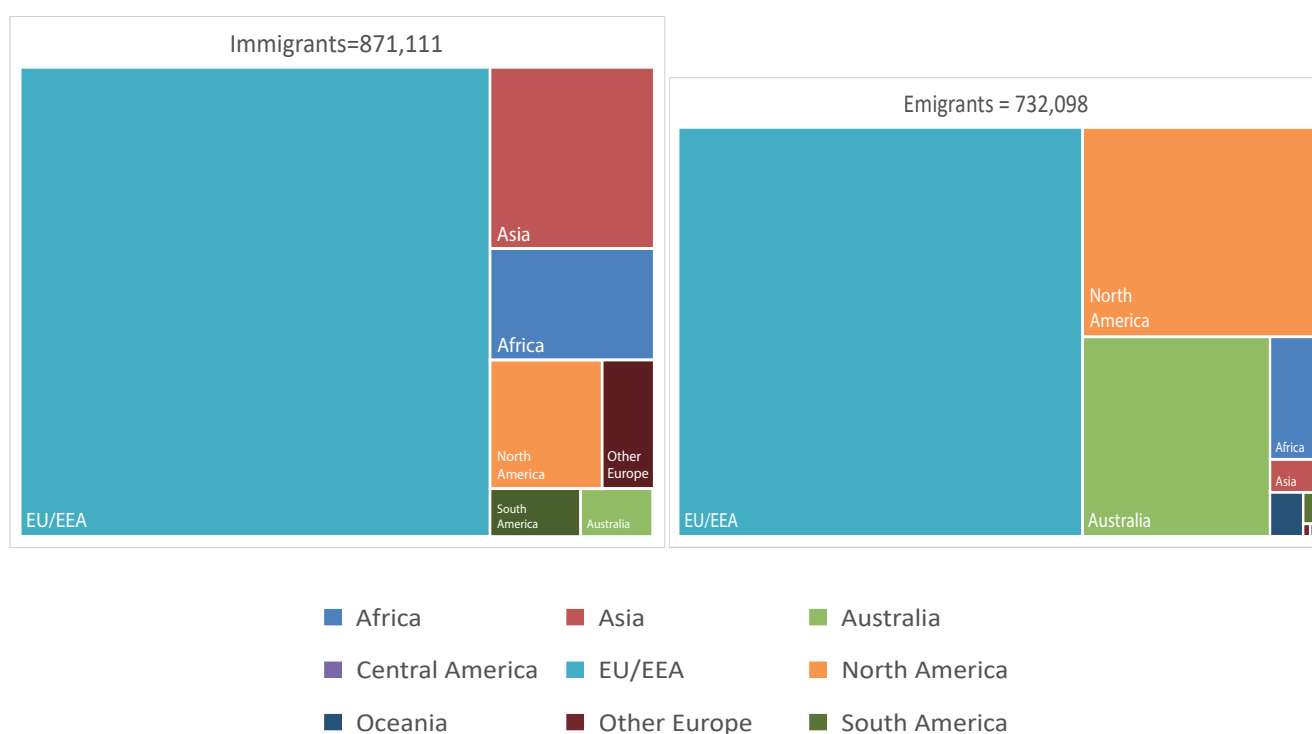
To date, declining fertility has not reduced Ireland's overall population. Growth has been maintained by both longer life expectancy and inward migration.

Migration is made of two elements: people leaving the country and people moving to the country. Emigration has been consistently high from the founding of the State. Since 1987 on average, 50,000 people have left Ireland each year, with a low of 26,200 in the early 2000s (CSO, PEA03). The peak year for people leaving the country was 2012 when 83,000 left Ireland but there was a recent peak in 2024 when 69,900 left Ireland. It should be noted that emigration is hard to measure; rather it is inferred from the absence of people in census or administrative data.

Migration presents even greater data challenges. Historically, migrants are defined as those residing in a country for at least one year. Yet in practice, individuals may move in and out multiple times, making the boundary between temporary and long-term migration difficult to draw. In Ireland, the absence of mandatory registration on entry or exit compounds this difficulty. Unlike in some other countries, people do not have to notify the State when arriving for a period of months or years, nor is there any requirement to record departures. Work permits and visas provide some data on inward migration, but these sources are partial: they capture entry on legal grounds but not necessarily the length of stay, repeat movement or subsequent

departure, and they entirely miss people who do not require a permit to live or work in Ireland. Immigration is therefore often recorded at census points, while emigration must be inferred when individuals are no longer observed but have not died; this can be supplemented with data from unrenewed work permits. It is also worth noting that there is very little understanding of motives for moves. All this hampers projecting the trends into the future. We can get some sense of the stock of migrants in Ireland and Irish emigrants in other countries (Figure 1.5). This highlights that by far the biggest source of migrants is from Europe and Europe is also the biggest destination for Irish emigrants.

Figure 1.5: Overview of immigrants and emigrants in 2020



Source: <https://www.populationpyramid.net/immigration-statistics/en/ireland/2020/> Note that EU/EEA includes the UK.

In contrast to emigration, immigration has been much more volatile, driven by shortages in the labour force and by economic growth. There was a big peak in the early 2000s; 151,000 entered Ireland in 2007, but the number fell to a low of 41,800 in 2019 and it has increased and then declined since then. Unlike with the emigration curves, there is a notable dip around the COVID pandemic years. (The numbers of immigrants are pretty evenly spread between women and men.)

This means that net migration (immigrants minus emigrants) has been very volatile.¹

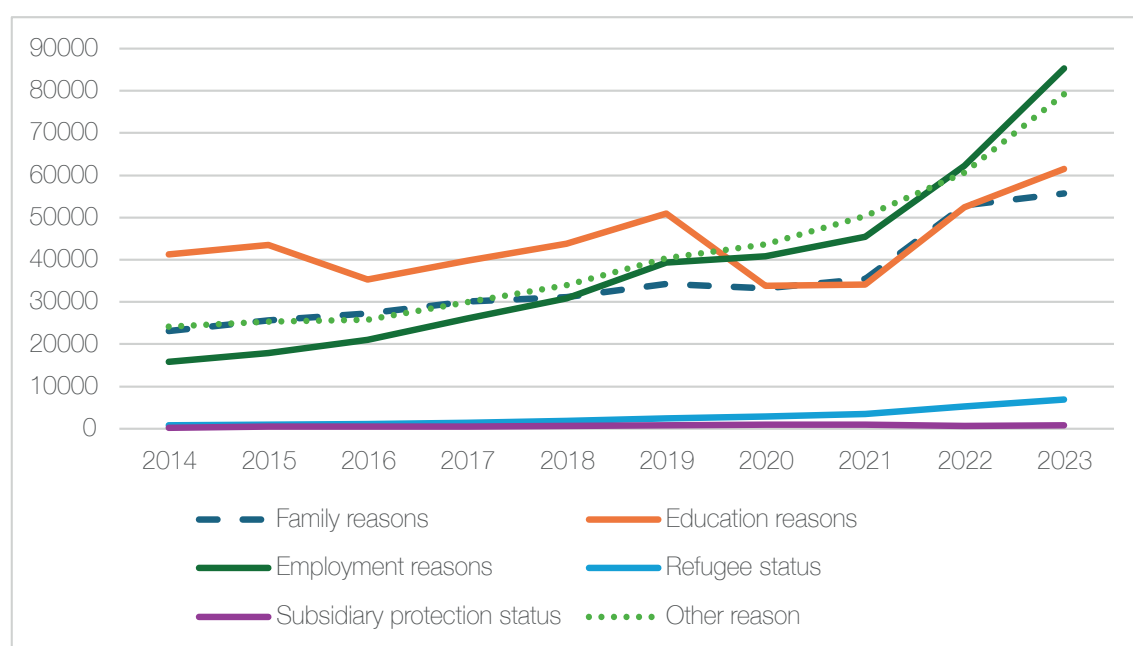
¹ Until the recent modelling of migration by the Department of Finance, all migration models used in Ireland were based on 'net migration' – those entering the country minus those leaving. However, net migration itself is not a process but rather an arithmetic outcome. The factors influencing why people leave or arrive are driven by entirely different processes. Moreover, the policy implications differ significantly depending on the composition of migration flows. For example, if 1.1 million people enter while 1 million leave, or if 200,000 enter while 100,000 leave, both scenarios result in the same net migration figure of 100,000. However, the impact on policy, such as housing demand, varies greatly between the two.

Most migrants arriving in Ireland do not require official permission, as they are Irish nationals returning home or citizens of the UK and EU. Approximately one quarter of all migrants who moved to Ireland in the year of the 2022 Census were Irish nationals. Around 38 per cent were European, British or dual nationals, while 37 per cent came from outside Europe.

As regards those who required official permission to enter (Figure 1.6), the largest category of permits issued was for employment purposes. The second-largest category, labelled 'other reasons,' encompasses a diverse range of circumstances. Education represented the third most common reason for migration, followed by family reunification.

Migrants who arrive seeking international protection constitute only a very small share of overall migration – less than 3 per cent when refugees and those granted subsidiary protection are combined.

Figure 1.6: All valid permits by reason, absolute numbers



Source: CSO, F5018.

Despite success in attracting migrants, Ireland faces challenges in retaining them. Department of Finance (2025) data show that 60 per cent of Critical Skills Employment Permit (CSEP) holders leave within five years.² High living costs, housing shortages and integration barriers are likely contributing factors. However, the specific reasons why CSEP holders, or emigrants more broadly, choose to leave Ireland remain unclear. Further research in this area is essential to inform more effective retention and integration policies.

To sustain its appeal as a destination for skilled migrants, Ireland must invest in infrastructure – especially affordable housing – and strengthen social integration policies. Without progress, the country risks slowed growth and increased social tensions.

² Ireland does not have exactly comparable data but analysis of selected European countries by the OECD suggests that this is on the high side (OECD 2024).

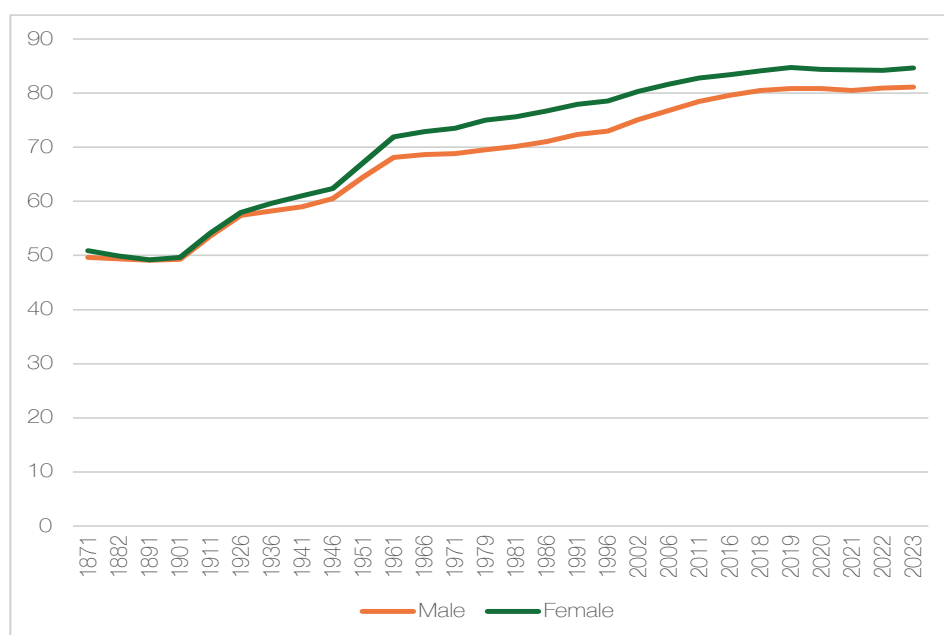
Over time, the offsetting effects of increased life expectancy and net inward migration will not be sufficient to sustain population growth, and Ireland will reach peak population within decades. However, policy interventions can set the timing of peak population back by several decades.

These demographic shifts will result in a redrawing of the age pyramid and changes to intergenerational dynamics.

1.4 Intergenerational Dynamics

In one hundred years the Irish average life expectancy at birth has increased by a quarter of a century (Figure 1.7). The average life expectancy at both 65 and birth is well above the European average but still a year behind the best-performing country (Switzerland).

Figure 1.7: Life expectancy at birth, 1871 to 2023



Source: CSO, 1871–2016, table VSA30; 2018–2023, table WM103.

Ireland's life expectancy at 65 is 85.8 years – that is, Irish men and women who retire at 66 can expect to live 19.8 years. Of note, the increase in longevity is not evenly spread. CSO Mortality Differentials statistics and the Irish Life Tables indicate that, while life expectancy for everyone has improved, the differentials between social classes, education levels and geographical regions are increasing over time.³

One of the most widely used indicators of the working-age balance in a population is the age dependency ratio, which compares the number of children (under 15) and older people (over

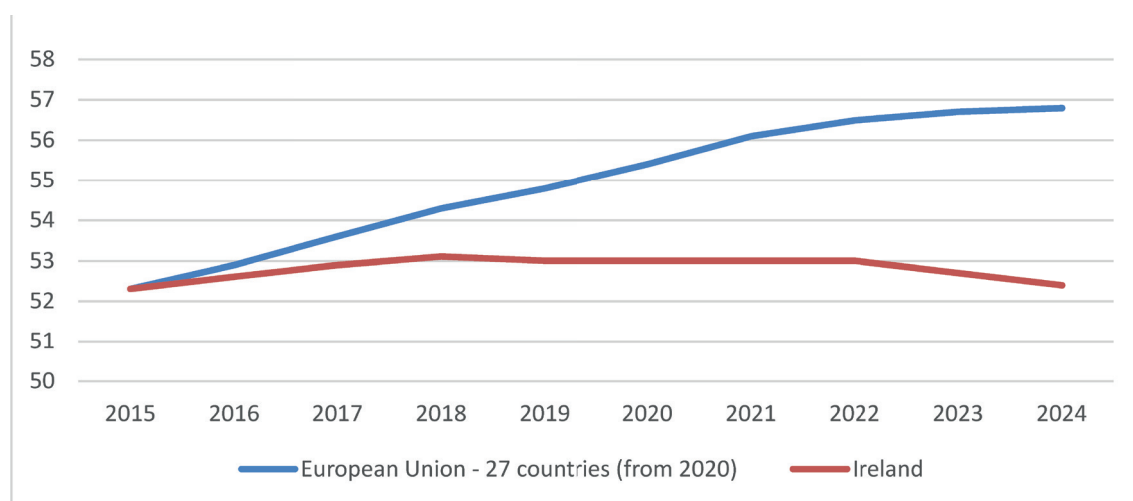
3 The latest Quarterly Vital Statistics from the CSO (VSQ04) indicate that the life expectancy gains achieved over the past century have now stalled, though several more years of data will be required to clarify the pattern.

65) to those of working age (15–65). This ‘age-dependency ratio’ seeks to illustrate the balance between those in need of care and those of working age.

First, it is worth noting that, while Ireland’s life expectancy has increased, the age-dependency ratio remains relatively low and significantly below the European average (see Figure 1.8). In 2024, Ireland had 52.4 people who were young or old compared to 100 people aged 15–65. The EU average is 56.8 people.

Using an assumption of low levels⁴ of net inward migration, the CSO predicts that the age-dependency ratio will peak in 2032, just seven years from now. With higher levels of net migration, that peak pushes to either 2042 or 2057. To be clear, pushing the peak to 2057 would require net migration of 45,000 per year, which is lower than the current level of 59,700 net migrants recorded in 2025 (125,300 immigrants and 65,600 emigrants) which in turn is a decrease on the 2024 level of 79,300 net migrants (CSO, PEA03). Therefore, migration has already pushed out the peak in the age-dependency ratio beyond 2032.

Figure 1.8: Age-dependency ratio



Source: Eurostat demo_pjanind.

Second, the age dependency ratio is a very blunt measure; for example, many people over 65 are working; this can take various forms, both paid and unpaid. The participation rate in work (as measured by the International Labour Organization) of people aged 65 and over has increased by more than 75 per cent, from 8.2 per cent to 15 per cent between 1998 and 2024 (CSO, F1033).

Indeed, with the extension of third-level education, it is equally misleading to assume that all 19-year-olds are working. The Council has previously criticised the age-dependency ratio for its implicit assumption that all individuals aged 15 to 64 are in employment, while those outside those ages are entirely dependent. It has recommended supplementing the conventional dependency ratio with additional measures to provide a more accurate reflection of economic

4 10,000 per year until 2057.

and social realities (NESC, 2023). Furthermore, relying on the age-dependency ratio can mislead policymakers into thinking that Ireland is doing better or worse than is actually the case.

A second measure of the link between generations is to outline the total number of people in relation to the number of people in employment. This presents a markedly different and improving picture. In 1998, at the start of the series, there were 2.4 people for every person in employment. This ratio increased during the recession, declined thereafter, rose again during the COVID-19 pandemic, and has since fallen. By the end of 2024, the ratio stood at 2 (CSO, QLF01 and PEA11). This measure reflects rising labour force participation rates across age ranges. The CSO projects that, with the lowest migration scenario, the labour force will not peak until 2037.

These demographic shifts collectively set the stage for significant social and economic restructuring in the coming decades – but these will play out across Ireland in different ways.

1.5 Regional Variation

Even though Ireland is geographically small, demographic change is marked by substantial regional variation. Both population growth and ageing unfold unevenly across the country. This spatial demography has real and tangible implications for people's lives and the environment. Geography shapes access to key opportunities such as education, employment, healthcare, housing and transport. In a cohesive society, where individuals live should not unduly limit their ability to participate fully in society (Whelan et al., 2023).

Population growth in Ireland is unevenly distributed, and the settlement patterns of migrants are reinforcing this imbalance. Against a backdrop of overall Irish population increases, some regions – particularly rural and remote areas – are experiencing both depopulation and rapid ageing. These trends risk deepening inequalities, as shrinking, older populations may become increasingly vulnerable to the decline of essential services such as healthcare, education and transport.

Conversely, other areas are seeing higher concentrations of births, migrants and returning Irish nationals, bringing vitality and diversity. But this growth is geographically concentrated. This puts pressure on services and infrastructure, which also risks deepening inequalities as populations find it hard to access services or to get reasonable housing. Limited movement of people between counties means that the benefits of demographic dynamism are not spreading across the country. Thus, both depopulation and over-concentration can produce forms of inequality – one through scarcity of services, the other through excessive demand.

As a result, distinct geographic clusters are emerging: some communities are growing and becoming more diverse, while others are shrinking and ageing. This fragmentation poses challenges for balanced regional development (a key national objective), maintaining social cohesion, ensuring equitable access to services, and promoting inclusion in all regions.

The counties with the largest populations in the 2022 Census were Dublin (1,458,154) and Cork (584,156), while those with the smallest populations were Leitrim (35,199) and Longford (46,751). While the total population has increased since 1926, Leitrim, Mayo, Roscommon, Sligo

and Cavan all have fewer people than they did in 1926. Conversely, Dublin and its environs have seen almost continuous and substantial growth.

Within counties, there are areas of relative growth and decline. Looking at electoral districts, O'Driscoll et al. (2024) argue that, between 1986 and 2022, some rural areas, particularly remote and peripheral areas in the Midlands and the West, suffered consistent depopulation. They highlight that the areas that are declining in population are ageing the fastest. They also note that many rural areas, especially around cities, are gaining population, while some urban areas have experienced population loss. All five cities have areas of population decline; in Dublin, centred on Donaghmede, in Cork on Glasheen and in Galway on Renmore. All this illustrates that population decline can be driven by different demographic factors (O'Driscoll et al., 2022).

There are at least three interrelated reasons for the regional patterns: where migrants and return emigrants choose to live, low levels of internal migration, and diverse rates of natural increases.

Returning emigrants and international migrants tend to settle in urban centres, which creates a noticeable spatial imbalance. Large cities and strong economic or educational hubs (Dublin, Cork and surrounding counties) tend to have higher proportions of people who have spent time abroad. This suggests that these areas attract internationally mobile individuals, likely due to education and job opportunities, and a more transient population. In addition, counties with fewer than 2 per cent of their population having lived abroad are generally more rural or less economically dynamic. Fewer people who moved abroad choose to return to these regions and fewer international migrants settle there, which is likely due to limited job opportunities and amenities.

In addition, there is a relatively low level of internal migration for most of the country. Just 5.3 per cent moved either within a county or within the State in the year leading up to Census 2022 (a decline from 6.1 per cent and 5.7 per cent in the previous two censuses respectively).

Finally, natural population growth is concentrated in the commuter belt around Dublin, particularly in South Dublin, Kildare, Meath and Fingal, each with rates of 9 per 1,000 or more. Fingal has the highest rate in Ireland, at 11 per 1,000 people. In contrast, counties like Mayo and Kerry have much lower rates, around 3 per 1,000. The national average is 6 per 1,000. Notably, Dublin City has a relatively low rate of natural increase at 4 per 1,000. Other urban areas also fall below the national average, including Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown, Cork City and County, Limerick City and County, and Waterford City and County, all at 5 per 1,000. Galway City aligns with the national average at 6 per 1,000.

These explanations are partial and do not account for inner-city population falls evident in all five cities. Here the explanation probably lies with housing, planning and economic restructuring, with high housing costs and short-term lets displacing families and leaving behind ageing populations. The paradox is that cities can grow overall (through suburban and commuter belt expansion) while their historic cores lose population.

The CSO projects increases in population for all regions until 2042 (PEC26) but with more of this growth on the eastern seaboard.

1.6 Conclusion

Ireland's demographic landscape has evolved greatly over the last half-century and will continue to change over the coming half-century. People will continue to migrate in and out of the country; the birth rate is likely to continue to fall, life expectancy to increase (though more slowly), and family structures to diversify.

This chapter illustrates three broad trends:

- a growing population – the Department of Finance central projection is that by 2065 Ireland will have a population of 6.8 million, 1.5 million more than today;
- a higher proportion of older people; and
- localised depopulation (in specific rural and urban areas) and regional concentration of growth in the East.

These demographic trends pose challenges for Ireland's future, affecting economic success, social cohesion and the country's environment. Without proactive planning, pressures on infrastructure, services and the labour market could undermine long-term stability and wellbeing.

However, these same trends present considerable opportunities: with timely and coordinated action, as outlined in Chapters 3 and 4, Ireland can harness demographic change to strengthen communities, sustain growth and support a more inclusive and resilient society.

Finally, while these projections provide a broad outline of likely trends, they also entail considerable uncertainty. The difference between a peak population of 6 million and 8 million would have major implications. Managing demographic change effectively will require stronger data collection, modelling and forecasting capacity, including more robust migration statistics through integrated administrative data, exit surveys and/or registration systems. Strengthening demographic foresight is not only a technical challenge but a cornerstone of building an adaptive, inclusive society.

Accurate foresight is critical. Ireland's current demographic modelling – often based on deterministic cohort-component forecasts – relies on simplified assumptions and outdated techniques. Migration, in particular, is highly volatile and frequently underestimated. Forecasts rarely incorporate feedback from policy interventions such as international student recruitment and urban growth strategies. Moreover, the discipline of demography is underrepresented in Ireland, limiting the expertise available for robust forecasting (NESC, 2025a).

Chapter 2: Vision – Towards a Virtuous Cycle

2.1 Introduction

Across the world, demographic changes are reshaping the economic, social and environmental landscape. Ireland is no exception. Shifts in fertility, life expectancy, migration and the spatial distribution of people are transforming our society at a foundational level.

While demographic change is slow-moving, the assumptions underpinning projections can shift quickly. Ireland's recent history provides clear examples:

- Net inward migration returned in the early 2000s far more rapidly than official projections anticipated.
- Life expectancy gains have altered the age profile of the population more rapidly than previously modelled.
- The rapid decline in fertility rates has outpaced all projections and is now near the European norm.

While the drivers of these shifts are complex, policy can shape demographic trajectories. This chapter adds a further dimension: the importance of a shared understanding of demographic change and its implications.

To be clear, the Council is not prescribing or judging how many people should or could live in Ireland. Rather, it is highlighting that future demographic change can be understood in two distinct ways, each with different implications.

In the first view, a vicious cycle can emerge: lower ambition, conservative projections and underinvestment weaken migration and retention, worsening the balance between workers and dependents. This, in turn, creates fiscal and pension pressures, risks economic contraction, fuels social division, and undermines progress on environmental goals.

In the second, virtuous cycle, investment aligns with higher or moderate population projections. This reduces emigration, attracts and retains migrants, supports natural population growth, and strengthens intergenerational balance and fiscal sustainability.

In both views, the Council stresses the need for continued commitment to ambitious climate and environmental action. Finally, while it has not formed part of the Council's work on demography, there is a case for further assessment of demographic trends and projections on an all-island basis. Such an approach would capture cross-border dynamics and provide a stronger foundation for forecasting, resource allocation and long-term planning in areas such as health, housing, infrastructure and the economy.

This chapter is structured as follows:

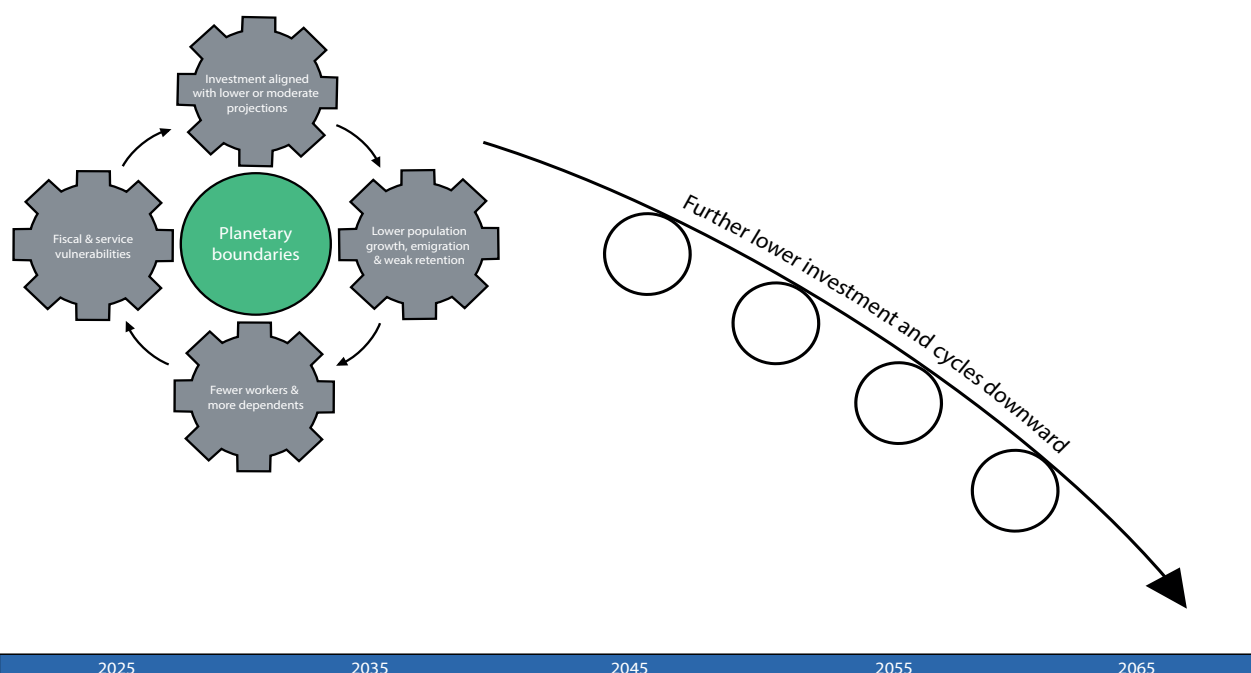
- Section 2.2: A Potential Vicious Cycle
- Section 2.3: Towards a Virtuous Cycle
- Section 2.4: Planetary Boundaries
- Section 2.5: Shared Island
- Section 2.6: Conclusions

2.2 A Potential Vicious Cycle

Ireland's rapid population growth has placed great pressure on housing, infrastructure and services. Acute housing shortages, especially for younger people, risk undermining integration and retention of migrants. Bottlenecks in water, energy and transport infrastructure, along with strains on health, education and childcare services, compound these pressures. Environmental impacts are also intensifying as land use expands, farming intensifies and transport-related emissions rise.

These pressures contribute to outward migration among both young Irish people and earlier migrants, exacerbating skills shortages and productivity challenges. Figure 2.1 illustrates a potential downward or 'vicious' cycle. While it is tempting to attribute current pressures mainly to rapid population growth, this is only partly true. Slowing population growth may ease near-term housing pressures, but it risks creating deeper medium- to long-term challenges, including fiscal strain and a shrinking labour force. This in turn leads to more profound challenges in the medium to long term, including the sustainability of our welfare model.

Figure 2.1: A potential vicious cycle of demographic underinvestment

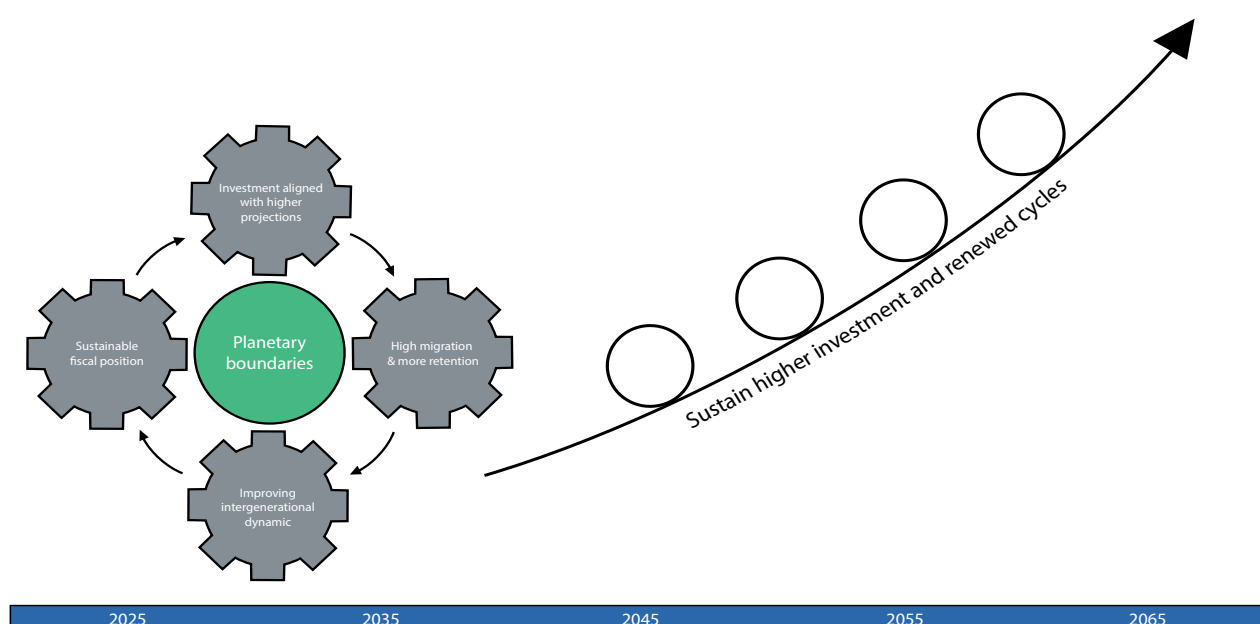


As Figure 2.1 suggests, reduced population ambition can trigger self-reinforcing effects: fewer workers, higher pension costs and lower investment capacity. These dynamics, once established, are difficult to reverse. The resulting outlook for younger generations includes longer working lives, heavier tax burdens and delayed family formation, all of which potentially reinforce emigration and greater care responsibilities for those who remain. Indeed, such could be the negative effects that life expectancy and health life years would fall.

2.3 Creating a Virtuous Cycle

Ireland retains advantages that many neighbours lack: a relatively young population, positive migration flows, and progress in reducing the emissions intensity of growth. Building on these strengths, the Council envisions a 'virtuous cycle' where investment in line with higher population projections addresses short-term pressures while reinforcing confidence in continued growth. Figure 2.2 illustrates a potential virtuous cycle.

Figure 2.2: A virtuous cycle of sustainable demographic growth



Projected population growth over the next 40 years represents an average annual increase of around 43,000 across all of the Department of Finance scenarios (high, low and medium). Importantly, this growth is front-loaded, with more than 50,000 additional people projected each year over the coming decade. The Council considers there to be no downside in preparing for the higher range of the Department of Finance projections over this period, supported by regular reassessment and adjustment as new data emerge.

To enable a sustainable cycle to begin, investment in the built environment and services (especially care services), in line with this higher projection, is essential. Delivering these investments depends on having the skilled and available workforce to build and staff them. In the short term, migration is needed to underpin this delivery. Without migrant construction workers, it will be difficult to build the housing we need. Without good housing in connected neighbourhoods with well-served transport links, it is hard to see how we can make a sustainable demographic transition. Similarly, without migrant health and care workers, waiting lists will grow and more people will lack the care they need.

Various levers and policy approaches (outlined in Chapter 3) can help stabilise the workforce and increase participation across the lifespan. These include balanced regional development, family supports, flexibility around pension ages, saving more now for future needs, lifelong learning to increase flexibility around jobs, and healthcare to support people into work and to keep them active. These reforms will help people remain active in the labour market across the life course, improving both participation rates and the quality of work as the population ages. At the same time, healthcare systems must adapt to the changing needs of an older population. This includes not only managing a higher prevalence of chronic conditions and age-related illnesses but also ensuring equitable access to care, including community-based and long-term support services. The increasing demand for health and social care comes at a time when many systems are already under strain, and workforce shortages in these sectors further complicate the picture.

Population ageing compels a rethinking of how Ireland designs and funds social supports. The virtuous cycle offers an alternative to the notion that older people are a fiscal burden, instead promoting active ageing, intergenerational fairness, and sustained participation in society. Box 2.1 highlights the pivotal role that a caring society can play in underpinning this positive view of ageing and intergenerational dynamics.

Box 2.1: Demographic Change & Care

Care is being reshaped by demographic forces. Family size is reducing, and more people are living at a greater distance from extended family. This is placing greater pressure on care arrangements. There is a need to strengthen formal care infrastructure and rethink how care is organised, valued and supported across society, both for the cared-for and the caring (Lakomý, 2024).

Building a caring society requires deliberate and sustained investment in the social and physical infrastructure that enables people to both provide care and receive it with dignity. This includes public services, social protection systems and employment practices – such as personalised budgets, paid parental leave and flexible working arrangements – that support people in combining care and paid work without compromising their own wellbeing or financial security.

A society grounded in mutual support also values care and carers. Whether paid or unpaid, formal or informal, these are acknowledged as important to society. Whether it consists of childrearing, elder care, disability support or the emotional labour of checking in on a neighbour, care is fundamental to the functioning of our economy and society. Yet too often it remains undervalued, unseen and unevenly distributed.

Importantly, care is not solely a matter of service delivery or economic policy (though no doubt these are very necessary). It is also relational, rooted in our human interdependence and the shared need for connection and recognition. Everyday acts of care – looking after a child, supporting an ageing parent, checking in on a neighbour – help build trust and cultivate the societal values of empathy, mutual respect and solidarity.

A society that nurtures wellbeing and belonging also reframes what counts as success. It shifts focus from narrow economic indicators toward the flourishing of human relationships, community well-being and ecological sustainability. It recognises both intergenerational responsibilities and horizontal solidarity and the imperative to support both people and the planet. Public institutions, in this vision, are not governed solely by efficiency or market logic but are embedded in a wider commitment to social connection and mutual support.

A caring society sees the wellbeing of all its members as a shared responsibility. It embeds care, in all its aspects, into the core of its social, economic and political systems, ensuring that those who provide care are supported, and that everyone has access to the care they need to live with dignity and purpose.

The Irish Wellbeing Framework demonstrates that government is already working to reframe what counts as national success. By moving beyond GDP to consider social, environmental and health outcomes, the framework reflects a broader understanding of progress – one that is grounded in wellbeing, equality and sustainability.

Looking ahead to ensure demographic stability, forward-looking policy will require recognising and responding to the emerging demographic reality of low fertility, rather than assuming a return to historical patterns. International experience, notably in Japan, shows how difficult it is to reverse declining birth rates once they fall below replacement levels. A more realistic policy goal is to stabilise fertility through broad-based supports that build confidence in equality, housing and economic opportunity. Such measures require sustained, long-term policy commitment across sectors.

Taken together, these measures, when embedded in a virtuous cycle, can improve healthcare outcomes, sustain our pension system and strengthen social cohesion. These, in turn, can support the case for greater and ongoing investment in infrastructure and services. Over time, the focus of that investment may shift in line with priorities, but without steps today those options will not be possible.

This virtuous cycle, like the vicious cycle, has the potential to become self-sustaining and to underpin ongoing improvements in societal wellbeing.

2.4 Population Growth and Planetary Boundaries

While future demographic trends are uncertain, needs are clear: adequate, affordable and flexible housing within well-serviced communities; clean air and water; access to green spaces; access to arts and culture; protection of biodiversity; and sufficient clean energy to meet national needs.

Population growth is often assumed to drive higher emissions. However, Ireland's experience challenges this assumption. The EPA reports that, in 2023, greenhouse-gas emissions were an estimated 58.82 million tonnes of CO₂ equivalent – 3.3 per cent below the 1990 baseline. This was the first time in 33 years that emissions fell below that benchmark (EPA, 2025). Over the same period, the population increased by around 50 per cent. This decoupling of emissions from population growth is a notable success, although it cannot be taken for granted.

External pressures will also intensify. As climate change heightens risks for coastal towns and floodplains, more communities may face relocation or costly adaptation, making it harder to maintain a balanced and vibrant settlement pattern across Ireland.

The Council notes the extensive literature on alternative economic paradigms such as doughnut economics and degrowth (NESC, 2020). These frameworks prioritise social and ecological wellbeing over conventional economic expansion, or, as Latouche (2010) puts it, 'signal the abandonment of growth for its own sake'. The essence of doughnut economics lies in maintaining a safe and just space between the floor of wellbeing and the ceiling of planetary pressure (Raworth, 2017).

These perspectives offer useful ways to ensure that demographic change and population growth within the virtuous cycle remain consistent with planetary boundaries.

2.5 A Virtuous Cycle: A Shared Island Perspective?

The Council emphasises the importance of examining demographic issues through a shared-island lens. Previous NESC work on the Shared Island (NESC, 2000) explored cross-border dynamics in labour markets, education and workforce participation. While this report focuses on the Republic of Ireland, a wider assessment of demographic data, projections and models would strengthen all-island planning for growth, services and infrastructure.

Cross-border migration for work, education and family reasons, alongside shared labour markets, underscores the value of an integrated demographic approach. Such analysis would inform coordinated planning for health, social care, housing, transport, environmental management and economic development.

Differences in fertility, mortality and migration patterns across the island could also be examined to enhance forecasting, resource allocation and long-term policy design.

2.6 Conclusion

Demographic trends are increasingly central to Ireland's economic resilience, social cohesion and environmental sustainability. Population growth, driven by longer life expectancy and migration, presents both opportunities and pressures. Declining fertility, while easing short-term demand on early-years infrastructure, poses long-term challenges for labour force renewal, economic vitality and the sustainability of intergenerational supports. Sustained low fertility could alter the dependency ratio, with direct implications for the funding and delivery of public services.

While demographic changes are probably inevitable, Ireland can delay turning points and prepare for the changes by instigating a virtuous cycle.

The Council argues that fostering a shared understanding of the positive potential of sustainable population growth can help align policy actors and the wider public behind a common vision of inclusive, balanced and sustainable development and thereby create a virtuous cycle into the future.

Chapter 3: Reinforcing Ireland's Virtuous Demographic Cycle – Six Levers

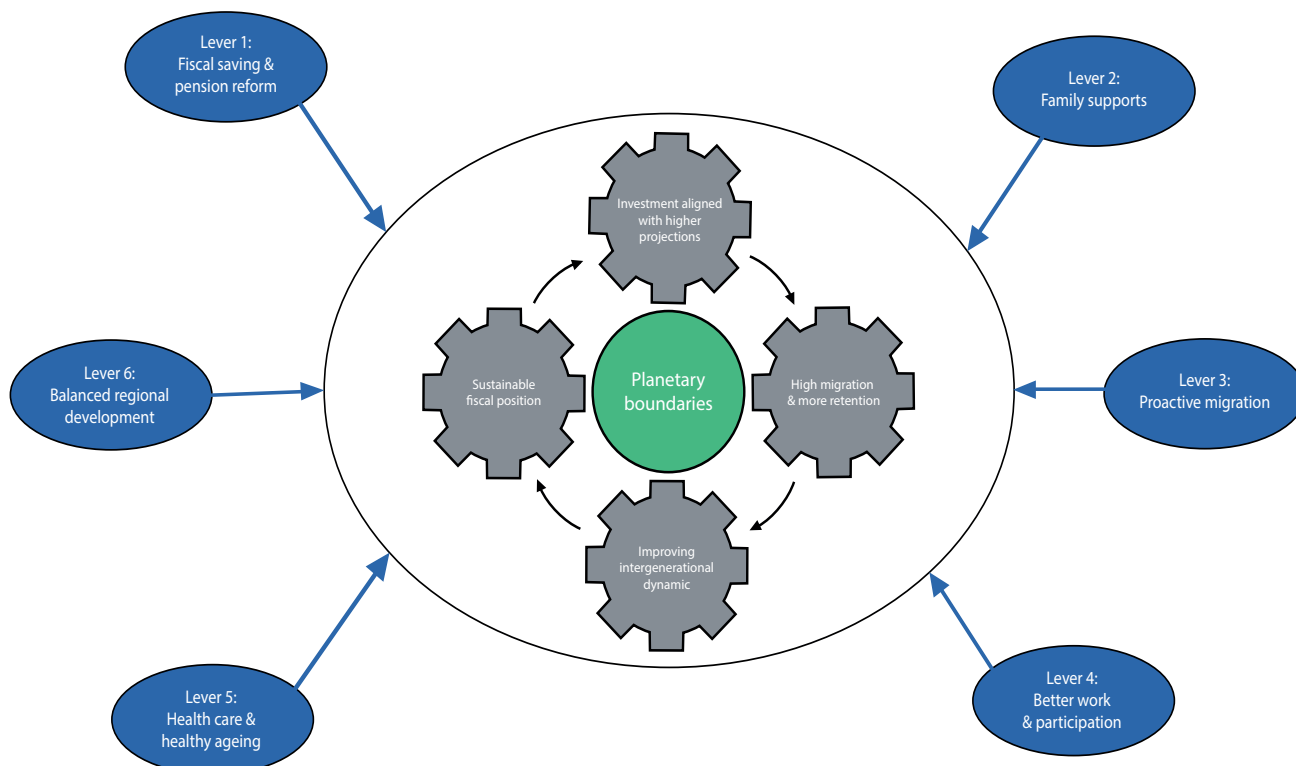
3.1 Introduction

Chapter 1 identified three major trends that will shape Ireland's future prosperity, social cohesion and environmental footprint:

- population growth of between 1 and 3 million by 2050;
- population ageing; and
- regional divergence.

The previous chapter outlined how these dynamics can generate either positive or negative feedback cycles. This chapter examines how a set of policy levers can be used to reinforce a virtuous cycle. Each direction shapes multiple elements of the system and should be understood as part of an interconnected whole rather than as an isolated intervention within a single domain.

Figure 3.1: Reinforcing Ireland's virtuous cycle: six levers



3.2 Lever One: Fiscal Preparedness

Demographic change will place sustained upward pressure on pensions, healthcare and long-term care at the same time as it reduces the tax base. A smaller working-age population will depress income tax revenues, while rural depopulation will increase the per-capita cost of local services. Concurrently, demand for pensions, healthcare and long-term care will continue to rise. Without advance planning, this widening gap between revenue and demand risks creating fiscal pressures that could undermine economic resilience and public trust.

The demographic window is narrowing. Without prompt action these costs could place strain on the public finances. Building fiscal buffers now – through prudent use of surpluses, investment in a resilience fund and disciplined expenditure prioritisation – will support stability and uphold intergenerational equity. There are two policy actions to ensure this: saving for the future and changes to pensions.

3.2.1 Increased Saving

Alongside reforms, setting aside funds now is essential. The *Future Ireland Fund* aims to support state spending from 2041 as ageing-related costs rise. However, simulations by the Irish Fiscal Council estimate that it will cover only half of these costs in 2041 and a quarter by 2050 (IFC, 2023). While other changes may lower ageing expenses, it is prudent to increase savings now while finances remain strong.

Sovereign wealth funds, which save current revenues for future use, are among the most effective tools. The *Future Ireland Fund*, which allocates corporate tax surpluses to long-term savings, is a step forward. Yet, due to corporate tax volatility, disciplined saving rules and prudent investment strategies are needed to ensure a reliable buffer when demographic pressures peak.

By ring-fencing resources today, Ireland can build a financial cushion to meet future costs without sharp tax hikes or service cuts. This approach promotes intergenerational fairness, using current prosperity to secure future retirees' wellbeing and safeguarding the sustainability of essential public services.

3.2.2 Pension Reform

Pension reform is part of fiscal preparedness but is distinct from increased saving for the future. An ageing population is placing mounting pressure on public finances through higher pension outlays and growing healthcare costs. The current pay-as-you-go pension model will become difficult to sustain without reform measures such as raising the retirement age or increasing worker contributions. Between 2014 and 2023, state pension expenditure rose by 53.8 per cent – from €6.6bn to €10.1bn – while the number of recipients increased by 30.3 per cent (Department of Social Protection, 2025a).

Pension spending is projected to reach 11 per cent of GNI* by 2050, up four percentage points from 2022 levels (Department of Finance, 2021; 2024). This would make pensions the largest category of age-related expenditure in the medium to long term, overtaking healthcare. Although these projections depend on factors such as future migration flows (Department of Finance, 2021), they nonetheless highlight the scale of the fiscal challenge.

Pensions are already the single largest component of social welfare spending and are increasingly funded through the contributions of migrant workers. To manage the fiscal implications of demographic change, Ireland must reinforce both its pension system and healthcare infrastructure. Key steps include linking pension eligibility to life expectancy, offering greater flexibility in when benefits are drawn, and implementing the planned auto-enrolment system to boost private retirement savings. Ensuring high participation – particularly among lower-income, intermittently employed and gig-economy workers – alongside fair contribution rates and transparent governance will be essential for success and public trust.

Financial incentives to make work beyond retirement age an attractive financial proposition is also needed. The recent reforms to the state pension, which allow individuals to defer claiming their pension in return for a higher payment later, are an important step forward. Such measures both empower individuals to achieve their potential and strengthen the resilience of the labour market, ensuring that Ireland makes full use of the talent available within its population.

Ireland has made progress in strengthening the contributory base, as shown by the declining share of non-contributory pensions (Department of Social Protection, 2025b). However, too many retirees still lack adequate income security. While raising the state pension age remains politically sensitive, increasing longevity and healthier later-life years mean that more people can continue working if they choose. A flexible approach, such as allowing pension deferral with financial incentives, helps balance individual autonomy with fiscal sustainability. Combined with the option of a pension age of up to 70 in the public sector, these measures represent meaningful steps toward narrowing the demographic gap.

However, an increase in the pension age linked to life expectancy and signalled well in advance will support fiscal sustainability and allow individuals to plan their retirement with greater certainty and confidence.

3.3 Lever Two: Strategic Family Support Policies

From 2024 onwards, the number of children began to fall. This reflects that the number of babies being born has consistently been falling since 2010. The sharp decline in the total fertility rate (TFR) poses challenges for the sustainability of the welfare system, the size of the labour force, and the capacity to support an ageing population. The international evidence shows that supportive family policies can reduce barriers to parenthood, even if their impact on fertility rates is modest (UNFPA, 2025; Spears and Geruso, 2025). Evidence from countries with a slower decline in TFR, such as the Scandinavian countries, suggests that family-friendly policies can help to slow the pace of decline in the TFR and make family life more sustainable (Hiekel, 2024).

Key policy measures include expanding and subsidising access to affordable, high-quality childcare, reforming the tax system to avoid penalising second earners, and offering more generous parental leave. Recent initiatives over the last decade – such as the extension of the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) scheme alongside increases in maternity, paternity and parental leave, the New Baby Grant, and the extension of free GP visits – represent steps in this direction as they help to ease the financial pressures of raising children.

An essential element of family support is ensuring that families have a safe and secure place to raise children and can rely on the State for assistance when difficulties arise. This requires that housing be adequate and affordable, and that social welfare and public services are maintained, adaptable and responsive as needs evolve. These policies not only support fertility but also enable greater female labour force participation, which strengthens household incomes and the wider economy. In this context, the recent decision to raise weekly income thresholds for the Working Family Payment for all family sizes is a welcome, well-targeted measure.

By fostering a more supportive environment for parents, Ireland also positions itself as a more attractive destination for international migrants seeking a family-friendly society. In this way, family policy serves three purposes: mitigating the effects of low fertility, increasing female labour participation, and enhancing Ireland's competitiveness in attracting and retaining migrants.

All this involves reframing a wide range of government policies to ensure that they support family formation and enable women and men to realise their desired family size, ensuring that social and economic structures do not constrain fertility choices.

3.4 Lever Three: Proactive Migration

By the 2030s, Ireland's workforce is projected to decline, posing a significant challenge to economic wellbeing and public service funding, both of which depend heavily on labour supply (McQuinn et al., 2025). Migration has historically been and will remain essential in maintaining workforce numbers and supporting economic dynamism. Key sectors, such as construction, healthcare and long-term care, are particularly reliant on migrant labour. Sustained inflows of skilled and semi-skilled workers help offset population ageing, boost productivity and expand the tax base that funds public services and social protection.

Migration not only increases population size but also influences its structure. Migrants tend to be younger and more highly educated than the native-born population, with higher rates of employment or self-employment. However, many also face challenges such as underemployment and limited access to affordable housing. As Ireland's population becomes more diverse, the benefits of migration – innovation, entrepreneurship and cultural renewal – depend on effective integration policies. Ensuring access to housing, education, quality work and public services for all residents is critical to social cohesion and public support for inclusive migration.

Ireland has a number of policies in the migration space which need to be constantly calibrated to not only the immediate needs of the economy and care workforce but also to the longer-term ambition to grow and integrate a skilled workforce into our communities. Stronger integration policies, long-term settlement opportunities and support for returning emigrants are vital. A social contract of migration is needed where the state invests in integration and communities, and migrants are supported to contribute and settle. This can strengthen cohesion and public confidence in migration.

3.5 Lever Four: Better Work and Increased Participation

A stable and growing labour force is essential to counteract ageing and sustain Ireland's economic wellbeing. It ensures sufficient workers to maintain output, fund public services and support tax revenues. While recent policies have rightly focused on increasing women's participation and reducing unemployment, expanding labour market inclusion to groups such as people with disabilities, lone parents and older workers is critical to meeting future labour demand.

Achieving this requires shifting from simple encouragement to systemic supports that promote secure, flexible and accessible employment. Flexible work arrangements, inclusive workplaces and robust investment in upskilling and reskilling are vital to strengthening economic resilience and overcoming persistent labour market barriers (NESC, 2024). Ireland needs to create more good jobs that people are both able for and want to keep working at beyond the age of 66.

Countries such as Japan and South Korea offer valuable lessons. Facing rapid ageing, they have boosted participation through improved childcare, gender equality reforms, later retirement ages and programmes supporting older workers. Investments in technology and selective skilled migration complement these strategies to maintain productivity.

Higher levels of workforce participation and opportunities for older people to participate in meaningful work will help improve the long-term fiscal outlook and pension sustainability. Investment in lifelong health promotes active ageing, helping people to remain in work for longer, thus easing fiscal pressures while simultaneously easing pressures on health and long-term care systems.

Technological advances, including AI, robotics and adaptive tools, may further extend working lives by reducing physical demands and automating routine tasks. However, realising these benefits hinges on embedding lifelong learning, enabling workers to adapt continuously to technological and structural shifts.

To sustain prosperity, government, employers and educators must collaborate to make lifelong learning a core feature of Ireland's labour market and extend participation to groups who have had historically low levels of work – fostering inclusion, adaptability and sustainable employment across all life stages. There are several relevant policies in the area of lifelong learning including the *National Skills Strategy 2025* and the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030*. However, these may need revisiting in the light of demographic and technological changes. Spreading participation across all socio-economic groups is a key element of several inclusion strategies but, to date, these have had mixed success.

3.6 Lever Five: Healthcare & Healthy Ageing

Future Forty projections indicate that, as Ireland's population ages, demand for healthcare services will continue to increase. Older adults tend to require more frequent and complex care, particularly for chronic conditions, long-term management and social supports. Already, a significant share of the working-age population is unable to participate fully in the labour

market due to health-related challenges. Without intervention, the ageing population will place increased demands on hospitals, community health services and the healthcare workforce. Without effective policy and service responses, these pressures risk undermining system sustainability and equity of access. Yet population ageing need not equate to higher levels of illness or dependency. The goal is not simply to extend life expectancy but to ensure more years of healthy, active living.

A sustainable long-term response requires a comprehensive health strategy focused on prevention, early intervention and wellbeing across the life course. Investment in preventive care, health promotion from an early age, and initiatives that enable older people to remain active and independent are central to reducing future healthcare demand. Proactive approaches of this kind can enhance quality of life while supporting labour force participation and economic resilience. In this context, the recent expansion of evidence-based Home Visiting services for new families is a positive step. However, early intervention services are too often overshadowed by short-term crisis responses, limiting their potential to improve social outcomes, strengthen fiscal sustainability and foster healthy ageing throughout life.

Measures to promote healthy ageing can mitigate rising healthcare demand while enhancing quality of life. Investment in preventative health, early intervention and integrated community-based care helps people maintain independence for longer. Equally important are policies that support older adults' participation in work, volunteering, lifelong learning, sports and the arts – activities that strengthen physical, mental and social wellbeing. Such engagement reduces isolation, improves cognitive function and delays the onset of disability, all of which lessen the need for costly health and care interventions. By fostering inclusion and opportunity across the life course, Ireland can transform the challenge of population ageing into one of resilience and shared wellbeing.

In addition, in a society with more older people, there will also be more demand for assistive technologies, leisure services and community-based care. This highlights the importance of planning for age-friendly infrastructure and active-ageing strategies.

Ireland already has a substantial raft of policies for prevention and healthy ageing, including Sláintecare, the Healthy Ireland Framework, the National Positive Ageing Strategy, and the National Healthy Childhood Programme. Each places explicit emphasis on prevention, health-promoting behaviours, and reducing socio-economic inequalities. Taken together with other health-related policies, they provide a solid strategic foundation for managing long-term pressures on the health system and for extending healthy, active years of life.

The core challenge is not policy design but implementation. Delivering these commitments at scale requires sustained investment, sufficient workforce capacity and stronger community-based infrastructure. Shifting care into the community will only be effective if primary, social and public health services are adequately staffed and resourced. Yet preventive and early-intervention programmes – including public health, mental health promotion and home-visiting supports – have historically received less funding and political attention than acute care. Without rebalancing this, the system risks remaining locked into crisis-driven responses rather than achieving the long-term gains these policies are intended to deliver.

The Council awaits the findings of the Commission on Care for Older People, which is currently examining health supports in older age. The results of its investigations will be crucial in informing future policy in this domain.

3.7 Lever Six: Balanced Regional Development

While the CSO projects that Ireland's population will grow for several decades, demographic concentration in the East and around Dublin is likely to continue without significant policy intervention, while rural and peripheral regions face decline.

Uneven population distribution and localised decline or depopulation can create a self-reinforcing cycle of economic hardship. Businesses in these areas struggle due to reduced footfall, leading to closures and further job losses, which in turn drive continued outmigration.

Labour shortages are particularly pronounced in agricultural communities, where younger generations are increasingly absent. This can contribute to land abandonment as agricultural activity becomes less viable for a range of social and economic reasons (O'Rourke, 2019). This potential shift raises critical challenges regarding sustainable land use and the future of rural development.

Depopulation also erodes the social fabric. Community anchors such as shops, schools, GAA clubs, art and music groups, churches and GP practices become less viable as populations age and shrink. Older residents who remain often face isolation, with limited family support, scarce affordable care and substantial commutes for acute health services. Many may be forced to relocate when their needs change, severing ties with long-standing communities (Walsh et al., 2020). Comparable experiences elsewhere in Europe show how such hollowing-out can fuel discontent and anti-establishment politics, adding a political dimension to the demographic challenge (Eurofound, 2023).

Climate change will compound these pressures. Rising sea levels and flood risks threaten the viability of many coastal towns and floodplain communities. For places already grappling with depopulation, the additional costs of adaptation and resilience planning may further undermine prospects for sustaining vibrant local economies. Climate adaptation should therefore be embedded within regional planning frameworks, to prevent further marginalisation of vulnerable coastal and rural areas.

Without targeted intervention, there is a risk that entire communities could be left behind. Addressing this requires a coherent rural development agenda that supports jobs, connectivity, service access and quality of life, ensuring that all regions contribute to and benefit from national prosperity.

Policy responses are evolving. *Our Rural Future: Rural Development Policy 2021–2025* sets out a range of actions to increase resilience and inclusion in rural communities, from increasing digital connectivity, supporting employment, enhancing participation and leadership, and public services, to supporting climate policies, just transition, and sustainability on the islands and in coastal communities (Department of Rural and Community Development, 2021). A mid-term

review is underway, and a new policy is due by 2026 ((Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht, 2025).

The National Planning Framework allocates 50 per cent of Ireland's projected additional population to regional towns, villages and rural areas (with the remaining 50 per cent in the five cities and their hinterlands).

Under Project Ireland 2040, a dedicated fund of €1bn has been established to invest specifically in rural towns, villages and their hinterlands, with the aim of strengthening rural economies, enhancing amenities and improving quality of life so that rural areas become more attractive places to live and work. This includes repairing infrastructure, encouraging entrepreneurship, revitalising heritage, improving connectivity (including digital) and supporting job-creation in rural locations.

Depopulation is not inevitable. Clustering of depopulation and ageing in specific regions also presents opportunities for targeted regeneration (O'Driscoll et al., 2024). Policies could include:

- Regional economic development strategies that focus on renewable energy, bioeconomy and heritage tourism. For instance, the Offshore Wind Industrial Strategy 'Powering Prosperity' (2024) includes actions to build regional industrial hubs, grow a supply chain in offshore wind, drive innovation, and leverage regional growth.
- Enhanced digital infrastructure and incentives for distributed work, attracting younger workers and families. The Digital Connectivity Strategy (2022) is an important contribution to this goal.
- Rural hubs and innovation centres that build on existing assets, including Gaeltacht and island communities. An example of this is the gteic@Baile an Sceilg innovation & digital hub in the Kerry Gaeltacht which provides workspaces for up to 50 people as well as remote learning and upskilling programmes, support for small businesses to develop and expand, and remote working space for the surrounding region.
- Tailored social and healthcare services that allow older residents to remain in their communities for longer. Our Rural Future (2021) has an explicit commitment to enhancing public services in rural areas, including healthcare, to support older and vulnerable residents.

However, substantial challenges remain. For example, many renewable and bioeconomy projects continue to be delayed by planning bottlenecks, grid constraints and local opposition (NESC, 2025b). The bioeconomy, including forestry and biomass, still lacks a coherent national strategy and requires stronger investment, research and commercialisation supports (O'Riordan et al., 2025).

With sustained investment and a long-term vision, Ireland can avoid the hollowing-out of large rural regions and foster a more balanced demographic future.

The opposite challenge is the excessive growth concentrated in the East and Dublin which manifests primarily as a capacity problem.

Urbanisation presents both opportunities and risks. The growing concentration of population in cities drives innovation, agglomeration economies and access to services. However, it also puts intense pressure on housing, infrastructure, transport and planning systems. To manage these pressures, there is a need to accelerate the implementation of compact, sustainable growth models that avoid urban sprawl, support public transport and foster liveable communities. This includes strategic planning, higher-density development and the provision of green spaces and amenities in line with projected population growth.

In Dublin and its surrounding counties, housing demand has consistently outstripped supply, driving price inflation, worsening affordability and heightening risks of housing insecurity and homelessness. Urban sprawl has produced longer commutes and unsustainable land-use patterns, further straining quality of life. At the same time, this concentration deepens regional imbalances: rural areas struggle to regenerate while infrastructure and services in urban centres are pushed beyond their limits. A more balanced approach to regional development is essential to ease pressure on Dublin while supporting the revitalisation of other cities and less advantaged regions.

Finally, it is important to highlight that policy has achieved some success in shaping regional trends. In 2025 the CSO projects positive population growth for all regions until 2042 (PEC26), but with more of this growth on the eastern seaboard. However, only five years previously, in 2020, the CSO projected that the West and Border regions would reach peak population by 2029 and thereafter face depopulation (PEB01). The change in projections was due to overall net migration being larger than anticipated and the pull of Dublin as a destination weakening. This means that, with successful government policy, under the National Planning Framework, Ireland has pushed out ‘peak region’ by at least 13 years. Further balanced regional development could extend this horizon further. Ireland must continue to make sure that regional development is balanced and that services are aligned with population needs.

3.8 Conclusion

Ireland’s demographic future is being shaped by powerful forces: slowing fertility, population ageing and uneven regional growth. These shifts will not only affect headline numbers but will profoundly reshape the structure of Irish society – its families, workplaces and communities. Policy choices made now can influence whether these transitions are experienced as destabilising pressures or as manageable adjustments that strengthen resilience and solidarity. *Future Forty* modelling suggests that Ireland has a decade to put in place the building blocks of a sustainable future; this includes physical and digital infrastructure, housing and sustainable models of service delivery and care.

Addressing these challenges requires long-term, multi-dimensional strategies. Supporting families through affordable childcare, fair taxation and accessible healthcare can soften the decline in fertility while strengthening economic participation and making Ireland more attractive to migrants to move to and remain in the country.

Robust migration and integration policies will be critical to sustaining population growth, enriching the labour market and maintaining social cohesion. In the coming decades, retention

rather than recruitment may become the defining measure of a successful migration strategy. At the same time, proactive planning for ageing – through fiscal buffers, pension reform, greater labour participation and healthy ageing strategies – will determine whether Ireland can secure prosperity and fairness across generations. Healthy ageing is not only a matter of wellbeing but also of economic sustainability, ensuring that an older population remains a productive and engaged part of society. Many of the demographic pressures will be eased by good jobs that people are trained for and can adapt to as needs change.

The geography of change must not be overlooked. A growing concentration of people and opportunities on the eastern seaboard risks leaving parts of rural and regional Ireland behind, with damaging effects on cohesion and inclusion. By investing in balanced regional development, digital infrastructure and community resilience, Ireland can counteract the centrifugal pull of demographic concentration and ensure that prosperity is more evenly shared. In this way, demographic change, though inevitable, can be pushed out – in some cases by decades – and can also become a catalyst for renewal, innovation and a fairer, more sustainable Ireland.

A review of policies in place highlights that Ireland has made progress along multiple paths. Yet many policies need more ambition and stronger coordination to achieve lasting impact, ensuring that individual initiatives reinforce one another and collectively drive a sustainable, inclusive and resilient society. Other policies, such as an increase in the pension age, need careful design, clear communication and early signalling to build public understanding and trust while supporting long-term fiscal and social sustainability.

Intergenerational fairness is not only a fiscal concern but a social contract, ensuring that today's policies sustain opportunities and wellbeing for future generations.

While this chapter outlines the policies most likely to shape Ireland's demographic future, it must be remembered that demographic outcomes are not predetermined. They are the result of complex and interacting forces: economic, social and environmental; local and global.

In particular, migration patterns remain highly volatile, fertility responses to policy are uncertain, and regional dynamics can shift rapidly with technological or environmental change. Projections therefore describe possibilities, not certainties. The challenge for policy is not to predict a single future, but to build the institutional and social resilience needed to adapt so that Ireland remains fair, prosperous and cohesive no matter which demographic path unfolds.

Chapter 4: Conclusions

Across Europe, countries are grappling with demographic decline: fewer children, fewer workers, slower growth, and rising costs for pensions and healthcare. Migration has long mitigated these pressures, but its political and social limits are becoming evident, as is the long-run downward pressure as the world population peaks. In response, many states have raised retirement ages, extended working lives or tightened welfare eligibility – measures that themselves carry risks of unrest and political backlash.

Ireland, by contrast, continues to record one of the fastest rates of population growth in Europe. Current projections suggest that this expansion will continue for another three to four decades, placing increasing pressure on infrastructure, housing and public services.

However, these decades of growth should not obscure the longer-term demographic trajectory. Within thirty years, Ireland will, like many of its European neighbours, face a slowing and declining population, a shrinking workforce and a larger retired population. The precise timing of this demographic peak will depend on the policy choices made today. With strategic and adaptive approaches, Ireland can get ahead of the demographic changes outlined above and extend the period of population growth and better prepare for the transitions that follow. Early preparation and clear signalling are the strongest guides we have for navigating these shifts, and for protecting public trust in our institutions.

Within the overall growing population there will also be a shift from a population growing because of natural increases to one growing because of migration. This will have crucial importance. It will make Ireland more dependent on migration policy, integration initiatives, international labour mobility and global demographic forces. Ireland cannot completely control these forces, but we should prepare for them. Tolstoy's warning that 'nothing was ready for the war that everyone expected' resonates today: despite clear demographic signals, our policy response risks lagging behind foreseeable changes.

These dynamics underscore the need for integrated, forward-looking strategies that promote social inclusion, economic vitality and environmental sustainability. To date, Ireland's approach to demographic change has been fragmented and reactive, with policies often lagging behind reality and producing misaligned targets and resource gaps.

The Council is concerned that, amid legitimate concerns about housing shortages, infrastructure constraints and gaps in public services, there is a risk of reverting to a mindset that regards lower population growth as desirable. Such a stance would constrain economic activity, reduce tax revenues and exacerbate labour shortages in critical sectors including health, care, construction, education, IT and the green transition. Simply put, there would not be enough workers to sustain Ireland's economy and society as currently organised.

The Council therefore argues for greater ambition and early planning for the upcoming changes. Ireland should invest now to address infrastructure and service gaps, anticipating a population that could grow substantially. While the Department of Finance projected population growth

over the next 40 years may appear significant, it represents an average annual increase of around 43,000. Importantly, this growth is front-loaded, with more than 50,000 additional people projected each year over the coming decade. The Council considers there to be no downside in preparing for the higher range of the Department of Finance projections over this period, supported by regular reassessment and adjustment as new data emerge.

The push-back against migration often stems from a well-founded belief that infrastructures are under strain. Good planning can mitigate this. Thus, a well-designed policy can delay or even reverse depopulation, extending the horizon from thirty to sixty years or more. This additional time would enable society and institutions to adapt, support intergenerational care and foster new patterns of work. Indeed, even the most ambitious levels of projected migration might prove insufficient to maintain economic dynamism and the present-day social contract. While action entails risks and costs, these are modest compared with the long-term consequences of inaction.

Policy choices are not only about fiscal sustainability, though these are critical; they are about creating a country that people want to remain in and return to. Demographic change can be a foundation for resilience, opportunity and shared wellbeing.

Chapters 2 and 3 set out the components of a joined-up approach that integrates family policy, migration, health and labour market participation in a mutually reinforcing cycle undergirded by increased saving for future needs. Many of the necessary policies already exist, but their ambition remains too modest. Ireland must plan proactively for higher levels of population growth, recognising that redundancy in capacity is a far better outcome than crisis management. This report has outlined several policy directions: lifelong healthcare policies, working to ensure that participation rates are maximised across the lifespan, increased housing, infrastructure, migration policy and family support policies.

Some reforms look sound on paper but require urgent implementation. With an ageing population, Ireland must accelerate the shift from hospital-centric to community-based, integrated models of care – scaling home supports, age-friendly housing and local primary care networks. Equally, expanding universal early childhood education and care, promoting flexible work and strengthening family supports are vital to rebalancing the economic pressures on younger generations.

A renewed focus on skills and participation is also essential: enabling older workers to remain active through lifelong learning and supporting those excluded from the labour market through early interventions and wraparound supports.

Investment through the National Planning Framework should align with demographic realities, incentivising balanced regional development, accessible housing and the infrastructure needed to sustain smaller towns and rural areas.

Sufficient, affordable, and sustainable housing, adaptable across the life course, is a central foundation which links care, population, place and participation. For too long, housing policy has been based on overly cautious demographic projections; this approach no longer serves the

goal of a sustainable and confident Ireland.

Finally, the Council emphasises the need for stronger data and modelling capacity and demographic research. Without robust evidence and forecasting, Ireland cannot effectively navigate the complex demographic transitions ahead. It needs to better understand the motivations of people migrating to and from Ireland and the circumstances in which people make fertility decisions. It is only through this knowledge that we can refine existing policies and develop new policies to meet the goal of an inclusive, sustainable country, ensuring that future generations inherit resilience and opportunity rather than crisis.

Bibliography

- Department of Finance (2021) *Population ageing and the public finances in Ireland*. Dublin: Department of Finance.
- Department of Finance (2024) *Population ageing and the public finances in Ireland – changing demographics*. Dublin: Department of Finance.
- Department of Finance (2025) *Future forty: Ireland's demographic outlook – trends and scenarios for the next forty years*. Dublin: Department of Finance.
- Department of Rural and Community Development (2021) *Our rural future: rural development policy 2021–2025*. Dublin: Government of Ireland.
- Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht (2025) 'Have Your Say': Minister Calleary launches final phase of consultation on Our Rural Future. [online] 17 November. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-rural-and-community-development-and-the-gaeltacht/press-releases/have-your-say-minister-calleary-launches-final-phase-of-consultation-on-our-rural-future/> [Accessed 30 November 2025].
- Department of Social Protection (2025a) *Annual report*. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-social-protection/publications/annual-report-2024/> (Accessed: 16 August 2025).
- Department of Social Protection (2025b) *Statistical information on social welfare services*. Available at: https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/20250710_2024_Annual_Statistics_Report.pdf (Accessed: 16 August 2025).
- Environmental Protection Agency (2025) *Latest emissions data*. Available at: <https://www.epa.ie/our-services/monitoring--assessment/climate-change/ghg/latest-emissions-data/> (Accessed: 16 August 2025).
- Eurofound (2023) *Europe's widening rural-urban divide may make space for the far right*. Available at: <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/en/commentary-and-analysis/all-content/europes-widening-rural-urban-divide-may-make-space-far-right> (Accessed: 10 November 2025).
- Hiekel Nicole (2024) *What the decline of birth rates in the Nordic countries means for family policy: A demographic paradox? Population Europe*, <https://population-europe.eu/research/policy-insights/what-decline-birth-rates-nordic-countries-means-family-policy-demographic?utm>.
- Irish Fiscal Council (2023) *Fiscal Assessment Report*, <https://www.fiscalcouncil.ie/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Fiscal-Assessment-Report-December-2023-Irish-Fiscal-Advisory-Council-Dublin.pdf>.
- Lakomý, M. (2024) 'Impact of family structure on the quality of life of older adults, its stability, and gender differences in the European context', *Acta Sociologica*, 67(3), pp. 330–351. doi: 10.1177/00016993231210660.
- McQuinn, K., O'Toole, C. and O'Shea, D. (2025) *Quarterly economic commentary, spring 2025*. ESRI Forecasting Series. Dublin: ESRI. doi: 10.26504/QEC2025SPR.
- National Economic and Social Council (2000) *A shared island: economic and social challenges and opportunities*. Dublin: NESC.
- National Economic and Social Council (2022) *Grounding the recovery in sustainable development: a statement from the Council*. Available at: https://s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/files.nesc.ie/nesc_reports/en/152_GroundingInSD.pdf (Accessed: 16 August 2025).
- National Economic and Social Council (2023) *Understanding the Irish economy in a time of turbulence*. Available at: https://www.nesc.ie/app/uploads/2023/04/160_understanding_economy.pdf (Accessed: 16 August 2025).
- National Economic and Social Council (2024) *Towards a National Better Work Strategy*. Available at: <https://www.nesc.ie/publications/towards-a-national-better-work-strategy/> (Accessed 12 November 2025).
- National Economic and Social Council (2025a) *Demographic aspects of policy and population modelling*. Dublin: NESC. <https://www.nesc.ie/publications/demographic-aspects-of-policy-and-population-modelling/>.

Cont. on next page

- National Economic and Social Council (2025b) *Energy communities in Ireland: progress, challenges and potential*. Available at: <https://www.nesc.ie/publications/energy-communities-in-ireland-progress-challenges-and-potential/> (Accessed: 16 August 2025).
- O'Driscoll, J. et al. (2024) 'Is rural Ireland really dying? What the facts and figures tell us', *Teagasc News and Events*. Available at: <https://teagasc.ie/news--events/daily/is-rural-ireland-really-dying-what-the-facts-and-figures-tell-us/> (Accessed: 16 August 2025).
- O'Driscoll, J., Meredith, D., Crowley, F., Doran, J., O'Shaughnessy, M. and Zimmermann, J. (2022) 'The spatiotemporal dimension of population changes in Ireland: visualisation of growth and shrinkage in Irish electoral divisions (1986–2016)', *Journal of Maps*, 18(3), pp. 551–557. doi: 10.1080/17445647.2022.2052766.
- OECD (2024), Return, Reintegration and Re-migration: Understanding Return Dynamics and the Role of Family and Community, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/625fb5e6-en>.
- O'Riordan, J., Boyle, R., Keating, S. and O'Leary, F. (2025) *Research 479: a review of circular economy and bioeconomy governance in Ireland*. Environmental Protection Agency. Available at: <https://www.epa.ie/publications/research/epa-research-2030-reports/research-479-a-review-of-circular-economy-and-bioeconomy-governance-in-ireland.php> (Accessed: 16 August 2025).
- O'Rourke, E. (2019) 'Drivers of land abandonment in the Irish uplands: a case study', *European Countryside*, 11(2), pp. 211–228.
- Raworth, K. (2017) *Doughnut economics: seven ways to think like a 21st-century economist*. London: Random House.
- Spears, D. and Geruso, M. (2025) *After the spike: population, progress, and the case for people*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Strozza, C., Vigezzi, S., Callaway, J., Aleksandrovs, A. and Kashnitsky, I. (2025) 'Socioeconomic inequalities in survival to retirement age in Denmark: a register-based analysis', *Genus*, 81(1), p. 21.
- UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund) (2025) *The real fertility crisis: the pursuit of reproductive agency in a changing world*. New York: UNFPA. ISBN 978921154283. Available at: <https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/swp25-layout-en-v250609-web.pdf> (Accessed: 16 August 2025).
- United Nations Population Division (2024) *World population prospects 2024*. Available at: <https://population.un.org/wpp/> (Accessed: 16 August 2025).
- Walsh K., O'Shea E. and Scharf T. (2020) 'Rural old-age social exclusion: a conceptual framework on mediators of exclusion across the lifecourse', *Ageing and Society*, 40(11), pp. 2311–2337. doi:10.1017/S0144686X19000606.
- Whelan, A.A. and McGuinness, S. (2024) 'Barriers to social inclusion and levels of urbanisation: does it matter where you live?', *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society*, 17(1), pp. 59–74. doi: 10.1093/cjres/rsad036.



National Economic & Social Council

Parnell Square, Dublin 1, D01 E7C1

+353 1 814 6300 info@nesc.ie

www.nesc.ie