



An Roinn Gnóthaí
Eachtracha agus Trádála
Department of
Foreign Affairs and Trade

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

An Roinn Gnóthaí Eachtracha agus Trádála
Cearnóg an Easpaig, Cnoc Réamainn, Baile Átha Cliath D02 TD99, Éire

Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Bishop's Square, Redmond's Hill, Dublin
D02 TD99, Ireland
EUPresidency2026Consultations@dfa.ie
www.ireland.ie/dfa

Table of Contents

1. How to make a submission	2
2. Background information	3
The Council of the European Union	3
The Council Presidency	4
3. The Presidency Policy Programme	4
4. Preparing the Irish Presidency Programme	5
5. Freedom of Information Act 2014 and Publication of Submissions	6
6. General Data Protection Regulation	7
7. Submission Form	8

1. How to make a submission

This form contains important guidance and background information on the consultation, followed by optional guiding questions to which respondents are invited to provide responses. We ask that the response to each question is limited to a maximum of 500 words.

Respondents are welcome to submit additional information alongside the Submission Form. However, in such cases, respondents must provide a summary of the additional information under the 'Any other comments' question. This summary should also be limited to a maximum of 500 words.

We ask that, where possible, respondents frame feedback with reference to the EU Strategic Agenda 2024-2029, the legislative programme of the Council, the planned legislative proposals included in the European Commission's 2026 work programme, or the work of a relevant Council configuration.

Please submit the form via email to EUPresidency2026Consultations@dfa.ie. The deadline for receipt of submissions is Friday 12 December 2025. If you have any questions, please send your query to this same email address.

Feedback received from submissions will be considered as part of the development of Ireland's Presidency priorities and policy programme. A summary thematic report, along with all submissions received, will be published on the consultation webpage.

2. Background information

Ireland will hold the Presidency of the Council of the European Union (EU) for the eighth time from July to December 2026. This will be an opportunity for Ireland to play an important role in shaping the EU's policy and legislative agenda in a way which responds to the overall interests and needs of the Union and its Member States.

Ensuring the delivery of a successful EU Presidency will be essential for Ireland's position and influence in the EU. During the six-month EU Presidency period, Ireland will steer the agenda of the Council and its legislative and policy-making processes. Irish Ministers and officials will chair meetings of the Council and its preparatory bodies, and Ireland will represent the Council in its interactions with other EU institutions.

The Programme for Government includes a commitment to resource and deliver a successful EU Presidency in 2026. Planning for the Presidency is being led by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, in close cooperation with the Department of the Taoiseach, and with active engagement from all Government Departments.

The Council of the EU is one of the three main institutions involved in the EU decision-making process. For further background information on the Council of the EU and how the EU's legislative and policy processes operate, see the following:

- [The Council of the European Union - Consilium](#)
- [Policy, law – decision-making process | European Union](#)

THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

The Council of the EU is composed of representatives at Ministerial level from the governments of all EU Member States. It meets to negotiate and adopt EU laws; conclude international agreements on behalf of the EU; adopt the Union's budget; develop the EU's foreign and security policy; and coordinate Member States' policies in specific fields.

The Council meets in ten different configurations to discuss policy and legislation:

- | | |
|---|---|
| • Agriculture and Fisheries (AGRIFISH) | • Environment (ENVI) |
| • Competitiveness (COMPET) | • Employment, Social Policy, Health and |
| • Economic and Financial Affairs (ECOFIN) | Consumer Affairs (EPSCO) |

- Education, Youth, Culture and Sport (EYCS)
- Foreign Affairs (FAC)
- General Affairs (GAC)
- Justice and Home Affairs (JHA)
- Transport, Telecommunications and Energy (TTE)

THE COUNCIL PRESIDENCY

The Presidency of the Council rotates among EU Member States every six months. It is responsible for driving forward the Council's work on EU legislation, ensuring the continuity of the EU agenda, orderly legislative processes and cooperation among Member States. To do this, the Presidency must act as an honest and neutral broker.

The Presidency chairs meetings of the Council in each of its configurations (with the exception of the Foreign Affairs Council, unless trade matters are being discussed) and meetings of the Council's preparatory bodies, working parties and other committees dealing with specific policy issues. The Presidency also organises various formal and informal meetings in Brussels and Luxembourg, and in the country of the Presidency.

The Presidency represents the Council in its relations with the other EU institutions, notably the European Commission and the European Parliament. The rotating Presidency works in close coordination with the President of the European Council and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy.

Since the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty in 2009, groups of three successive Council Presidencies – known as “Trios” – work together to ensure the coherence of the Council’s agenda over an 18-month period.

3. The Presidency Policy Programme

Shortly before the start of each Presidency term, the incoming Presidency sets out its priorities and objectives for the work of the Council during its term in the form of a Presidency policy programme. This identifies the areas of focus for the work of the Council during the Presidency, and highlights the specific legislative and policy initiatives on the Council’s agenda that the Presidency will seek to progress during its term.

The Presidency programme generally has two parts. One part highlights a range of high-level priorities for the Presidency term, setting out the overall areas of thematic focus for the Presidency. A second

part details the specific legislative and policy proposals that the Presidency will seek to take forward during its term across each of the ten different policy configurations in which the Council meets.

The policy programmes of recent EU Presidencies can be found at the following links:

- [Denmark \(July to December 2025\)](#)
- [Poland \(January to June 2025\)](#)
- [Hungary \(July to December 2024\)](#)
- [Belgium \(January to June 2024\)](#)
- [Spain \(July to December 2023\)](#)

While the Presidency does offer the opportunity for Ireland to shape and influence the EU agenda, as Presidency, Ireland will be expected, in effect, to act as an impartial chair and be tasked with guiding the work of the Council in a way that reflects the interests of all Member States and of the Union as a whole. In effect, this means that the Presidency policy programme does not typically prioritise the specific national interests of the Member State holding the Presidency. Instead, the policy programme sets out the perspective of the Presidency on the policy areas and initiatives that are likely to be of most value and relevance for the Union – and all of its 27 Member States – during the Presidency term. The policy programme identifies areas of ongoing Council work on which the Presidency will seek to reach agreement or make substantial progress in discussions among Member States during its term.

The Presidency programme generally indicates how each Presidency plans to build on the work done by its predecessor in progressing the Council's legislative and policy agenda. It also reflects the programme of legislation planned by the European Commission, which is the sole institution that can propose new EU laws for consideration by the Council of the EU and the European Parliament.

4. Preparing the Irish Presidency Programme

Ireland will publish its priorities and policy programme for its 2026 EU Presidency in June 2026, shortly before the start of the Presidency term. The development of the programme is now underway and the stakeholder consultations form part of this process.

A number of EU documents set out the background and context for the policy and legislative work of the Council, and will inform the development of Ireland's EU Presidency priorities and policy programme:

- The EU's overall priorities and strategic orientations for the period ahead have been set out by the European Council in the [Strategic Agenda for the Union for 2024-29](#).
- The legislative work of the Council in 2026 will reflect the [Work Programme of the European Commission for 2026](#), which was published on 21 October 2025.
- Each year, the European Parliament, the Council of the EU and the European Commission set out a **Joint Declaration on Legislative Priorities** for the year ahead. The Joint Declaration on Legislative Priorities for 2026 is expected to be agreed and published in the coming months.

The evolution of the Council's legislative agenda through the Danish and Cypriot Presidencies over the coming months will also have a significant bearing on the definition of the policy and legislative objectives to be reflected in Ireland's Presidency policy programme.

Ireland will also work with its Trio Presidency partners, Lithuania (January to June 2027) and Greece (July to December 2027) to prepare a Trio programme setting out an overall orientation for the work of the Council during the 18-month Trio period (July 2026 to December 2027). It is expected that the Trio programme will also be finalised and published in June 2026.

This process of consultation with domestic stakeholders will play an important part in ensuring that the policy priorities for the Irish Presidency take account of views across different sectors of Irish society on important areas of focus for the work of the European Union during the Presidency term.

5. Freedom of Information Act 2014 and Publication of Submissions

The Department will make public all submissions received as part of this consultation on the consultation webpage on gov.ie. Additionally, information provided to the Department via this consultation may be disclosed in response to a request under the Freedom of Information Act 2014. Therefore, if you consider any information you provide as part of this consultation to be commercially sensitive, please clearly identify it as such and specify the reason for its sensitivity. The Department will contact you regarding any information identified as sensitive before publishing or otherwise disclosing it.

6. General Data Protection Regulation

Respondents should note that the General Data Protection Regulation ('GDPR') entered into force in Ireland on 25 May 2018 and is intended to give individuals more control over their personal data. The key principles under the Regulation are as follows:

- Lawfulness, fairness and transparency
- Purpose limitation
- Data minimisation
- Accuracy
- Storage limitation
- Integrity and confidentiality
- Accountability.

The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade is subject to the provisions of the Regulation in relation to personal data collected by it from 25 May 2018 onwards. Any personal information which you volunteer to this Department, will be treated with the highest standards of security and confidentiality, strictly in accordance with the Data Protection Acts 1988 to 2018.

We would like to draw your attention to our [Data Privacy Notice](#), which explains how and when we collect personal data, why we do so, and how we treat this information. It also explains your rights in relation to the collection of personal information and how you can exercise those rights. Anonymised excerpts from individual submissions may be included in internal and published reports. While the Department will carefully consider all comments and suggestions received, it does not intend to respond to individual submissions.

Please note that all responses received as part of this consultation are subject to the provisions of the Freedom of Information Act 2014 (FOI), the European Communities (Access to Information on the Environment) Regulations 2007-2014, and the Data Protection Act 2018.



7. Submission Form

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

Mandatory questions	
Name	Dr Orla Lehane
Organisation (if any)	Irish Council for International Students (ICOS)
Date of submission	12 th December 2025
Do you agree to all of the terms set out in this consultation process, including those set out under section 5 and 6?	Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>

Optional questions <i>The following questions are asked only to help us understand the range of perspectives received as part of this consultation process.</i>	
Respondent type (i.e. individual, NGO, business, academic, local authority, etc.)	NGO The Irish Council for International Students (ICOS) is a national NGO and membership organisation representing 27 higher education institutions across the Republic of Ireland. Our membership includes universities, colleges, and Aontas na Mac Léinn in Éirinn (AMLÉ), the national student union. ICOS also convenes a Student Advisory Group to provide structured, lived-experience input into our advocacy and policy work.
What is your sector/area of work?	International student advocacy; international education; higher education mobility; student-facing immigration, accommodation, and welfare systems. ICOS supports the rights and welfare of international students in Ireland. We work across a network of 27 institutional members and focus on ethical mobility, learner voice, and accessible

Optional questions

The following questions are asked only to help us understand the range of perspectives received as part of this consultation process.

	<p>information and support systems for international learners in higher education.</p> <p>This includes managing the Ireland Fellows Programme on behalf of Irish Aid.</p>
<p>What is your connection to the issues you are providing feedback on? For example, are you an expert practitioner, person affected by a policy issue, member of the public with a general interest in the topics, etc.?</p>	<p>Our submission draws on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Direct engagement with international students navigating immigration, residency and visa systems. • Policy advocacy on student welfare and accommodation standards, racism, and learner welfare. • Institutional partnerships promoting ethical student mobility and inclusive education practice. • Alumni and scholarship networks that contribute to Ireland's development goals and to the EU's external action priorities.
<p>Describe your geographical focus in the context of your submission? For example, rural, urban, national or EU wide.</p>	<p>Our work is national in scope within Ireland, but our focus intersects directly with EU-level mobility and migration systems. This includes infrastructure and policy debates relevant to the Justice and Home Affairs (JHA) and Education, Youth, Culture and Sport (EYCS) Council configurations in the context of the 2026 Presidency.</p>

Guiding Questions for Stakeholder Consultations

Through these consultations the Government is seeking to gather observations, suggestions, and reflections on how Ireland can best fulfil its Presidency role; ensure the Presidency policy programme is informed by diverse perspectives from across Irish society; and identify EU-wide issues, themes, and policy areas that should be given particular attention during Ireland's Presidency.

It is proposed that Ireland's overall policy approach for the 2026 Presidency will be expressed at a high level in the form of a single overarching phrase or slogan setting out a people-centred and future-oriented vision for the EU, accompanied by three priority themes.

Guiding Questions for Stakeholder Consultations

Respondents are asked to consider the following guiding questions and to limit their responses to each question to a maximum of 500 words. Please note that you do not have to respond to all questions.

Respondents are welcome to submit additional information alongside Submission Form. However, in such cases, respondents must provide a summary of the additional information under the 'Any other comments' question. This response should also be limited to a maximum of 500 words.

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

Please limit response to a maximum of 500 words.

ICOS welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this consultation. As a national NGO advocating for international students, we work at the intersection of education, mobility, immigration, and inclusion. These lived experiences offer concrete insights into how EU systems perform, and how they can be strengthened to deliver greater fairness, resilience, and public value.

Based on this expertise, ICOS proposes the following three areas as strong, people-centred thematic priorities that Ireland's Presidency could credibly lead on and contribute to broader EU objectives.

1. Inclusive Mobility for a Future-Ready Europe

Learner mobility is a long-standing expression of European cooperation. When mobility systems are clear, fair, and rights-based, they deliver public value: talent development, social cohesion, and global connection. International students and researchers engage daily with EU-regulated systems, including visas, immigration registration, housing markets, and qualification recognition. Their experiences are a real-world measure of how the EU delivers.

Ireland's Presidency can:

- Champion transparent, timely visa and work pathways (JHA configuration)
- Promote fair qualification recognition and academic transitions (EYCS)
- Support multilingual, accessible public information on rights and redress mechanisms

Mobility should not be reduced to a transactional market. It is a public good that supports inclusion, human development, and democratic participation, reflecting core EU values and aligned with the EU Strategic Agenda 2024-2029 and the European Education Area.

2. International Education as Strategic Public Infrastructure

Ethical international education supports not only individuals, but EU-wide strategic goals:

- Research and innovation
- Climate adaptation and global cooperation
- Gender equality and inclusive economic development

International students contribute to Europe's demographic sustainability and are integral to its future skills ecosystem. The Presidency can:

Guiding Questions for Stakeholder Consultations

- Position study and research exchange as key components of the EU's competitiveness and talent strategy
- Reinforce long-term alumni networks as soft-power assets
- Champion education as a durable, rights-based investment in the Union's internal strength and external partnerships (SDGs 4 and 17)

3. Safer Digital Living for Mobile Citizens

International learners rely on digital platforms for accommodation, services, and community life, often across language barriers and legal systems. Yet they remain vulnerable to scams, exploitative practices, and information gaps.

Ireland's Presidency should:

- Promote platform accountability and digital consumer protections
- Advance a rights-based approach to digital services in cross-border settings
- Ensure that mobile learners' lived experiences inform the broader EU digital transformation agenda

These themes reflect Ireland's capacity to convene practical, people-centred solutions across Council configurations. Learner mobility is a human measure of how EU systems work. When they reduce friction, prevent harm, and enable belonging, they also enhance Europe's competitiveness and social resilience. This delivers benefits for individuals, institutions, and communities alike.

These themes also reflect the role of civil society in strengthening EU systems and delivering public value, bridging institutions and communities at national and international levels.

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

Please limit response to a maximum of 500 words.

Ethical, well-governed learner mobility contributes to Europe's social cohesion and global competitiveness while advancing the EU's role in international cooperation, particularly through SDG 4 (inclusive, equitable quality education) and SDG 17 (global partnerships). This includes international students, researchers, and mobile learners across all stages of education and training.

Ireland's Presidency provides an opportunity to make progress on the systems international learners and education providers depend on, including immigration, accommodation, consumer protection, and qualification recognition. These issues cut across Council configurations, including Education, Youth, Culture and Sport, Justice and Home Affairs, and Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs.

ICOS recommends a cross-cutting focus on the following, framed around values-driven governance and practical outcomes:

Guiding Questions for Stakeholder Consultations

A coherent, inclusive approach to international education

EU legislation and policy should uphold the rights and welfare of all international students, across Erasmus+, national scholarships, and self-funded pathways. This includes transparent approaches to residence permits, post-study options, access to public services, and protection from discrimination. The 2026 European Commission Work Programme should prioritise inclusive mobility as a core element of EU education policy and advance practical proposals to enhance student safety and wellbeing.

Fair, learner-centred migration and visa systems

ICOS urges the Presidency to prioritise work within the JHA configuration to improve mobility pathways for third-country nationals, including students and researchers. Fair, efficient, and transparent visa and residency processes are central to Europe's credibility and attractiveness as a destination for study, research, innovation, and skills development, and should be positioned as shared EU infrastructure. Such systems also underpin broader resilience and security by ensuring well-managed and rights-based migration.

Protection from discrimination and exploitation

Across EU Member States, international students are often vulnerable to racism, housing discrimination, precarious work, and exploitative recruitment. The Presidency should support stronger safeguards and clear redress mechanisms, ensuring that learners are treated as rights-holders, not solely as economic contributors. This includes tackling hate crime, discrimination, and extreme hate speech, in line with the EU Anti-Racism Action Plan and the Digital Services Act, aligning with EPSCO priorities around equality, social protection, and fair working conditions.

Strengthening cross border education through EYCS

ICOS recommends that the Presidency use the EYCS configuration to support progress on:

- Ethical, transparent cross-border student recruitment
- Qualification recognition and fair transitions between education and work
- High-quality learner supports and wellbeing systems

These priorities reinforce the strategic goals of the European Education Area and the EU's position as a global leader in inclusive, ethical and values-driven international education.

International education and research support broader EU goals: climate adaptation, global solidarity, innovation, and gender equality. Strong alumni networks enhance long-term EU influence and partnership-building, strengthening both internal cohesion and external engagement.

They align with the EU's external action objectives under the Global Gateway strategy and NDICI–Global Europe, both of which emphasise education, gender equality, climate action, and inclusive international partnerships.

Ireland's Presidency can help embed these priorities across EU agendas, ensuring that mobility, education, and inclusion are recognised not only as sectoral issues, but as strategic enablers of the Union's future success.

Guiding Questions for Stakeholder Consultations

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

Please limit response to a maximum of 500 words.

The most substantial impact will come from improving the clarity, fairness, and accessibility of systems that people engage with in their daily lives, particularly those navigating education, migration, housing, and work across borders.

From ICOS' perspective, the Irish Presidency can make a lasting difference by championing joined-up, people-centred governance, especially in areas where EU institutions directly shape the lived experiences of mobile learners, international students, and their host communities.

Strengthen trust in cross-border systems

People feel the value of the EU when systems work, when immigration processes are predictable, housing is fair, rights are respected, and information is accessible. International students and researchers – who move for study, training, and research – are an important case in point. Their journeys rely on multiple EU-regulated systems across Member States.

The Presidency can:

- Prioritise efficiency and transparency in visa and residency systems
- Promote consistency in qualification recognition and access to work
- Encourage consumer protections for mobile citizens, especially in digital markets

Efficient, rights-based systems reduce stress, build social and economic resilience, and contribute to security by reducing uncertainty and vulnerability. For students and institutions, clearer pathways reduce stress, unlock opportunity, and support businesses and institutions in planning, recruiting, and retaining talent.

Deliver fairness and protection through inclusive policy design

Discrimination, exploitation, and exclusion – including hate crime and online hate speech – undermine EU values and erode social cohesion. International students, including those from third countries, are often vulnerable to racism, housing scams, precarious work, and unclear redress systems.

Ireland's Presidency can support:

- Rights-based policymaking across Council configurations
- Stronger accountability for actors profiting from mobility (e.g. recruitment, accommodation platforms)
- Investment in accessible, multilingual public information

Protecting learners' dignity and safety contributes to community stability and reflects the EU's commitment to equality, non-discrimination, and fundamental rights. This benefits individuals and the communities, institutions, and businesses that depend on safe, ethical systems.

Guiding Questions for Stakeholder Consultations

Frame education mobility as a shared public good

International education contributes not only to individual opportunity, but to broader public value across the Union. When properly supported, it strengthens:

- Local economies (housing, services, innovation hubs)
- Business ecosystems (talent development, alumni networks)
- Social cohesion (intercultural understanding, civic engagement)

Well-managed mobility enhances competitiveness, skills development, and long-term innovation across Member States. By promoting ethical, inclusive international education, as part of the European Education Area and broader talent strategies, Ireland can help make the EU more globally attractive, economically competitive, and socially resilient.

Lead by example in civic participation and inclusion

Ireland's Presidency can model inclusive civic engagement by creating space for youth, international students, and underrepresented communities to participate in EU discussions. These groups are often directly affected by EU policy but excluded from formal processes. Empowering their voices enhances transparency, trust, and legitimacy.

The Council's work can have lasting, people-centred impact by strengthening systems, protecting rights, and enabling participation. By championing EU values in practice – fairness, openness, solidarity, and opportunity – Ireland's Presidency can help shape a future-ready Europe grounded in inclusion, sustainability, competitiveness, and collective security.

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

Please limit response to a maximum of 500 words.

As the national NGO supporting the rights and wellbeing of international students in Ireland, ICOS believes that education mobility provides one of the most visible and relatable demonstrations of EU cooperation in everyday life. Students, whether participating in Erasmus+, on (inter)national or institutional scholarships, or self-funded, experience the EU not as an abstract project, but through tangible freedoms: to move, to study, to connect, to belong. Their journeys offer a powerful lens through which to communicate not only what the EU stands for, but also what it makes possible.

ICOS proposes the following approaches to communicate EU values and build broader public ownership of Ireland's 2026 Presidency:

1. Amplify diverse student, researcher, and alumni voices

International students and researchers speak directly to core EU values – freedom, dignity, and opportunity – through their lived experience. Sharing their stories, challenges, and contributions demonstrates how European cooperation delivers real public value. These narratives resonate across borders, generations, and sectors, while reflecting the EU's competitiveness in education, research, and inclusive partnerships.

Guiding Questions for Stakeholder Consultations

2. Promote inclusion, belonging, and civic participation

Student mobility is not a one-way process. International learners actively contribute to their host communities through volunteering, peer support, cultural exchange, and civic life. Tackling hate crime, discrimination, and hate speech is essential to ensuring these contributions are visible, safe, and valued. Highlighting these contributions shows how inclusion strengthens Europe, fosters innovation, and builds lasting, people-to-people partnerships.

3. Use inclusive, accessible, multilingual channels

To reach and engage diverse audiences, Presidency communications should reflect Europe's linguistic and cultural diversity. Multilingual and youth-friendly content, shared via social media, education settings, and community organisations, can extend the Presidency's reach, especially among newcomers, mobile citizens, and underrepresented groups.

4. Make mobility visible, and rights clear

Showcase how EU membership enables study, research, training, and cross-border exchange. This includes demystifying practical systems, such as visa renewals or digital residence permits, through user-centred, rights-based information. Strong, transparent systems not only build public trust; they also reinforce collective security by reducing discrimination, misinformation, and risk. When people see the EU improving access, transparency, and fairness, public trust grows.

5. Create civic participation spaces for students and youth

Civil society and student-led initiatives can act as trusted intermediaries, helping to make EU policy more tangible and relevant to citizens. Ireland's Presidency can lead by embedding student voices into Presidency activities and legacy. Youth assemblies, student-led dialogues, and consultations aligned with the EU Youth Strategy and the EYCS Council configuration can support authentic engagement and long-term impact. This also strengthens the democratic foundations of the Union and builds ownership among future leaders.

Ireland's credibility in international education, rooted in people, partnerships, and shared values, offers a powerful platform to deliver these messages. The Presidency can help communicate not only what Europe is, but what it is becoming: open, fair, connected, and future-focused.

Question 5 – Any other comments

Respondents are welcome to submit additional information alongside Submission Form. However, in such cases, respondents must provide a summary of the additional information under the 'Any other comments' question. This summary should also be limited to a maximum of 500 words.

