



**Opening Statement for Briefing the
Joint Committee on Enterprise, Tourism and Employment
on the Topic of**

**The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment
Statement of Strategy 2025-2028**

**Mr Declan Hughes
Secretary General
Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment**

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Cathaoirleach

Members of the Committee

Thank you for the opportunity to present the Department of Enterprise, Tourism and Employment's *Statement of Strategy 2025–2028*. It is a pleasure to appear before you to set out how the Department supports our Ministers to deliver on *Programme for Government* commitments, to consolidate our strong economic performance of recent years and to position Ireland for the challenges and opportunities ahead.

I would like to briefly introduce my colleagues. I am joined by Assistant Secretaries Harry Lester, Head of Corporate Division; Gary Tobin, Head of Economics, Competitiveness and Climate Division; John Newham, Head of Investment and Innovation Division; Fiona Coyne, Head of Tourism and Trade Development Division; Yvonne White, Head of Workplace Regulation and Economic Migration Division; and Karen Hynes, Principal Officer in our Irish Enterprise Division.

Context

Our Starting Point in 2026 is from a position of relative strength. The most recent CSO Labour Force data shows 2.833 million people in employment at the end of 2025, an increase of 56,700 on 2024. Participation rates are at record levels, and we have full employment in all regions. Of course, while the labour market remains buoyant, it demands a sustained focus on productivity, skills and competitiveness to ensure enterprise, tourism and employment continues to drive prosperity.

The pipeline for indigenous enterprise and foreign direct investment remains strong. Last year saw the number of jobs in client companies of our enterprise development agencies, Enterprise Ireland, IDA Ireland and the Local Enterprise Offices (LEOs) reach a record 585,100.

Enterprise Ireland's end of year results for 2025 shows total employment in EI supported companies at 232,425, with 12,608 new jobs created last year; notably, 69% of those new jobs were created outside Dublin—evidence that growth is increasingly broad-based and regionally anchored. That momentum is illustrated by recent announcements of global expansions by Irish enterprises in sectors from food nutrition and agri-tech, to software, engineering, health and medical technologies and Artificial Intelligence (AI), precisely the areas where our *Strategy* emphasises digital transformation and innovation.

IDA Ireland's most recent annual results confirm a record 323 investments in 2025, up 38% on 2024, with over 15,300 expected new jobs approved. This is 14% higher than the previous year. There were 78 first time investors, and client expenditure on RD&I reached €2.5 billion. Total employment in the IDA client base now stands at 312,400. While the external environment for investment is extremely competitive, Ireland remains a globally attractive location for enterprise and innovation.

At the small business level, companies supported by our 31 *Local Enterprise Offices* (LEOs) created 7,261 new jobs in 2025, with a net employment gain of 2,479. For the first time, LEO supported jobs reached 40,285 and 82% of new jobs were outside Dublin. 2025 marked the 12th consecutive year of jobs growth for the LEO network and underlines the importance of a strong, locally based pipeline feeding into higher growth Enterprise Ireland supports.

Similarly, the latest CSO data shows overseas tourist numbers and revenues rose by over 30% in December last, an encouraging indicator that adds near term weight to our longer-term policy direction. In December Minister Burke published our new National Tourism Policy Statement, “[A New Era for Irish Tourism](#)” which places SMEs, regional balance, diversification of markets and sustainability at the heart of delivery. The Policy Statement will also serve to align the corporate plans of Fáilte Ireland and Tourism Ireland to support growth in visitor numbers, revenue and employment over the coming years.

This is the starting point for our new *Strategy*. Investment and innovation remain strong, enterprise ambition is real, our trade and tourism are diversifying, and the labour market is robust and near full employment even as international conditions remain challenging.

Our task now is to consolidate these gains and realise our vision as set out in our new *Statement of Strategy* of making Ireland *the world’s leading location to work, do business, and visit*.

Programme for Government and Consultation

In the area of enterprise and employment, the Programme for Government ‘[Securing Ireland’s Future](#)’ emphasises that further developing Ireland’s enterprise base remain a key focus. From backing small businesses and start-ups, to scaling firms and enhancing foreign direct investment. There is a commitment to reducing business costs, simplification and effective regulation. We must secure access to finance and investment in vital infrastructure to help businesses succeed. If we are to continue to grow quality jobs, we must keep a laser focus on competitiveness, skills and innovation. The Programme for Government changed our Department’s functions with new responsibilities in the area of Tourism and the transfer of our Trade Policy Unit to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

While the Programme for Government is the cornerstone of our new strategy, in developing it, we also listened carefully to stakeholders. We ran a public consultation and invited submissions from the Enterprise Forum, Retail Forum, key social partners including Ibec and ICTU, iSME, Chambers, Regional Assemblies, our offices and enterprise and regulatory agencies, and Government Departments.

The Six Strategic Goals: Our Plan for 2025–2028

Through the delivery of six key goals our Strategy sets out a clear path to deliver opportunity, quality jobs and prosperity for all by driving a competitive, resilient and sustainable economy that supports enterprise, tourism and employment across all of Ireland’s regions.

Our first goal is to drive *competitiveness, sustainability and innovation*, building the resilience of the economy.

Competitiveness is the foundation of improvements in living standards. Under this goal we have developed and are delivering a new whole-of-Government Action Plan for Competitiveness and Productivity.

With an eye on the future, we are developing Enterprise 2035 as a long-term strategy for long term jobs and growth, and we are driving strategic investment in skills, innovation and infrastructure. We will increase enterprise R&D, scale Technology Centres, and advance digital adoption - including AI and cybersecurity - so that 90% of small businesses reach basic digital intensity by 2030.

We will also accelerate decarbonisation, implement the Offshore Wind Industrial Strategy, and leverage the EU Net Zero Industry Act to drive growth in green manufacturing and supply chains in Ireland. We will continue to work with the social partners through the *National Competitiveness and Productivity Council* on formulating solutions on key competitiveness issues.

Our second goal is focused on creating and maintaining *high-quality jobs* and increased *productivity* to drive prosperity and high standards of living through.

To do so we need to ensure we have the talent and skills to support enterprise and quality employment. It also requires investment in innovation, productivity, digitalisation, decarbonisation and supporting infrastructure.

To deliver high quality jobs it will be essential to activate those people still outside the labour market, as well as attracting international workers. Economic migration should not be regarded as a mechanism for importing low-cost labour. Rather, when developed and implemented in a strategic, cross-governmental manner it will allow for the attraction of talent to support enterprise and the delivery of public infrastructure and services.

We will be working with the [Employment Law Review Group](#) to ensure that employment rights frameworks are modern, proportionate and enforceable. We will also continue to support and strengthen the Workplace Relations Commission, Labour Court, and Low Pay Commission, and the Health and Safety Authority.

Thirdly, we aim to strengthen and support tourism and Irish based enterprises, particularly SMEs to start, scale and compete internationally.

As the Committee is aware, responsibility for tourism transferred to the Department last year. Our focus in the coming period is very much on the supporting SMEs in the broad tourism sector to innovate, grow and prosper, and through Fáilte Ireland and Tourism Ireland successfully implement the 71 policy actions in “A New Era for Irish Tourism”, focusing on market diversification, quality tourism jobs, skills, and sustainability.

We will enable Enterprise Ireland and the LEOs in every county to deliver a regionally balanced entrepreneurial pipeline from start up to scaling businesses; increasing innovation and productivity, deepening market diversification, boosting export capability. We will have a particular focus on access to finance, strengthening the SME finance escalator with new mechanisms to close the scaling finance gap through Enterprise Ireland, in addition to the expansion of [MicroFinance Ireland](#) and low-cost, long-term debt finance with the SBCI and the European Investment Bank and further incentivising venture and equity investment.

We will also simplify access to information and supports through the *National Enterprise Hub*, providing enhanced supports to tourism enterprises and reforming Enterprise Ireland and LEO supports to ensure they are targeted and easy to use.

Our fourth goal is to provide the most competitive environment for the attraction and retention of *inward investment* at the cutting edge of innovation.

We will enable IDA Ireland’s “*Adapt Intelligently*” strategy and ensure that framework conditions, from skills and infrastructure to digital regulation expertise, keep Ireland among the world’s best locations for knowledge intensive FDI.

We will deepen RD&I collaboration through *Important Projects of Common European Interest*, deliver the IDA's regional property programme and *Next Generation Sites* and deliver on the potential for *Green Energy Industrial Parks*.

We will also continue to work across Government to ensure the framework conditions for enterprise, infrastructure and talent make Ireland the best location for foreign direct investment, building out a pipeline of highly innovative projects from the existing base and from new name FDI.

Fifth, we will provide measured, certain and *innovation friendly regulation* for business, workers and consumers.

We will remove unnecessary administrative burdens, strengthen the SME Test across Government, and champion EU level simplification to boost the competitiveness of firms operating in the Single Market. A key priority for us is to continue to ensure company law and intellectual property regimes are fit for purpose.

We will continue to support and strengthen the Corporate Enforcement Authority, Companies Registration Office, Irish Auditing and Accounting Supervisory Authority, Injuries Resolution Board, National Standards Authority of Ireland and the Intellectual Property Office of Ireland to effectively deliver on their respective legislative mandates.

We will support the work of the Company Law Review Group to ensure company law is fit for purpose and facilitate enterprise and employment. We will promote a digital and AI regulatory framework that balances encouraging innovation while mitigating potential risks for individuals and society and championing the strategic and ethical adoption and development of AI in Ireland. We will also establish a national AI Office as the central coordinating authority for the EU AI Act.

Our sixth and final goal is to advocate Ireland's values and strengthen our relationship and influence with the EU and international partners.

Ireland will hold the Presidency of the Council of the European Union in the second half of this year, from 1st July. This will be an important opportunity for us to influence policy and legislation and be recognised as a policy leader among Member States. The reputation gained while holding the Presidency will stand to Ireland's credit in influencing future policy and legislation long after the term of the Presidency.

A successful Presidency will be measured in terms of legislative files and policy initiatives advanced and in the development of relationships through the calendar of events held in Ireland over these six months. DETE has several key policy areas that will be central to Ireland's Presidency, including European Competitiveness, advancing the Single Market, Simplification and Better Regulation. Progressing agreement on the European Competitiveness Fund, which my Department is leading on, will be, as part of the overall Multiannual Financial Framework, one of the most important files for the Presidency and for my Department.

Throughout the Presidency, there will be opportunity to advance the interests of Irish businesses and Irish consumers, and to reinforce DETE's policy messaging around simplification, promoting SMEs and supporting quality employment.

We will continue to promote rules-based trade and economic security, lead the Market Diversification Action Plan, and publish a new Trade & Investment Strategy. We will also maximise Ireland's participation in the European Space Agency and deliver targeted trade and tourism missions to deepen market access for Irish firms and regions.

Delivery and Progress to date

While we are still in the early stages of our new Strategy, we are already delivering with our Ministers on key elements.

We have:

- Published the [Action Plan on Competitiveness and Productivity](#) to tackle structural cost and productivity challenges and unlock growth through innovation, skills and infrastructure;
- Launched the [Action Plan on Market Diversification](#), a whole of Government initiative with over 100 actions to broaden our export base and build resilience in a volatile global trading environment;
- Advanced the AI Act implementation model, designating a distributed approach anchored in sectoral regulators with my Department as the *Single Point of Contact*. We are progressing preparations for the *AI Office of Ireland*, reflecting our ambition to be a European hub for digital innovation, regulation and trustworthy AI adoption;
- Established a Small Business Unit to drive application of the SME Test, simplify grants and improve the [National Enterprise Hub](#)'s "once only" principle;
- Delivered multiple rounds of the *Disruptive Technologies Innovation Fund*, with €159m in awards announced in 2025, invested in Technology Gateways/Centres, and published Ireland's Semiconductor Strategy, *Silicon Island*, aligned with the EU Chips Act, providing critical building blocks for innovation led growth;
- Delivered the '[Action Plan on Collective Bargaining](#)' which introduces practical measures to empower, promote, and protect collective bargaining, ensuring workplaces remain fair, productive, and resilient.
- Published '*A New Era for Irish Tourism*', introduced the *Short-Term Letting & Tourism* legislation to improve data and oversight, and launched the *Business Events 2030* strategy, placing SMEs, skills, seasonality and market diversification at the centre of long-term growth.
- Published our Department's largest ever [Sectoral Capital Plan 2026-2030](#) as part of the government's National Development Plan, setting out how the Department will spend €4.7 billion in capital investment over the next five years to strengthen Ireland's enterprise and employment base, attract foreign direct investment, promote innovation and support tourism development across all regions.

We delivered the above while supporting our industrial relations institutions, company law modernisation, employment rights, competitive markets and consumer protection.

Our Department will continue to deliver throughout 2026 and beyond, with progress transparently reported in our [Annual Reports](#), the Public Service Performance Report, through programme indicators in the Revised Estimates, and via our public [Data Dashboard](#).

We are also committed to supporting and developing our staff who work so hard to deliver our vital mission. Underpinning our new Statement of Strategy we have also developed our Corporate Services Strategy, focusing both on effective governance and oversight and also how we will invest in our people and in digital transformation to ensure consistent, high-quality performance.

Finally, an overarching priority for the Department achieving its strategic outcomes is leading and influencing across Government to deliver a positive environment in which enterprise, tourism and employment can thrive. We continue to work with our Agencies and offices and support other Departments and State bodies to progress our strategic goals.

Closing remarks

Cathaoirleach and Members, the Department's Statement of Strategy 2025–2028 is a plan to sustain full employment and quality jobs in all regions and support investment through effective and timely delivery of our strategic goals.

As a Department and working with our Ministers we have a renewed sense of purpose and ambition about what can be delivered. We are determined to sustain and translate the resilience of the economy into enduring productivity growth, higher living standards, and quality employment in every county.

Our new Statement of Strategy builds on our longstanding strengths as an open, enterprising economy, recognising the centrality of SMEs and family businesses, leveraging our strengths as a location for leading edge inward investment, and embracing tourism as a driver of regional opportunity. As I noted earlier, the Strategy is grounded in consultation, built on evidence, and designed for delivery.

I and my colleagues look forward to working with this Committee as we implement the Strategy, and I welcome your questions.

Thank you.