Statement of Strategy 2024–2028



Informed policy for a better Ireland



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The Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) is proud of the role it has played in Irish life since its foundation in 1960. Through its research, our knowledge and understanding of Ireland's economy and society have been expanded enormously, and the assistance provided to policymakers has been immeasurable.

The purpose of this document is to set out how the ESRI will continue to fulfil its mission over the next five years and how we will strive to do so more effectively. In the following pages, we reflect on the current situation of the Institute and consider the evolving national and international context in which the ESRI undertakes its work. Against that background, we go on to specify the vision, mission, goals and values of the Institute and set out how we will enhance our efforts to provide evidence for policymaking and public debate.

The strategy is being written at a time when Ireland is performing exceptionally well across many indicators. Economic growth, as measured by gross national income, is strong, and the economic rebound post-COVID-19 has exceeded general expectations. Unemployment is at a historically low rate, and the public finances are in surplus. However, inflation is well above the ECB target rate, and interest rates are being increased in an effort to curb inflationary pressures.

Beyond economic indicators, Ireland faces a number of challenges. Our greenhouse-gas (GHG) emissions are not on a trajectory that is consistent with 2030 targets. Housing supply is well below demand, resulting in chronic shortages. Inequalities across many dimensions persist, as evidenced, for example, by gender wage gaps, inequality in market incomes and socio-economic differences in access to third-level education.

Taking a broader, more global view, there are many changing factors that will impact on life in Ireland. Technological change, most notably with regard to artificial intelligence (AI), is likely to accelerate, with consequences that are difficult to anticipate. Climate change is also likely to continue, even if progress on GHG reductions are achieved. Geopolitics is another arena of considerable instability, as evidenced, for example, by the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Given these and other challenges, it is clear that there continues to be a need for a strong evidence base to guide policy. We will only anticipate and address the economic, social and environmental problems of our time by first ensuring that we have a clear understanding of those problems and the processes underlying them.

Through the actions outlined in this strategy, we aim to ensure that the Institute will continue to provide high-quality research to inform policymaking in Ireland. Having conducted a high-level peer review of the Institute in 2022, we have drawn on the insights provided by a large group of external stakeholders who were interviewed through that process. We have also sought views from all staff members. The Council of the Institute has deliberated on the strategy at Council meetings and through its Business and Operations Committee.

The Council looks forward to monitoring progress under the strategy over the next five years. We are very much aware of the skills, capacities and commitment of ESRI staff, and so the Council is confident of success in delivering on the goals set out below

Sean O'Driscoll, Chair **Alan Barrett**, Director

1 Introduction

The ESRI was established in 1960 by a group of senior academics and public servants, led by Dr T. K. Whitaker, who had identified the need for independent research to support policymaking in Ireland. Over sixty years later, the Institute's importance in providing authoritative research to inform public policy is widely recognised.

This public-good role is supported by an annual grant-in-aid from the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. The grant accounted for approximately 25–30. per cent of the Institute's income over the lifetime of the last strategy. Most of the rest of the funds needed to sustain the research of the ESRI come from research. programmes in partnership with government agencies and departments, research projects commissioned mostly by public bodies and competitive research grants. Membership and patronage subscriptions have contributed an increased amount in recent times following the relaunch of the membership programme in 2021.

As is the case for all organisations, the ESRI operates in an environment of constant change. Hence, it is necessary to review periodically our role and how we go about fulfilling that role. In this document, we present our latest strategy, which sets out the strategic actions that will be taken in the coming years so that the ESRI will continue to provide authoritative research to inform public policy.

The strategy is structured as follows. In Sections 2 and 3, we reflect on both the strengths of the ESRI and the challenges that we face as we come to the end of one strategy cycle and look forward to the next. Much of the thinking in these sections was prompted by the peer-review process in late 2022 and the discussions held by the staff and council in response to the Peer Review Report. In Section 4, our perspective changes, and we assess the socio-economic and other contexts that will determine the ESRI research agenda in the coming years.

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In this document, we present our latest strategy, which sets out the strategic actions that will be taken in the coming years so that the ESRI will continue to provide authoritative research to inform public policy.

Section 5 sees us turning to the core elements of the strategy. We set out our vision, mission, goals and values, each of which has been revised since our earlier strategy. In Section 6, we specify the strategic actions that will be taken in the years to 2028. We conclude in Section 7 with remarks on the oversight of the strategy and broader issues of governance.

The strengths

The 2018–2023 Strategy contained many goals and actions, and significant progress was made across all of these. But, as we look back on this period, the COVID-19 crisis stands out as the defining episode.

As with all organisations, the pandemic and its associated impacts and adaptations presented us with huge challenges. However, in many ways, the COVID-19 crisis highlighted the strengths of the ESRI and the important role it plays in Ireland's public-policy processes. We will discuss these strengths below, but first we will share a quote from the Peer Review Report (2022):



The ESRI is a very strong and respected brand in Ireland based on a very positive perception of the quality and independence of its research output. Its major outputs – the QEC, research reports, working papers, and journal articles – are widely read and a high level of trust is placed in the thoroughness, professionalism and independence of this work by virtually all stakeholders.

As noted above, the peer-review exercise involved extensive consultation with our stakeholders, and the above quote is based on the views expressed. Looking at some of the key words – 'respected', 'quality', 'independence', 'trust', 'thoroughness', 'professionalism' – it is clear that the Institute enjoys enormous respect. We see this as resulting from many factors, some of which we list below.

- ▶ The staff of the ESRI are highly trained, professional and dedicated. Many of our research colleagues are internationally recognised for their expertise and excellence, as evidenced in part by publication in international peerreviewed journals. The researchers are supported by an equally dedicated team in Corporate Resources.
- ► In recent years, the Institute has achieved its highest level of output of policy-relevant research, and this has been disseminated actively through, for example, presentations at conferences and workshops and through the print and broadcast media.
- The positive impact of ESRI research in the policy-formation process was recently recognised by the OECD. In its 2023 report Strengthening Policy Development in the Public Sector in Ireland, the authors note how 'a valuable example of long-term policy collaboration between academia and the civil service is the bilateral research programmes agreed between the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) and individual government departments and agencies'.

- ► The Institute continues to maintain and develop nationally important analytical models. These include COSMO (macroeconomics), SWITCH (taxbenefit), I3E (climate-economy) and Hippocrates (health care). These models are key pieces of Ireland's national research infrastructure and allow for key analytical questions to be explored on an ongoing basis.
- ► Ten years ago, the Institute took some early steps in adding behavioural science to our research programmes. We now see the ESRI as being the leading centre for applied behavioural research in Ireland, based in part on the role played by the Behavioural Research Unit when working with the Department of Health and the Department of the Taoiseach during the pandemic.
- At the outset of the COVID-19 crisis and throughout this period, the staff of the ESRI demonstrated an ability to pivot and to deploy research expertise to a new topic overnight. Very early in the pandemic, our macroeconomic team produced estimates of the possible economic impact of large-scale business closures. Similarly, our behavioural team wrote about how best to communicate. public-health messages such as handwashing and social distancing. Parallel to this, our health team was represented on the Irish Epidemiological Modelling Advisory Group and contributed its expertise and modelling capability. Our tax and welfare team worked with the relevant departments in the design of pandemic welfare supports.

Recognising its role in providing evidence for policy formation, the ESRI continues to maintain a broad research agenda, capturing many of the challenges facing the country. While there can be a temptation to consolidate and to focus on existing research themes, the growth of our work on Northern Ireland and the allisland economy during the period of the 2018–2023 strategy showed an ability to broaden research outputs to match policy needs.

Turning to more internal features of the ESRI, it is reassuring to report that the funding of the Institute is now more stable, compared to 2017/18 when the previous strategy was being developed. There are two main reasons for this. First, the Institute has a wider base of multi-annual research programmes, with an increased number of government departments and agencies funding our work. Second, we set about relaunching our corporate membership programme in 2021, and this has proven to be very successful.

Recognising the importance of gender equality, inclusion and diversity, the ESRI has a high level of gender equality in terms of our senior staff and Council and a Gender Equality Plan (GEP) in place to maintain and improve this positive situation. The gender-equality plan was devised in 2022 and is one of the principal internal governance achievements in the 2018–2023 strategy period.

We have listed many strengths of the ESRI above, but in many ways these strengths all flow from the same source: the ESRI's highly qualified, highly motivated staff who are world-class researchers, excellent communicators and highly entrepreneurial, and who are, in turn, supported by a highly professional administrative team. The staff of the ESRI are a remarkable asset for the state and have shown their value continually.

The challenges

When thinking about the challenges that the ESRI faces, we posed the following question to ourselves: 'What threatens our capacity to deliver high-quality research on the most important issues facing Ireland?' In this way, our challenges are not simply a matter of internal concern. Instead, our focus is on the positive role we play for the state and its citizens and the factors that constrain our ability to maximise our contribution. As our funding model is the dominant factor, we will discuss it first before touching on some other issues.

Our funding model is not ideal, and for a number of reasons. First, as identified by the Peer Review Panel, we have a somewhat complex model. One large funding stream (the grant-in-aid from the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform) makes up approximately 30 per cent of our income. However, 60 per cent of our income is made up of about eighty funding streams – about thirty bilateral programmes with government departments and agencies and, at any given time, about fifty individual projects or research grants. To illustrate the issue further, we can quote from the Peer Review Report (emphasis added):



The management of the significant variety of funding streams (with their accompanying governance arrangements) whilst ensuring an ongoing relationship between the Institute and many funders, each with its own specific research requirements, takes considerable effort and time on behalf of the ESRI's senior management. As almost all this funding comes from the exchequer, the total administrative overhead cost to the state of this funding structure must also be considerable.

A second difficulty with our funding model relates to uncertainty, and this comes from two sources. First, while the funding for our research programmes is typically guaranteed for two to three years, at any point in time we are faced with the possible ending of a number of programmes. Second, the level of the grant-in-aid is determined on an ad-hoc basis every year, and a freeze in nominal terms has occurred regularly in recent years.

The final challenge posed by our funding model is the relatively low proportion of total income which the core grant represents. Many comparable institutes across Europe have core funding that amounts to 50 per cent of total income and more, so the ESRI figure of 30 per cent is low and leads to some of the challenges in managing the multiple funding streams mentioned above.

In addition to funding issues, we see the following factors as compromising our ability to maximise the value of our contribution to the policy-formation process.

While the breadth of the ESRI's research agenda is a strength, the Peer Review Panel observed that '[w]here a small number of staff within a particular research area are being stretched across a

- broadening (funder-led) demand, there is a risk that the breadth being serviced will be done so at the expense of development of depth of expertise'.
- ➤ The Institute has always faced significant competition for staff from the universities and elsewhere, and this continues to be the case.

In describing our final challenge, it is useful to quote the Peer Review Report again:



There is a real danger that in the 'research following the funding' model, [...] the ESRI's ability to actually determine the research agenda is somewhat compromised. While this can be seen to usefully underpin the relevance of research [...], there is a danger that the Institute's reputation for independence, and its capacity to develop a coherent and prioritised research agenda will be damaged and may not best serve the overall interests of the state.

The external context and our research agenda

In this section, we set out briefly and at a high level some factors that are likely to determine the ESRI's research agenda over the course of the 2024–2028 Strategy. While not a comprehensive list, these themes emerged from the discussions underpinning the strategy process.

Before turning to a forward-looking perspective, we should note that there is a wide range of existing issues on which the ESRI will continue to provide the evidence base for policy action.

- ▶ At the time of writing, the housing crisis is possibly the dominant theme in the public discussion. The supply of housing remains well below estimated needs. This is leading to a host of outcomes including high levels of rent, high numbers of homeless people and a large number of adults continuing to live with their parents beyond ages where new household formation would previously have been expected.
- ▶ Ireland's health-care system remains under pressure, as evidenced by long waiting lists for in-patient procedures and certain assessments, and also by overcrowding in A&E departments.
- ▶ While the government has set ambitious targets for reducing GHG emissions, progress against those targets remains disappointing. Most would agree that radical changes to patterns of consumption, production, travel, etc., will be required, and at an unprecedented scale.
- As with all European countries, Ireland's population is ageing, and this will lead to a host of impacts that are well known. Apart from mitigating the costs of an ageing population, policy should look to redesigning many features of life so that the needs of an older population are accommodated. Taking urban planning as an example, it would be ideal to see age-friendly spaces and communities being assisted, in a way that is consistent with climate policy.
- ➤ Staying with demographic issues, immigration into Ireland is likely to rise for reasons including climate change globally (a push factor) and population ageing in Ireland (a pull factor as we need to augment our workforce). The need to ensure the harmonious and successful integration of immigrants will be key.

► Finally, the ESRI has a long tradition of conducting research on inequalities, and this is likely to continue. Our recent work has considered unequal outcomes across gender, ethnicity and disability status. Identifying and quantifying inequalities will continue to be an important task, but we will also want to continue our research on the design and implementation of policy aimed at countering inequalities.

The issues just mentioned are part of our current research agenda, but we expect the following issues to become more prominent.

► AI is gaining increasing attention, and in many ways the focus of the discussion is reminiscent of earlier discussions about new technologies. On the one hand, it is possible to see the immense labour-saving potential with consequent implications for productivity. On the other hand, labour-saving technologies give rise to fears about job losses. More broadly, new technologies, including AI, open up many positive possibilities, but they also give rise to fears over malign uses. From a research perspective, there will be a need to understand the implications of AI across all dimensions: economic and social, good and evil. And there will also be a need. to assess how AI can assist the research process. For example, economic forecasting will possibly be aided by AI through the use of vast quantities of the most up-todate data and the early identification of turning points.

- ▶ Apart from AI, other technologies are likely to grow in importance, and we will continue to witness and adapt to the digital transition. Along with the digital transition, we are also likely to witness a green transition, and, of course, failure to achieve the latter could be catastrophic. The twin transitions will require much investment in physical and human capital and also in R&D. They will also require changes in many practices across work and leisure.
- ► Changes in technology and the world's response to climate change will all take place within a geopolitical context that is itself changing. In February 2022, Europe was shaken by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The invasion led to Finland joining NATO and, hence, a reduction in the number of non-aligned members of the EU. Cyberattacks and the use of social media by certain states to undermine democratic processes are newer threats. The full implications for Ireland are yet to be understood. As a highly globalised economy. Ireland must be fully aware of, and alert to, this context. Geopolitics is not an area of the FSRI's expertise. but we must have an awareness and an understanding so that our research is informed.
- ► Another international development with likely relevance for Ireland is the increasing movement towards strategic autonomy with both the USA and the EU strengthening their supply chains and weakening external competition. This could have direct impact on Ireland's economic model, which is based on an open global trade model.

Wision, mission, goals and values



Vision

To be a world-class research institute supporting the achievement of a more inclusive, prosperous, sustainable and decarbonised Ireland.







Our ambition in delivering for the country

In setting our mission of providing evidence to inform policymaking and public debate, we are aware of the responsibility to undertake our work to the highest possible standards. We serve the citizens of Ireland by ensuring that the research we generate accurately identifies and measures economic and social processes. It is important to highlight that research that is of poor quality and that lacks rigour can mislead policymakers. By contrast, research that is high-quality provides policymakers with a solid foundation on which to build policy for the betterment of all.

Before outlining how we will innovate in our work, it is important that we commit to continuing to produce the large volume of high-quality, policy-relevant research and to disseminate it effectively. Central to this is the continued adherence to our quality-control processes where all ESRI output is peer-reviewed, with external reviewers asked to assess most reports and papers. Similarly, we must foster an internal culture where we encourage our researchers to question each other's research respectfully but robustly and where we welcome different perspectives.

We will also commit to improving and innovating along the following lines.

- ► The Peer Review Report expressed a concern about how the multiple funding streams could lead to a 'lack of overall prioritisation' of national research needs. We will ensure that national research priorities are being identified in the following ways:
 - By establishing an internal committee on research priorities that will expand the ESRI's role in determining the national research agenda.
 - ▷ By establishing an international advisory panel to look at both our research agenda and research quality. (Part of the role of this panel will be to ensure that the work of the ESRI is continually benchmarked against the highest international standards in terms of research quality and policy impact.)
 - ▷ By engaging on questions of national research priorities with external stakeholders both within and outside the public sector. (In this context, stronger engagement with the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science will be sought.)

- ► Having increased our efforts to identify national research priorities through greater internal and external reflection, we will aim to undertake the associated research. Ideally, this would be facilitated through an increased grant-in-aid.
- ▶ Again reflecting comments reported to us by the Peer Review Panel, we will conduct periodic foresight exercises in which we will discuss emerging challenges, drawing on expertise across the Institute. The first such exercise will commence in early 2024 when an economic outlook will be produced, including medium-term forecasts.
- ▶ We will invest in our staff and provide opportunities for learning and development and also for more engagement with the international scientific community. As noted by the Peer Review Panel, 'there is relatively little EU/international funding of ESRI work, related in part to the complexity and time demands of application processes'. We will address this by facilitating staff to participate in European research networks and in Horizon Europe bids and projects.
- ► We will ensure that nationally important models such as COSMO, SWITCH, I3E and Hippocrates are properly resourced and that 'key staff risks' are minimised by creating teams with the required skills.
- ► The link between our research and the policy implications must be maintained, but we will increase the focus on policy evaluation in our overall agenda.

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An overarching set of goals is to ensure that the ESRI remains an agile and adaptable organisation that can respond rapidly to Ireland's changing research needs.

- ▶ A core strength of the ESRI is the presence among our staff of international experts on a broad range of topics. As many current policy challenges require input from a number of research areas, the Institute needs to draw more heavily on the broad range of expertise in addressing complex problems. Examples of the sorts of policy challenges which we have identified are as follows:
 - ▶ housing and planning for services such as health and education;
 - be the successful integration of immigrants through the labour market, the education system, culturally and politically;
 - ▶ education, skills and economic growth;
 - ▷ children, education and social inclusion;
 - ▷ pensions, financial well-being and behavioural sciences.
- ► We will ensure that our research methods are in line with modern practice, in part by

- further developing models of participatory research, drawing on our experience involving children and people with disabilities.
- ▶ We will place 'knowledge exchange' at the core of our work. This will include staff exchanges between the Institute and government departments, our joint master's programme with TCD and an increase in engagements with departmental management teams. Currently, we have good engagement across government departments resulting from the steering committees that oversee our research programmes, but we need to ensure that our work is influencing thinking at the highest levels within departments.
- ▶ We will build on the recent expansion of our work on Northern Ireland and the allisland economy including the development of stronger links with collaborators and stakeholders in Northern Ireland.
- ▶ We will increase the reach and accessibility of our research output by continuously employing innovative, best-practice communications and dissemination techniques. We have made much progress on this in recent times through, for example, the use of social-media channels, infographics and other methods, but this is an ever-evolving challenge.
- ► We will also continue to inform public debate through the traditional media, for example, by researchers participating in radio and television discussions and ensuring that evidence is presented.
- ▶ We will address the challenges in hiring top-quality researchers in certain areas by developing longer-term relationships with early career researchers. Historically, the ESRI maintained links to junior researchers through a fellowship programme that partfunded Ph.D. studies. We will now revisit that model.
- ► We will invest in our IT infrastructure to ensure it is state-of-the-art, particularly with respect to cybersecurity.

- We will invest in management information systems to manage more efficiently our accounts, project management and HR processes.
- ▶ We will continue to ensure the wellbeing of our staff by implementing a comprehensive health, safety and welfare programme that includes regular safety training and initiatives promoting work-life balance.
- ▶ In the presence of hybrid working, we will continue to develop ways of maintaining our culture of collegiality, mentorship and constructive engagement with each other's work. In 2022, as the COVID-19 restrictions were being lifted, we started a programme of internal conferences where all staff came together on a regular basis. This has proved to be successful in maintaining connections, and we need to build on this.
- ► In the context of reassessing our accommodation needs post-COVID-19, we will ensure that our office accommodation supports our culture and goals including research excellence, across-Institute engagement and sustainability.
- ▶ We will review our ethics framework to ensure that it is fully up to date with modern practice and comprehensive with respect to how we choose our study topics, how we conduct research and how we disseminate the results.
- ► We will develop our offering to corporate members and Whitaker Patrons with a view to retaining current members and attracting more, by fostering a sense of engagement with the Institute while maintaining our independence and objectivity.

Looking specifically at actions that can be viewed as directly aligned with the environment, social, governance (ESG) agenda, we commit to the following:

- ➤ Environment: Our research on issues such as climate and energy makes a significant contribution in this area, but we will also strive to meet the highest standards in terms of energy usage, waste generation and other sources of environmental impact.
- ▶ Social: We will make further efforts to improve the diversity of our staff, including the implementation of actions under the Athena Swan accreditation process, and we will maintain the Equality, Diversity, Inclusion Committee which was created under that process. In the context mentioned above of identifying national research priorities, we will also engage with our broad stakeholder base, including social partners, NGOs and others, to ensure that our research agenda is informed by a wide spectrum of views.
- ▶ Governance: We will continue to adhere to the requirements of the Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies, and other public-sector guidelines, to ensure the highest levels of ethical and effective governance. We will ensure transparency and accountability through regular reporting on corporate governance practices, and we will continue to implement robust risk-management systems and internal controls

An overarching set of goals is to ensure that the ESRI remains an agile and adaptable organisation that can respond rapidly to Ireland's changing research needs. We cannot say with any certainty what questions might emerge in the coming years. However, we can engage continually in horizon-scanning exercises, maintain a culture that prioritises research in critical areas and invest in skillsets so that our researchers are well placed to generate insightful research on the emerging topics.



As with all statements of strategy, the greatest risk to success is a failure to implement the strategy. To guarantee implementation, the ESRI management team will develop an internal strategic implementation action plan, with identified actionable steps, clearly defined accountability and ownership for each action, resources required and timeline. The management team will ensure that suitable performance metrics are established to monitor progress in the achievement of the strategic actions.

The Council of the Institute will oversee implementation of the strategy over the five-year period. This will be achieved via half-yearly detailed reports to the Business and Operations Committee, a subcommittee of the Council, with a high-level overview by the Council. A mid-term review of the strategy and its implementation will be conducted in 2026, when a new director will have been in place for six months. This interim review will assess the effectiveness of the strategic actions and will adapt the strategy, if required, to ensure it is relevant.

In a complex and rapidly changing world, Ireland, like all countries, needs a world-class research institute to drive knowledge and understanding. It is only with such knowledge that policymaking can achieve optimal outcomes for its citizens. The ESRI is very proud of the role it has played in Ireland in enhancing knowledge and understanding for policymaking. Through this strategy, we commit to maintaining and developing our research expertise and to collaborating with key stakeholders for the benefit of all who live in Ireland.

Whitaker Patrons and Corporate Members

ESRI WHITAKER PATRONS

Davy EirGrid plc

The Electricity Supply Board (ESB)

Google Ireland Ltd

ICON plc Intel Ireland Ltd

Kingspan Holdings Ireland

Microsoft Ireland

ESRI CORPORATE MEMBERS

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Allied Irish Banks p.l.c. An Garda Síochána

An Post

Becton Dickinson BORD BIA

Bord Gáis Energy Ltd

Bus Éireann

Central Bank of Ireland

Competition and Consumer Protection

Commission Cork City Council Cork County Council

daa plc Datalex DCC plc

Deloitte Ireland LLP

Department of Agriculture Food and the Marine

Department of Defence Department of Foreign Affairs

Department of Further and Higher Education,

Research, Innovation and Science

Department of Transport

Dublin Bus

Dublin City Council

Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council

Enterprise Ireland Fáilte Ireland FBD Insurance Greencoat Renewables plc Higher Education Authority Jarnród Éireann Irish Rail

IBEC
IDA Ireland
IntertradeIreland
Irish Life Group
Kerry County Council
KPMG Ireland

Limerick County Council Louth County Council M Kelliher 1998 Ltd

Malin plo

Mater Misericordiae University Hospital

Matheson LLP Mazars Ireland Ltd Meath County Council Musgrave Group

National Transport Authority

National Treasury Management Agency

Norbrook Laboratories Limited

OHM Group Portwest UC

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Ryanair DAC SIPTU

The Sisk Group Tesco Ireland

The Institute of Bankers in Ireland (IOB)
The Irish Farmers' Association (IFA)

Uisce Éireann

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