

Report Card 2024: Is the Government keeping its word on climate and environment?

Last update: 2/8/2024 by Dr. Cara Augustenborg; Dr. Paul Deane; and Dr. Diarmuid Torney

Methodology: Friends of the Earth commissioned three academic experts to independently assess the Irish Government's performance on environment and climate relative to commitments in the 2020 Programme for Government (PfG). The PfG contains nearly 300 environmental or climate related commitments. Friends of the Earth divided these commitments into nine categories: *Climate; Nature and Biodiversity; Circular Economy & Waste; Water and Marine; Air Quality; Transport; Buildings; Energy; and Agriculture and Forestry*. More than 95 stakeholders across a wide range of civil society organisations, sectoral interest groups, political parties, academic institutions, media organisations, and Government bodies were contacted to gather data and insights on each of the Government's environmental commitments. Thirty three stakeholder interviews were conducted along with extensive desk-based independent research, all of which is reported in a [compendium](#) developed by Avalon Kennedy Astles, Benjamin Macke and Ross McCann of University College Dublin. Three academic experts then used the information in this compendium, along with their own knowledge of Government policy, to score each of the nine categories. Their assessment below *does not* evaluate whether commitments contained in the PfG were adequate, but rather how well this Government is keeping their word on *their own* climate and environmental promises. The assessment took into account that the current Government has served for four years while the PfG was developed based on a five-year timescale. Thus, performance was evaluated based on the level of policy development and implementation which could reasonably be expected within the period this Government has served to date. This assessment has been conducted annually since 2021 to measure progress over the duration of the PfG. We anticipate this to be the last Report Card of this Government in this series before the next general election.

The experts commissioned for Report Card 2021- 2024 were:

- Dr. Cara Augustenborg (Chair), Assistant Professor, Environmental Policy Programme, University College Dublin
- Dr. Diarmuid Torney, Associate Professor, School of Law and Government, Dublin City University
- Dr. Paul Deane, Senior Lecturer in Clean Energy Futures, MaREI, University College Cork.

Report Card 2024 (Scores out of 10)

	2024		2023		2022		2021	
Climate	6.5	Moderate	6.0	Moderate	6.0	Moderate	7.5	Good
Nature & Biodiversity	7.5	Good	6.5	Moderate	6.5	Moderate	4.5	Poor
Water & Marine	5.0	Poor	5.0	Poor	4.5	Poor	5.5	Moderate
Waste & Circular Economy	8.5	Excellent	7.5	Good	8.5	Excellent	8.5	Excellent
Air Quality	7.0	Good	7.0	Good	7.0	Good	7.0	Good
Transport	6.5	Moderate	6.5	Moderate	7.0	Good	6.5	Moderate
Buildings	7.5	Good	7.0	Good	6.0	Moderate	6.5	Moderate
Energy	7.0	Good	7.0	Good	4.0	Poor	6.0	Moderate
Agriculture & Forestry	5.0	Poor	4.0	Poor	4.0	Poor	4.0	Poor
Overall	B-	Good	C+	Moderate	C	Moderate	C+	Moderate

Overall assessment: In the final year of this Government's term, they have just scraped a B- overall in achieving their own promises to address climate change and protect our environment, up from a C+ last year. In reviewing their environmental commitments, it is clear that this Government has achieved a good degree of what they set out to accomplish and laid some of the foundations to build a sustainable country. Additionally, they went beyond their original promises by playing an outsized role in passing of the EU Nature Restoration Law and enacting legislation for a Climate and Nature Fund, both of which will last well beyond the lifetime of this Government. However, the promises in their Programme for Government were not enough to achieve a truly sustainable society or meet our national and international climate targets. While we are relieved that Ireland has turned a corner away from our "climate laggard" origins, this is just the start of a long and important journey for Irish society, and momentum will have to accelerate over successive governments to make Ireland a genuinely sustainable economy.

In this year's assessment, we observed the following changes from last year:

- **Improvements:** Positive progress was apparent this year across several commitment areas, including in Climate governance, emissions and adaptation; Nature & Biodiversity; Drinking and Waste Water; Waste & Circular Economy; Buildings; and Agriculture, the details of which are explained below.
- **Declines:** While there was notable progress in the Marine area as detailed below, our assessment of the Government's marine commitments dropped from 5.5 last year to 5.0 this year due to persistent, inexcusable delays in their commitment to develop legislation on Marine Protected Areas.
- **No change:** Scores for Climate funding; Air Quality; Transportation; and Energy categories remain unchanged compared to last year and are explained in more detail below.

Overall, the grade of B- reflects hard work and substantial funding for environmental resources and capacity on the part of this Government. We call on the next Government to maintain these efforts in their own Programme for Government. Rather than reinventing the wheel with new strategies and plans, the focus of the next Government should be on making that wheel spin faster by increasing the pace of implementation for many of the actions established by the current Government.

We also recommend the following six additional areas the next Government should consider in establishing their own Programme for Government:

1. **Climate Action:** Establish a detailed roadmap for a fossil-free economy and a detailed plan for a sustainable agriculture sector. This includes: revising Food Vision 2030 to align line with the long term vision of achieving net zero emissions and to ensure that resilience to climate shocks are at the heart of our food system; publishing the National Planning Framework with regional energy targets; prioritising Oireachtas support for grid infrastructure projects; and removing fossil fuel subsidies (including in aviation).
2. **Engagement:** Develop and implement a coherent, consistent, all-of-Government strategy for climate communications, taking sufficient account of the different strata in our society. The focus of communications should be on the opportunities of decarbonisation as well as the progress already made. The Government should also engage with the public via a communication campaign to highlight the evidence of poor air quality on human health. Daily air quality measurements could be used in the weather app to showcase that urgency. However, to utilise our exceptional air monitoring network, the Government must also ensure that all monitoring stations are well-maintained with adequate equipment.
3. **Nature:** To address Ireland's biodiversity crisis, the next Government should immediately implement the Nature Restoration Law and develop the National Restoration Plan. To achieve this, there needs to be adequate resources to fund restoration projects on both private and public lands. The next Government should also commit

to moving forward the recommendations from the Citizens Assembly, Children and Young People's Assembly and the Joint Oireachtas Committee, including biodiversity education across society.

4. **Economy:** Align graduate and apprentice training programmes with the needs of Climate and Biodiversity Action Plans, Circular Economy Plans, the need for retrofit and repair services, etc. We will not meet ambitious environmental targets if we fail to sufficiently train Ireland's workforce to undertake this important work.
5. **Governance:** Undertake further steps to ensure that all Government departments and state bodies act in a manner consistent with the commitments in the climate law, including through amending the legal mandates of state bodies.
6. **Commitment:** Take a more interconnected approach to environmental policy between departments and state commitments in the next Programme for Government in SMART ways (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time bound). For example, the current commitment "*Ensure compliance with the Water Framework Directive*" should be broken down into a series of SMART-er commitments.

Quotes by the experts

Dr. Cara Augustenborg (Chair): *"While it's a relief that this Government has largely taken their own promises seriously and delivered on a majority, the importance of having strong commitments out of the gate is clear. We are turning a corner toward a more sustainable Ireland but still have a long way to go to address worrying trends in environmental health. I hope this process shows the next Government that we are always watching, and civil society will continue to demand more ambition and faster implementation of environmental commitments in any future Programme for Government."*

Dr. Paul Deane: *"The Government has laid a good foundation to build a decarbonised future, the challenge now is to build the structure at speed. Ireland has not lacked ambition when it comes to climate, but it has lacked agility, and this will be the challenge for the next government"*

Dr. Diarmuid Torney: *"This year, the Government has done enough to merit moving from last year's C+ grade to a B-. This reflects action across a range of areas. Nonetheless, the Government shouldn't be content to rest on their laurels. The progress achieved needs to be sustained over the years ahead. As we move into an election cycle and the formation of a new government, it is important that all parties commit to continuing and strengthening action on climate and environment in the years ahead."*

Quote by Friends of the Earth

Reacting to the assessment, Oisín Coghlan, Chief Executive of Friends of the Earth who commissioned the assessment, said: *"This fourth independent assessment shows that when a Government prioritises an issue in the Programme for Government, progress is possible. Climate polluting emissions have begun to fall. But it also shows that the initial commitments in the Programme for Government are critical. That's why Friends of the Earth will now be pushing all the political parties heading into the General Election to commit to the faster and fairer climate action we need to stay within the binding limits on pollution we have agreed to under both Irish and EU law."*

Summary of Analysis

1. Climate (6.5 / 10): Somewhat more progress was observed in commitments to address climate change this year, particularly with respect to governance, emissions reductions, and adaptation. Thus, the Government's progress on its climate commitments achieved a score of 6.5 out of 10 this year, compared to 6.0 last year.

	2024		2023		2022		2021	
Climate - Overall	6.5 / 10	Moderate	6.0 / 10	Moderate	6.0 / 10	Moderate	7.5 / 10	Good
Governance	7.0 / 10		6.5 / 10		6.5 / 10		8.0 / 10	
Emissions	6.0 / 10		4.5 / 10		4.0 / 10		6.0 / 10	
Adaptation	5.0 / 10		4.0 / 10		4.5 / 10		4.5 / 10	
Funding	8.0 / 10		8.0 / 10		8.0 / 10		8.0 / 10	

Governance (7 / 10): We observed good progress in the Government's commitments in climate governance this year, particularly through improvements in EPA enforcement powers via legislation and establishment of the Just Transition Commission. In addition, all Local Authorities now have Climate Action Plans, and there is a Climate Action unit in every Government department. However, the slow pace implementing Just Transition provisions; vague engagement with society on climate issues; the absence of new mandates as promised for several climate-relevant agencies (e.g. Coillte; Gas Network Ireland); and failure to submit a finalised updated National Energy and Climate Plan to the European Commission by the June 2024 deadline were weaknesses in this area.

Emissions (6 / 10): Our score in this category increased significantly from 4.5 in 2023 to 6.0 this year due to the EPA's recent analysis that greenhouse gas emissions declined 6.8% in 2023. This is a significant achievement, though we remain concerned it may be largely due to external forces rather than proactive policy changes. Nonetheless, this Government must be commended for removing and reducing the most polluting fuels, peat and coal, from electricity generation, both which will contribute to long-term emissions reduction. The lack of an emissions ceiling target for the land use sector and for so called "unallocated" emissions prevent the Government from receiving a higher score in this area.

Adaptation (5 / 10): This year, our score in adaptation increased from 4.0 to 5.0, accounting for the long-awaited publication of the National Adaptation Framework. Due to delays in publishing the Framework, there are still no sectoral adaptation plans as promised and only six flood relief schemes to protect approximately 3,500 properties have been completed, which prevents a higher score in this category. It is also noteworthy that there is a general absence of substance regarding adaptation commitments in this PfG, something the next Government should remedy.

Funding (8 / 10): This Government has been relatively consistent in their funding commitments to address climate change, especially regarding the commitment to increase carbon tax annually and allocate revenue to climate action measures. However, worryingly, they have yet to progress their commitment to hypothecate revenues from the carbon tax into legislation as promised, and this puts their progress at greater risk of being undone by a future Government. The new Infrastructure, Climate and Nature Fund goes beyond the Government's promises in their PfG by committing to long-term funding in this area. Substantial funding was also observed across many climate commitments, including funds for solar panels on schools and the Creative Climate Action Fund. Ireland's international climate finance has also

increased, but still falls short of NGO estimates of the state's fair share contribution towards the Paris Agreement goal of \$100 billion per year.

2. Nature & Biodiversity (7.5 / 10): One of the most notable Government actions in Nature & Biodiversity this year, their successful intervention in the EU Nature Restoration Law process, was not a commitment in their Programme for Government. However, it will have long term positive impacts on several PfG commitments, including climate targets, pesticide use, and urban biodiversity, as will the new Infrastructure, Climate and Nature Fund. For this reason, the score for this category increased from 6.5 last year to 7.5 this year. The new Wildlife Amendment Act, giving legal standing to the National Biodiversity Action Plan as well as the publication of the Plan itself, and the designation of two new national parks were also positive outcomes this year, as were continued improvements to the work of the National Parks and Wildlife Service. Promises to improve biodiversity education appear neglected, as does the commitment to designate western lakes as salmonoid lakes.

3. Water & Marine (5.0 / 10): This year, we observed somewhat more progress in the area of drinking and waste water than previous years, but less progress in the marine area detailed below. As a result, the overall score for this category remained the same with poor progress overall. Stakeholders noted that climate change represents one of the biggest threats to Ireland's water resources and this area needs far more attention in the future Governments.

	2024		2023		2022		2021	
Water and Marine - Overall	5.0 / 10	Poor	5.0 / 10	Poor	4.5 / 10	Poor	5.5 / 10	Moderate
Drinking and Waste Water	5.0 / 10		4.0 / 10		4.0 / 10		5.0 / 10	
Marine	5.0 / 10		5.5 / 10		5.0 / 10		6.0 / 10	

Drinking and Waste Water (5.0 / 10): Government progress in drinking and waste water has been plagued by an inability to achieve their own commitment to “*ensure that the State complies with the EU Water Framework Directive*”. In addition, their promises regarding water conservation have been largely ignored and revisions of the River Basin Management Plan are progressing far too slowly. However, this year, we observed more improvements in this category than past years, including stronger efforts to address rural water quality and leak reduction efforts and nationwide improvements in water infrastructure. While progress remains poor in this area, it improved somewhat this year.

Marine (5.0 / 10): While there was notable progress in the Marine area regarding new schemes to reduce by-catch; National Marine Planning & Development; and the creation of a new marine national park, our assessment of this area dropped from a score of 5.5 last year to 5.0 this year due to significant delays and obfuscation regarding the Government's commitment to develop legislation on Marine Protected Areas. For the past three years, this Government has claimed legislation to establish Marine Protected Areas was imminent, yet this legislation is still awaited and damage to our precarious marine environment continues as a result. In general, very little work has been done by this Government to prevent overfishing.

4. Waste and Circular Economy (8.5 / 10): Progress in the area of waste and circular economy has been consistently strong for the duration of this Government, culminating in the successful nationwide roll out of a Deposit and Return scheme on plastic and aluminum bottles this year. Other big commitments in this area are now complete, including the Circular Economy Act; a well developed Circular Economy Fund; a National Waste Action Plan; and a new Circular Economy unit within Government. However, commitments, such as the coffee-cup levy, tax changes, green procurement, and phase out of single use plastic are not progressing fast enough.

5. Air Quality (7 / 10): Progress on the five commitments in Air Quality have consistently scored 7 out of 10 points. Good progress continued this year with the publication of the Clean Air Strategy and increasing monitoring stations

across the country, making Ireland's air quality monitoring network the best in Europe. However, there have been issues with maintenance of the network and enforcement of the Government's smoky coal ban and restrictions on high sulphur fuel. The promise to take a regional approach to air quality and noise does not seem to be delivered.

6. Transport (6.5 / 10): Some large transport projects are just entering the planning system far too late in this Government's tenure, and emissions in the transport sector remain stubbornly high. Thus, the score in this category remains unchanged from last year. However, good progress is evident on many commitments, including developing and resourcing an electric vehicle (EV) strategy; e-scooter legislation; speed limit reviews; green taxi schemes; cycling and walking infrastructure; an all-island rail review; fare reductions and noticeable improvements in local bus link services with a 78% increase in use. Perhaps the most significant commitment this Government achieved in transport is to retain a 2:1 funding commitment to public and active transport over road development, something no previous Government had attempted and the implications of which will only be apparent when funding has translated into on-the-ground projects. Reductions of the EV Home Charger grant, the EV purchase grant, and the conclusion of toll discounts for EVs may be partially to blame for decreasing EV sales in 2024, which is concerning.

7. Buildings (7.5 / 10): Progress in achieving commitments in the built environment have consistently improved over the last few years, up from 7.0 last year to 7.5. Ireland now has the highest level of retrofit per capita in the EU, and emissions in the residential sector are at record lows. Over 133,000 properties have been upgraded since 2019. This year, we also saw publication of a National Retrofit Plan and a New Home Energy Upgrade Loan Scheme to improve household financing options for energy retrofit. The slow progress in district heating and lack of sufficient skilled capacity in this sector prevent a higher score in this area.

8. Energy (7.0 / 10): While emissions reductions in the energy sector last year were mainly due to external causes and progress on Renewable Energy targets has been too slow, we observed good progress in upgrades to the power system; roll out of solar farms; Renewable Electricity Support Schemes; and community energy and benefit funding. However, Wind Energy Guidelines have been frustratingly delayed through the lifetime of this Government, and the outlook for future data centre expansion that is consistent with climate targets is yet to be determined. Thus, the score for this category remains unchanged from last year.

9. Agriculture & Forestry (5.0 / 10): Last year, we described the Government's lack of progress in their agriculture and forestry commitments as "flirting with failure" and gave them a score of 4.0. This year, a 4.6% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions in agriculture along with noticeable progress in several schemes demonstrated that, for the first time, this Government is putting options on the table for farming families to engage in the low-carbon transition. Most notably, the extent of organically farmed land has trebled in the lifetime of this Government and the launch of a National Biomethane Strategy is a welcome development towards diversification. In contrast, progress in forestry remains very poor and land remains a source of emissions rather than a sink. The impact of intensive farming on water quality also continues to be a serious concern. Thus, while progress in this category improved from last year, overall progress remains poor.