

IRISH PRESIDENCY CONSULTATION

RESPONSE FROM THE EUROPEAN CANCER ORGANISATION (ECO)

1. 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: Richard Price	
Organisation : European Cancer Organisation	
Date of submission: 12 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.)	Response on behalf of the European Cancer Organisation, a not-for-profit umbrella organisation.
What is your sector/area of work?	Public Health
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.?	The European Cancer Organisation is a federation of 41 Member Societies working in cancer at a European level. It convenes oncology professionals and patients to agree policy, advocate for positive change and be the united voice of the European cancer community.
Describe your geographical focus in the context of your submission? For example, rural, urban, national or EU wide.	Europe focus.

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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.

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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.

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.

ECO recommends that the Irish Presidency of the EU include in its high level thematic priorities: the preservation and enhancement of the European Health Union.

In Ireland, 44,000 citizens are diagnosed with cancer every year, and 9,800 people die from the disease, making cancer the most common cause of death.¹ This places a devastating burden on the Irish society and its healthcare system, with annual spending on cancer care reaching €1.14 billion and indirect costs amounting to €639 million.²

In recent years, the development and delivery of targeted policies have shown real impact in easing this burden. Notable examples include the EU Cancer Mission on cancer and Europe's Beating Cancer Plan, yet also Ireland's National Cancer Strategy for 2017–2026. These had a concrete impact on Ireland, through:

- With a rate of 7%, Ireland has the lowest rate of smoking among 15-year-olds in the EU, making it an example of how to implement the EU's Beating Cancer Plan, aiming to create a tobacco-free generation by 2040.*
- Reaching out an 83% immunisation rate for HPV vaccination in 2022, close to the EU target of eliminating cervical cancer by 2040 through gender-neutral vaccination (WHO).*
- Introducing a Central Bank (Amendment) Bill in February 2025 to prohibit financial service providers from discriminating against survivors of cancer from accessing financial services, paving the way for a stronger Right to be Forgotten.*

¹ National Cancer Registry Ireland. *Cancer in Ireland 1994–2022: Annual Statistical Report of the National Cancer Registry*. Cork: National Cancer Registry Ireland, December 2024

² Hofmarcher, T. et al. (2019) Comparator Report on Cancer in Europe 2019 – Disease Burden, Costs and Access to Medicines

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This underscores the strategic value of a coordinated approach, with EU and national initiatives reinforcing one another. Keeping health and cancer care high on the political agenda in Ireland and across the EU is therefore essential to sustaining momentum and addressing the enduring challenges at both levels.

- *Without strengthened screening, prevention, and treatment pathways, Ireland risks facing an additional 15,000 new cancer cases every year by 2040, along with a continued increase in cancer deaths ;³*
- *According to OECD, in 2022, more than half of adults in Ireland were either overweight or obese;⁴*
- *Ireland's breast-cancer screening programme has missed its targets for the past two years, with a target of 195,000 women in 2024, yet only 137,134 were screened.⁵*

Despite this urge, the European Commission appears to be shifting health policy further into the frame of broader “competitiveness” priorities in the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) for 2028-2034. Under the proposed Commission architecture, the EU4Health Programme would be discontinued, eliminating the EU’s dedicated funding stream for health and cancer-specific initiatives. Instead, health is set to be incorporated into a wider Competitiveness Fund, under “health, biotech, agriculture and bioeconomy” heading. This merger risks diluting cancer-focused initiatives, as the overlap between these diverse policy areas may reduce their visibility and impact.

In setting its high-level thematic priorities for its 2026 Presidency of the Council, **Ireland should place cancer and health at the centre of its programming priorities**. Building on its reputation as a cancer champion, **Ireland is uniquely positioned to lead by example**, setting high standards for other EU Member States. Strong and visible leadership is essential to ensure that health and cancer care remain prominent on the political agenda, both in overarching policy priorities and in the negotiations for the next Multiannual Financial Framework.

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.

The Irish Presidency will take office at a moment when the European Union must decide whether to consolidate or dilute the gains made through Europe’s Beating Cancer Plan. The Presidency can play a pivotal role in the following areas:

1. Advancing Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2028–2034 negotiations

³ Health Research Board. “Record Funding for Ireland under Europe’s Beating Cancer Plan.” *HRB News*. November 27, 2025, <https://www.hrb.ie/news-stories/record-funding-for-ireland-under-europes-beating-cancer-plan>

⁴ OECD & European Commission, *EU Country Cancer Profile: Ireland 2025*, EU Country Cancer Profiles, OECD Publishing, 2025

⁵ Health Service Executive, “Response to Parliamentary Question PQ-46658/25: BreastCheck Screening Numbers,” September 2025

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With EU4Health no longer operating as a dedicated health instrument, cancer-related actions risk being absorbed into wide, catch-all funding envelopes in the next MFF 2028-2034. This makes it harder to guarantee that cancer priorities receive the targeted, ring-fenced investment needed to sustain progress. ECO calls on the Presidency to:

- Champion a **€2 billion European Cancer Fund** within the Competitiveness Fund to guarantee full implementation of Europe's Beating Cancer Plan and ensure cancer is not marginalised within wider "Health, Biotech, Resilience and Bioeconomy" agendas.
- Strengthen the cancer relevance of **National and Regional Partnership Plans (NRPPs)** by raising the share for social objectives to **20%**, enabling investment in national cancer screening, vaccination infrastructure, oncology workforce capacity and modern cancer-data systems.
- Secure the continuation of the **Cancer Mission** as a future Horizon Europe "moonshot" and support consideration of a **European Cancer Institute** to coordinate EU-wide cancer research and innovation.

2. Calling for stronger and harmonised tobacco control policies

Tobacco is a **leading cause of preventable death** in the EU, claiming over **700,000 lives annually** and accounting for **27% of all cancer cases**. The Presidency should push for the following measures:

- Advancing the revision of the **Tobacco Taxation Directive and Tobacco Products Directive**, ensuring higher and more consistent excise duties across all tobacco and nicotine products, including novel products that disproportionately attract young people;
- Facilitate agreement on **New Own Resources**, particularly the Tobacco Excise Duty Own Resource, generating sustainable revenue while reinforcing cancer and health prevention objectives.

3. Showcasing Irish position on Alcohol policies

Europe has the highest level of alcohol drinking globally. 7 of the top 10 countries with the highest alcohol consumption are in the EU, where approximately 240,000 people died because of alcohol in 2019.

The Irish Government's pioneering move to introduce legislation on alcohol labelling marked an important first step towards a healthier Europe. However, the subsequent announced delay to the measures being introduced cited, among other reasons, a need for European alignment on alcohol labelling.

The Irish Presidency should therefore prioritise the following measures:

- a) Support greater consensus between EU member states on achieving health warnings on alcohol labelling across Europe – as was promised in Europe's Beating Cancer Plan

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- b) Within this, ensure consumers rights are upheld by mandating inclusion of a full list of all ingredients in all alcoholic beverages

3. Pushing for cancer to be integrated in the upcoming Gender Equality Strategy

The forthcoming **EU Gender Equality Strategy**, expected for adoption in March 2026, will come before the Irish Presidency at first reading, giving Ireland a critical opportunity to reinforce the ambition and clarity of the text. The Strategy identifies health as a guiding principle; an approach ECO strongly welcomes. Yet to be truly effective, it must explicitly embed a holistic understanding of health, ensuring that gender-related disparities across cancer prevention, screening, diagnosis, treatment and survivorship are fully addressed.

You may read more on ECO's 5 Women Cancer Rights here: <https://europeancancer.org/resources/news/press-release-introducing-five-basic-cancer-rights-for-women-at-the-european-parliament.html>

4. Pushing for cancer to be integrated in other equality frameworks

The Irish Presidency has an opportunity to make cancer a clearer priority across EU equality initiatives. By embedding cancer considerations within work on **intergenerational fairness**, **anti-poverty measures** and the **emerging European Housing Strategy**, the Presidency can help ensure that social and environmental determinants, such as age-related vulnerability, income inequality and poor housing conditions, are addressed in a coherent way. This would strengthen the Union's wider equality agenda while supporting more effective cancer prevention and protection for those most at risk.

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 organisation of a **High-Level event on Cancer**, included directly in the Irish Presidency Programme, would provide a first means to achieve positive impact on the European cancer community. It could notably support elevating cancer as a strategic EU priority during the MFF 2028–2034 negotiations, ensuring it is addressed with dedicated focus rather than subsumed under broader competitiveness considerations. By providing the cancer community with a structured platform to contribute expertise, facilitating the exchange of best practices, and fostering multi-stakeholder collaboration, such an event would and drives actionable measures that improve outcomes for patients and communities across Europe.

Such an event could also focus on areas where Ireland has demonstrated leadership, such as policies on alcohol and tobacco control, showcasing best-practice approaches that can be adopted across the EU.

In parallel, an event hosted by the cancer **community under the auspices of the Irish Presidency** would offer a distinct but complementary space to elevate patient voices on

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distinct topics, highlight innovative initiatives and EU-funded projects for instance lead by Ireland, and foster collaboration across sectors. By demonstrating that the community is prepared to contribute expertise, this event can strengthen stakeholder engagement, bringing together healthcare professionals, researchers, patient organisations, and industry representatives in a more flexible, action-oriented setting.

An example of a European Cancer Organisation led, national event focused on Ireland & Cancer policies can be found here

: <https://www.europeancancer.org/timetoaccelerate/impact/resource/together-against-cancer-ireland.html>

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.

In 2024, 76% of the Irish population declared being in favour of a common EU health policy⁶ and 4 out of 5 people in Ireland believe there should be more investment in cancer services.⁷

To demonstrate the value of EU membership and foster citizen ownership of Ireland’s Presidency, emphasis should be placed on concrete achievements. Europe’s Beating Cancer Plan illustrates how EU coordination enhances cancer prevention, treatment, and research, Ireland has for example benefited from increased investment in cancer prevention, treatment, and research, strengthening the healthcare system and improving outcomes for patients across the country.

- *From 1973 up to 2018 Ireland was a **net recipient of over €40 billion in EU funds**;⁸*
- ***The European Health Data Space (EHDS)** supports Ireland’s use of health and cancer data, with €3.6 million funding to establish a national Health Data Access Body for research and personalised care.⁹*

The upcoming **Irish Presidency**, therefore, provides an opportunity to ensure that health and cancer care remain a central theme of the Irish Presidency, mirroring the Irish population’s key asks.

The Irish Presidency could, for example, showcase how policy actions developed by Irish civil society, such as **the National Cancer Information System (NCIS)**, which ensures that 16 of 26 chemotherapy-providing hospitals in Ireland can work together , **the new radiation oncology centre in Galway**, which has driven improvements in treatment and after-care for cancer

⁶ Directorate-General for Communication, European Parliament, Plenary Insights – March 2025 (Brussels: European Parliament, 2025)

⁷ Irish Cancer Society, “People Are Prioritising Heating and Eating Over Health Appointments, New Research Reveals,” press release, November 11, 2024

⁸ European Commission, EU Cohesion Policy in Ireland: Funding 1973–2018, accessed December 4, 2025

⁹ Department of Health (Ireland), “Minister Donnelly affirms commitment to digital health infrastructure as he announces €3.6 million in EU funding,” press release, December 28, 2023

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patients, and **the €95 million spent on anti-smoking initiatives since 2017**, could contribute to the successful implementation of the EU's Beating Cancer Plan across Member States. ¹⁰

By doing so, benefit will be provided not only to Irish cancer patients, healthcare professionals and researchers through increased investment in cancer care, but also to Irish society as a whole by addressing the indirect costs of cancer on Irish society.

¹⁰ National Cancer Control Programme (NCCP). *National Cancer Strategy 2017–2026: Implementation Report 2023*. Department of Health, Ireland, 2024