

Submission on the Public Consultation on the development of Ireland's third Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) National Implementation Plan

January 2026

Global Action Plan Ireland (GAP) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the public consultation on the development of Ireland's Third SDGs National Implementation Plan. As an environmental charity based in Ballymun and a government-appointed SDG Champion, GAP brings a combination of community-level delivery experience, education expertise and systems-level insight to this submission.

GAP supports the advocacy positions of networks in which we are involved, including IDEA and Coalition 2030, sharing their commitment to a rights-based, inclusive and accountable approach to SDG implementation. Our submission therefore reflects both practical learning from implementation and alignment with wider civil society priorities for strengthening SDG governance in Ireland.

GAP strongly supports the SDGs as an integrated framework for addressing Ireland's interconnected social, environmental and economic challenges.

Achieving the Goals will require more than policy alignment and reporting. Therefore Ireland's Third SDGs National Implementation Plan should explicitly recognise that:

- The SDGs represent a long-term process of societal transformation;
- Public understanding, ownership and participation are essential to delivery;
- Behaviour change, values-based education and community action are critical enablers across all Goals.

The Implementation Plan should therefore move beyond awareness-raising, towards structured approaches that support people to act for sustainable development in their daily lives.

Based on GAP's experience delivering education and engagement programmes with communities, schools and businesses, we emphasise that behaviour change must be treated as a core, cross-cutting enabler of SDG delivery. National strategies on climate action, sustainable consumption, biodiversity and wellbeing depend on individual and collective behaviour change. However, this is rarely reflected in governance structures, resourcing decisions, or monitoring frameworks.

GAP recommends that the Third SDGs National Implementation Plan:

- Explicitly **recognise behaviour change** as a cross-cutting SDG enabler;
- **Integrate behavioural insights into policy design** and evaluation;
- **Invest in organisations with proven expertise** in education, engagement and behaviour change;

- Support long-term programmes that move beyond short-term or campaign-based engagement.

Furthermore, Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) and Global Citizenship Education (GCE), as articulated under SDG 4.7, are foundational to the achievement of all SDGs. GAP's programmes demonstrate that education which is participatory, action-focused and values-based enables people to understand the connections between local actions and global challenges.

Ireland's SDG governance framework should therefore:

- **Strengthen cross-departmental coordination to support SDG 4.7 delivery;**
- **Recognise ESD and GCE as delivery mechanisms for the full SDG framework,** not as standalone education initiatives;
- **Provide long-term support for civil society organisations** delivering ESD and GCE across formal, non-formal and informal education settings;
- **Ensure educators and community facilitators are adequately supported, trained and resourced.**

GAP recommends that the government mandate sustained, multi-year funding for Global Citizenship Education providers to realise SDG 4.7 and cross-cut all Goals, concentrating resources on lifelong learning for adult education that drives awareness and action.

GAP's work highlights the importance of localising the SDGs. Communities are not only sites of delivery, but also sources of innovation, learning and resilience. The Third SDGs National Implementation Plan should therefore clearly **articulate the role of local authorities, community organisations and civil society in SDG delivery, and support community-led and place-based approaches to sustainable development.**

This community-led emphasis aligns directly with evidence from the [Spark Change Community Guide](#) produced by Trinity College Dublin, the Environmental Protection Agency and The Wheel, which identifies friends, children, storytelling, local narrative and neighbours as the top five drivers of change in promoting SDG action. The guide argues that trusted relationships and shared local stories, rather than top-down policies, drive sustainable behaviour shifts. These findings reinforce the need for the Implementation Plan to **prioritise interpersonal and narrative-based engagement within communities.** GAP urges policymakers to integrate these insights by **resourcing community platforms that support such dynamics.**

GAP's work through community gardens demonstrates the pivotal role of shared green spaces as hubs for SDG localisation, delivering co-benefits across food security (SDG 2), sustainable communities (SDG 11), biodiversity (SDG 15) and reduced inequalities (SDG 10). Academic research confirms that such shared green spaces promote inter-generational skill-sharing, combat social isolation, enhance urban ecosystems and provide accessible nutrition, directly countering environmental lags and building community resilience and ownership.

To elevate the impact of community gardens and allotments, the Third NIP should include **dedicated funding streams for expanding community gardens and shared green spaces**, integrated with local authority plans and civil society delivery. This would scale such initiatives and mandate participatory design that prioritises "furthest behind first" access for marginalised groups.

1. What are the key areas of progress in achieving the objectives and actions of the current [National Implementation Plan \(NIP\)](#) and how can these be built upon?

Recommendation:

Build on existing SDG governance and education successes by mandating long-term resourcing for Global Citizenship and participatory behaviour change programmes that link local action to national SDG delivery.

GAP Ireland commends the Second NIP's advancements in stakeholder engagement through forums like the National SDG Stakeholder Forum and public consultations. These fora can potentially support broader civil society input, despite their limitations.

Furthermore, the high-level coordination via the SDG Senior Officials Group and Interdepartmental Working Group must be welcomed as steps toward greater policy coherence, alongside robust frameworks like the National Planning Framework. To build on this, the Third NIP should mandate systematic stakeholder integration into decision-making, articulate clearer departmental accountabilities, and enhance local government resourcing for localisation.

GAP Ireland, as an SDG Champion, emphasises progress in SDG 4 (Quality Education) through expanded Global Citizenship Education (GCE) and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) in schools and communities, amplified by the SDG Champions programme's relaunch and growth.

SDG Champions exemplifies Strategic Objective 3 ("Greater partnerships for the Goals") from the Second NIP, showcasing civil society voices in local delivery via community-led initiatives like ACT programmes and gardens. GAP advocates building on this by mandating long-term resourcing for GCE and ESD providers, offering cross-departmental support for SDG 4.7, and scaling participatory behaviour change models to link local actions to national goals.

2. What are some of the key challenges in achieving the objectives and actions of the existing NIP and how can these be addressed?

Recommendation:

Address gaps in public awareness, behaviour change and engagement by integrating participatory Global Citizenship Education, resourced ESD programmes and a just transition framework into national SDG strategies.

A primary challenge in achieving the objectives and actions of Ireland's existing National Implementation Plan lies in insufficient public knowledge of how everyday lifestyle choices (such as reliance on driving) directly contribute to greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, while also exacerbating global poverty and inequality through interconnected supply chains and resource demands.

This knowledge gap limits effective progress across multiple SDGs, particularly those related to climate action (SDG 13), responsible consumption (SDG 12), and reduced inequalities (SDG 10). Compounding this, many people remain unaware that their individual actions can collectively drive meaningful change, leading to disempowerment and inaction.

Current NIP approaches often downplay critical lessons from climate psychology and behaviour change research, relying instead on top-down policies that overlook local-global inequities and fail to foster sustained participation.

To address this, the Third NIP should mandate integration of Global Citizenship Education (GCE) programmes, such as GAP's SDG Masterclasses, into national strategies. These participatory initiatives build essential skills, confidence and awareness of local-global linkages, while confronting power and privilege dynamics to enable inclusive, long-term action that aligns with Ireland's governance shortfalls and resource constraints.

Finally, embedding a Just Transition framework is key to overcoming these challenges, ensuring that shifts towards sustainability equitably support vulnerable communities without deepening divides.

GAP welcomes the creation of a [Just Transition Commission](#), as a crucial step toward embedding fairness and inclusion in Ireland's climate policy. GAP believes the Commission should prioritise meaningful community participation, education and capacity-building to ensure that all people - particularly those most affected by the transition - are active contributors to shaping equitable and sustainable futures.

This aligns with GAP's commitment to empowering communities through experiential learning and local-global awareness, positioning the Just Transition as both a social and educational process. By prioritising community-led behaviour change, resourced ESD/GCE delivery, and cross-cutting recognition of individual agency, the NIP can transform societal engagement from awareness to action, building on progress in civil society integration and SDG 4 education to deliver holistic SDG outcomes.

3. Do you agree with the NIP's current key objectives? In your view, are there further or alternative objectives that should be included?

Recommendation:

Strengthen the NIP by explicitly including behaviour change as a cross-cutting enabler and introducing a dedicated Just Transition objective to ensure equitable sustainability outcomes.

GAP Ireland agrees with the core objectives of Ireland's Second National Implementation Plan (NIP) 2022-2024, which emphasise policy integration, stakeholder partnerships and localisation of the SDGs, as these align with GAP's mission of community-led sustainability and education for behavior change.

Ireland's current SDGs National Implementation Plan (NIP) 2021-2024 outlines key objectives focused on governance, policy coherence, and stakeholder involvement to advance all 17 Goals:

- Establish national governance structures, including the SDG Implementation Review Group and multi-stakeholder forums, to coordinate SDG integration across government levels and sectors.
- Enhance policy coherence by mapping sectoral policies to SDG targets via the SDG Policy Map, ensuring alignment with national strategies like the Climate Action Plan and National Planning Framework.
- Strengthen monitoring and reporting frameworks, preparing for Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) with indicators tracking progress on priority Goals such as climate (SDG 13), inequality (SDG 10), and sustainable cities (SDG 11).
- Promote stakeholder engagement through consultations, SDG Champions like GAP Ireland, and civil society partnerships to embed SDGs in local actions and education (SDG 4).
- Foster partnerships (SDG 17) for inclusive implementation, prioritising "leave no one behind" via targeted actions on poverty (SDG 1), gender equality (SDG 5) and decent work (SDG 8).

GAP would advocate adding explicit objectives on behaviour change as a cross-cutting enabler, and mandating scaled-up GCE/ESD programmes like its SDG Masterclasses to address public awareness gaps on lifestyle impacts and individual agency.

In addition, GAP Ireland would advocate for a dedicated Just Transition objective within the Third NIP to ensure that sustainability shifts (such as decarbonisation, sustainable consumption and biodiversity protection) are equitable and do not exacerbate vulnerabilities. This objective would prioritise support for communities disproportionately impacted by environmental lags, like those in rural areas reliant on high-emission transport, urban low-income households facing energy poverty, or sectors undergoing green restructuring (e.g., agriculture and peat-dependent regions).

Drawing from GAP's community-led programmes in Ballymun and beyond, GAP emphasises the importance of resourcing participatory Just Transition plans that integrate behaviour change, retraining via GCE/ESD, and local empowerment to prevent inequality spikes amid Ireland's weak SDG 10 and 13 performance.

This builds on the NIP's governance focus by embedding principles of fairness and inclusion, countering critiques of "business-as-usual" budgeting that overlooks social costs. GAP also proposes measurable actions like funding community Just Transition hubs, cross-departmental equity audits for SDG policies, and partnerships with SDG Champions to pilot inclusive models, fostering resilience and ownership for long-term delivery.

4. Are you satisfied that the Governance structures in place are sufficient to ensure increased policy coherence for sustainable development across all levels of government?

Recommendation:

Enhance policy coherence by granting statutory authority to the SDG Unit, enforcing departmental compliance and ring-fencing resources for participatory, locally-led SDG implementation.

As an organisation working at community scale, it is difficult for GAP Ireland to obtain a full picture of current governance structures. However, it would appear to us that current arrangements are insufficient for ensuring policy coherence across government Departments and levels,

Structures like the SDG Senior Officials Group and Interdepartmental Working Group offer high-level coordination but appear to lack enforcement power, allowing sectoral silos and "business-as-usual" practices to undermine delivery, particularly on lagging environmental goals (SDG 13, 12). Local authorities face unclear mandates and resourcing gaps for localisation, sidelining grassroots action where organisations such as GAP excel.

To strengthen coherence, GAP urges granting legal (statutory) authority to the SDG Unit in the Department of An Taoiseach, enabling it to enforce compliance across government, alongside mandatory action plans for each Department, checked through fairness audits that ensure policies do not harm vulnerable groups.

GAP also calls for ring-fenced funding directly allocated to local authorities and communities, but only if tied to participatory SDG delivery methods, like those used in GAP's programmes.

5. Stakeholder Engagement - what is working well and what needs to be further developed e.g. better reaching the furthest behind first?

Recommendation:

Expand and target stakeholder engagement to reach the furthest behind first through resourced, participatory forums and equity-focused education initiatives that embed GCE/ESD principles.

GAP welcomes the SDG Stakeholder Forum and SDG Champions programme as key successes in stakeholder engagement. These mechanisms have created spaces to amplify grassroots voices and experiences. These mechanisms could also help increase a feeling of ownership among civil society organisations, as well as inspire further initiatives to link local actions to national goals.

To further develop engagement, particularly in reaching "the furthest behind first", GAP urges targeted, resourced outreach to vulnerable groups such as low-income households, rural communities and migrants.

This requires participatory forums embedding Global Citizenship Education (GCE) and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), addressing psychological barriers to

action, and prioritising equity through mandatory "Leave No One Behind" protocols for transformative, inclusive progress.

6. How can youth voices and the voices of groups identified as being in danger of being left behind best be included?

Recommendation:

Prioritise the inclusion of youth and marginalised voices via co-creation platforms, HIAs, and GCE/ESD.

GAP strongly endorses academic research highlighting participatory, multi-stakeholder approaches as vital for including youth and marginalised groups in SDG delivery. We advocate for co-creation platforms like youth assemblies and digital forums where young people lead agenda-setting, coupled with capacity-building through training in advocacy and policy literacy.

Early integration into decision cycles, rather than tokenistic consultation, builds genuine ownership, as evidenced by GAP's community programmes promoting local-global linkages.

For groups at risk of being left behind, such as people with disabilities, migrants and low-income communities, GAP recommends mandatory "Leave No One Behind" protocols featuring targeted outreach and accessibility adaptations like multilingual materials and inclusive tech. These should incorporate Health Impact Assessments (HIAs) as key community engagement tools, enabling vulnerable groups to evaluate policy effects on health equity through participatory processes that build trust and generate actionable insights. Power-sharing via community advisory boards would further address barriers like distrust or exclusion, ensuring voices from marginalised communities and groups help shape national SDG strategies.

Hybrid models blending top-down policy with bottom-up empowerment, leveraging local champions and narrative-driven engagement (as demonstrated in our ACT, ChangeAble, and Ballymun Is Brilliant initiatives) deliver higher equity and lasting impact. By prioritising these evidence-based methods, the Third NIP can align with cross-sector SDG partnerships, transforming inclusion from rhetoric to reality and accelerating progress on lagging environmental and inequality goals.

7. Are there specific actions that should be considered for inclusion? If so, please specify.

Recommendation:

Roll out national community programmes to track and reduce emissions, consumption, poverty and inequality impacts, alongside increased resourcing for community gardens.

GAP recommends rolling out national support for households and communities to track and reduce their impacts on emissions, consumption, poverty and inequality through scalable programmes.

Such action-oriented initiatives empower participants with practical tools to connect everyday choices to SDG outcomes. The aim is to promote measurable behaviour change that addresses Ireland's environmental lags while building resilience in marginalised areas and communities.

Additionally, GAP calls for increased resourcing of community gardens as multi-benefit hubs advancing food security (SDG 2), sustainable communities (SDG 11), biodiversity (SDG 15), and social inclusion (SDG 10). Our successful GLAS gardens demonstrate how participatory green spaces reduce isolation, share skills across generations and social groups, enhance local ecosystems and provide nutritious produce, directly countering inequality while aligning with Just Transition principles for equitable, grassroots-led sustainability.

8. Are there new topics or areas which need to be considered for inclusion (e.g. AI and Digitalisation, Pact for the Future, etc.)?

Recommendation:

Incorporate climate psychology, Just Transition, Pact for the Future, Global Citizenship and a Future Generations Commissioner into the Third NIP.

GAP recommends incorporating climate psychology and behaviour change as explicit topics in the Third NIP, addressing how lifestyle choices contribute to emissions, poverty and inequality while empowering individuals through practical awareness of their agency.

Such an approach supports a dedicated *Just Transition* focus on power dynamics, ensuring vulnerable communities in areas receive equitable support amid environmental lags.

Additionally, GAP urges embedding UN Pact for the Future commitments on global citizenship via scaled GCE/ESD delivery, alongside establishing a Future Generations Commissioner to safeguard long-term SDG outcomes.



Making Space for Change

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