



**Opening address of the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and
Employment, Peter Burke T.D.,**

Joint Committee on Enterprise, Trade and Employment

Leinster House, 3rd July 2024

Cathaoirleach, Committee Members,

Thank you for this invitation to brief you for the first time since I took office as Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment.

I look forward to updating you on the work of my Department in the first half of 2024.

Much of our progress this year can be framed within the context of delivering our ambitions under the Government's national enterprise policy, the *White Paper on Enterprise 2022-2030*.

The *White Paper* sets out the Government's ambitions for a regionally balanced and sustainable economy with policies targeted at delivering for our open economy with strong trade and foreign direct investment, a vibrant innovation ecosystem, and a resilient labour market.

I am pleased to say that we have made strong progress across the whole of Government in implementing the vision set out in the White Paper for Irish-based enterprise to succeed and to deliver rewarding jobs and livelihoods. Almost half of the activities outlined in the *2023-2024 White Paper*

Implementation Plan have been delivered, and the majority of those remaining are on track for completion as scheduled.

Despite the global challenges and volatility impacting some sectors, CSO figures continue to record strong employment growth. We had a record 2.7 million people in work in Q1 this

year, an unemployment rate of 4.1%, increasing female participation and every region at full employment.

Income tax receipts also remain robust, indicating the ongoing strength of the labour force.

At the end of last year, over 560,000 people were employed in clients of the enterprise development agencies, Enterprise Ireland, IDA Ireland and the Local Enterprise Offices (LEOs), with an additional 500,000 employed indirectly in providing goods and services to those clients. Taken together, the Department's agencies are supporting over one million jobs or 35% of the total employed across all regions.

The agencies inform me that the first half of 2024 is broadly positive for their clients, as international markets recover.

While broadly the economic indicators look good, we remain vigilant at Government level.

We are continuing to focus on competitiveness to ensure that Ireland is the best place in Europe for Irish and overseas multinationals to invest and for SMEs to develop and grow.

On that point, the *White Paper* contains specific measures to support our small and medium enterprises (SMEs) to navigate the challenges and opportunities of the twin Green and Digital transitions.

SMEs are the backbone of local communities and are central to our ability to build a broad-based and successful economy and society.

Last month I brought forward a package of measures to support our SMEs in reducing costs, boosting productivity, digital innovation and energy efficiency – while also balancing critical progress in terms of working conditions.

This SME Package included measures such as:

- reopening the Increased Cost of Business grant,

- introducing a second Cost of Business payment for retail and hospitality sectors of up to €10,000,
- increasing the maximum amount available under the Energy Efficiency Grant Scheme to €10,000,
- widening eligibility for schemes such as the Trading Online Voucher and Digital for Business consultancy to firms up to 50 employees, and
- doubling the value of the Innovation Voucher to €10,000, to name but a few of the actions.

These measures will help many SMEs secure their long-term financial sustainability and to grow good jobs into the future.

In May, I launched the first ever Local Enterprise Office policy statement which sets out the central role the LEOs will play for small businesses up to 50 employees right across the country. The LEOs will be an accessible one stop shop with

over 370,000 businesses eligible for some form of support from the LEOs.

The *White Paper on Enterprise* also recognises the opportunities that arise as we transition to a climate neutral and sustainable Ireland.

My Department is committed to encouraging energy efficiency in enterprise and to exploring the potential of new sources of renewable energy as part of our cross-government climate response. To date, over 12,400 tailored climate action plans have been generated for businesses using my Department's Climate Toolkit, providing an action plan for firm-level green transition.

In March, my Department launched our offshore wind strategy, *Powering Prosperity*, to ensure that we have the necessary infrastructure, supply chains and skills in place to take advantage of Ireland's abundant offshore wind potential.

This roadmap will allow us to harness the potential of a whole new industrial sector, with well paid jobs for regional and coastal areas, while reducing our energy bills and our reliance on other countries for fossil fuel.

To meet our ambitions under the Climate Action Plan, I also have just published the *Decarbonisation of Industrial Heat Roadmap* to inform the necessary interventions to decarbonise heat use in the manufacturing sector.

To demonstrate the Government's commitment to assist the manufacturing sector, earlier this month I launched a €300 million Industry Decarbonisation Fund to incentivise businesses to make significant investment decisions to reduce their carbon emissions and so that we can achieve our 2030 abatement target.

The challenges faced by business today, not just in green transformation, but also in accelerating technological change

and market disruption, can best be addressed through innovative actions and pioneering R&D.

Expanding our support for targeted, business focused research, development and innovation is imperative for Ireland's ongoing economic development and for the resilience of the enterprise base.

In May, I launched the seventh call of the Disruptive Technologies Innovation Fund (DTIF) to fund collaborative projects in the development and deployment of disruptive technologies on a commercial basis. This latest call has a focus on projects that complement our policy objectives on improving digitisation and meeting our climate objectives.

My Department has continued to be outward looking and in 2024 has an ambitious programme of trade missions to focus on promoting the innovative capabilities and competitive

offerings of Irish companies to international buyers across a range of sectors.

In the area of regulation, my Department through our discrete regulatory bodies continued to enforce and uphold the rights of workers and consumers and exercise statutory mandates in areas of competition and company law.

Levels of entrepreneurship and company incorporations with the Companies Registration Office (CRO) remained strong in the first six months of 2024, with a total of 10,384 new companies registered, up 3% on the same period in 2023.

My Department issued 30,981 work permits last year and we have seen a 39% increase in applications so far this year. We have also issued 2,300 renewals to date in 2024, compared to 1,615 for all of 2023.

The Workplace relations Commission has completed over 2,400 workplace inspections so far this year.

The Health and Safety Authority has completed over 5,000 occupational health and chemicals inspections to date in 2024.

The Injuries resolution Board continues to achieve an over 70% consent rate for cases brought before it with over 5,700 respondents agreeing to have their cases assessed up to the end of May this year. Also, from earlier this year the Board now has its new mediation service for public and liability insurance claims fully operational.

Moving now to legislative matters, my Department has continued to advance our priorities, with the passing of the Digital Services Act which will ensure the rights of Irish users of digital services are protected.

We strengthened the protection for employees in a collective redundancy situation and we commenced legislation to allow mediation on Insurance claims at the Injuries Resolution Board.

We progressed the Employment Permits Bill to make the permit system more flexible and to protect workers and we will commence the various provisions over the coming weeks.

Last week we completed passage of the Digital Services (Levy) Bill to extend the power of Coimisiún na Méan and the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission to meet their expenses in regulating the providers of online platforms and protecting consumers.

To ensure that work pays more, on the first of January the National Minimum Wage increased by €1.40, to €12.70 per hour.

This increase is part of Government's commitment to reaching the living wage of 60% of the median wage, among a number of other measures. Government will continue to have regard to the prevailing economic conditions in the implementation of these measures.

On a final point, the Committee may be interested to note that my Department is currently consulting with stakeholders on a new Statement of Strategy, which will run to 2025.

Guided by the *Programme for Government* and the objectives of the *White Paper on Enterprise*, it will give us a framework to not only sustain the economic progress made but to continue our momentum towards our vision to make Ireland the best place to succeed in business, to work and live.

I look forward to a constructive engagement this morning with the Committee members and I am happy to take any questions you may have.

Thank you.

ENDS