Mr Chairman, Members of the Committee,

Thank you very much for the opportunity to meet with the Committee today and for your strong interest in exploring Ireland’s alliance building within the EU, particularly in a post-Brexit context.

Director General O’Donoghue outlined the Government’s strategic approach and the strong leadership provided in this area by the Taoiseach, Tánaiste and Ministers. I also echo her remarks on the positive role played by the Oireachtas in deepening our engagement across the Union. I hope to complement her presentation with some practical perspectives from my role in Brussels.

My message is straightforward- Ireland’s success in Europe will depend on remaining highly connected and engaged both in Brussels and across each of the other 26 Member States.

As Permanent Representative at the Coreper 1 Committee, my team and I cover a wide range of sectoral issues, including the Single Market and competitiveness, transport, climate policies, agriculture, fisheries, energy, social and employment, the digital economy, research, health, education, culture and sport.

Coherence and effectiveness abroad depends on coherence and joined up thinking at home. I am therefore very grateful for the opportunity to work with colleagues from every Government Department be they based at our Permanent Representation or at home.

There is very considerable legislative activity on the Coreper 1 side and, crucially, almost all legislation that comes to the Committee and is prepared for the Council of Ministers is agreed through Qualified Majority Voting (QMV).

As you know, decisions taken under QMV require the support of at least 55% of the Member States representing 65% of the EU’s population and a blocking minority requires over 35% and at least 4 Member States.

Given this maths, Ireland cannot achieve good outcomes in the legislative process without a sustained proactive approach to building both strategic and tactical alliances.
We are of course not unique. Alliance building is an essential requirement for all Member States operating within the EU, particularly under QMV. Even well-established geographic alliances such as the Benelux, Visegrad and Nordic/Baltic, can be fluid and often evolve and shift as a particular legislative file progresses. While these groups do provide important political coherence, the component Member States are not obliged to share the same position on legislation.

As Director General O’Donoghue has stated, Ireland has consistently engaged in a wide number of issue based alliances. This practice has served us well and we are usually satisfied with the outcomes and reassurances achieved in negotiations. Indeed, we have voted against legislative proposals at final stage on only two occasions since January 2017. However, while it may be relatively rare for most Member States to oppose a file at final stage, QMV considerations are always to the forefront of the tactics of the rotating Presidency, the Commission and Member States.

Small Member States are under constant pressure to demonstrate that they have broad support for their particular concerns. A Presidency is most unlikely to take on board an Irish amendment or proposal unless we secure good backing in the room (and ideally little opposition). Building and maintaining the support of as many Member States as possible is therefore an ongoing core activity for myself and the attaches based at the Permanent Representation.

Mr Chairman, there are a number of recent examples which demonstrate the advantage and necessity of issue based alliances.

- Ireland has been a leader within a group of like-minded states who support the deepening and strengthening of the **Single Market and Digital Single Market**. There is a strong crossover in both groups with the Nordic/Baltics, the Netherlands and Czech Republic. In 2018, Ireland, along with Finland, Czech Republic and Denmark, focused attention on the remaining obstacles to completing the single market in services through the Copenhagen Economics Study which was commissioned by the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation and launched by Minister Humphreys in Brussels. This core group was successfully expanded in advance of the March European Council when 17 Heads of State and Government, including the Taoiseach, agreed a joint position on the current priorities.

- On the **ECOFIN** side our main focus has been on the ‘Nordic/Baltic plus’ colloquially known as the New Hanseatic League/Hansa 2.0. This group was established in 2017 and has been meeting almost monthly at Finance
Minister level. The countries include Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Ireland and the Netherlands. From time to time Finance Ministers from Germany, France, Czech Republic or Slovakia have attended the Ministerial level meetings. The Group has published joint position papers on the Future of Economic and Monetary Union, Capital Markets Union, and strengthening the role of the European Stability Mechanism. The Nordic Baltic Ireland Netherlands formation has also met twice at Head of State/Government level.

- During the divisive negotiations in 2017/18 on the reform of mobility, posted worker and haulage sector rules, we were aligned with a number of central and eastern MS, including Hungary, Bulgaria and Slovakia, as well as with those on the geographic periphery, such as Finland and Portugal;
- On the key climate files on CO2 emissions from cars, vans and heavy duty vehicles, Ireland formed an alliance in 2018 with a number of ambitious Member States and those, like ourselves, who are technology takers, such as Luxembourg, Denmark and the Netherlands.
- On agriculture and the ongoing negotiations on the reform of CAP, we have worked closely with France and those seeking to ensure a fully funded CAP (such as Spain, Portugal, Greece and Finland).

There are many other examples that could be provided, but these help indicate the considerable number of issue based alliance where we are active and the wide range of Member States involved.

The UK has been an important partner in Brussels for us on many issues. Their departure will deprive Ireland and several like minded groups of considerable political and voting strength. This will be particularly true on Single Market and digital economy matters. The numbers make this clear. At present, Ireland’s % of the EU population for QMV purposes is 0.95%. This will increase to 1.08% post Brexit. The total population of the Baltics, Nordics, Ireland and Netherlands will only amount to 11.06%. This is far short of the number required for even a blocking minority. By comparison, France and Germany will see their combined voting strength rise to 33.54% from 29.22%. This change matters because the Presidency, the Commission and the Member States are heavily influenced by the likely voting strengths as files evolve.

Becoming strongly linked with a grouping like the Nordic/Baltics is important in building our political influence, but, given the numbers, must be augmented by a deep level of engagement with other MS, particularly the larger Member
States. Director General O’Donoghue has outlined the steps we are already taking to do so.

Mr Chairman, a number of conclusions can be drawn from this experience.

First, the need to regard engagement as a shared responsibility and opportunity. While the Government has primary responsibility for managing relations with other Member States and the EU institutions, the challenge of expanding our connections and level of engagement across Europe should be viewed as a collective one. The Oireachtas, civil society, our business and farming communities, youth, education and cultural sectors all have a vital role to play in a national effort to deepen Irish engagement both in Brussels and across the Member States. This includes understanding the issues that are important to each Member State, what local political factors are at play and the nature of relations with non-EU or third countries. The support we have received on Brexit is a graphic demonstration of the benefits of such sustained engagement.

Second, change domestic perceptions about our influence in Brussels. At times in the past- perhaps due to our size and geographic location- the EU was often regarded as a phenomenon that tended to happen to us rather that an organisation that we could actively lead and shape. However, we bring a pragmatic, problem solving approach to issues that is very much appreciated by other Member States. The Taoiseach outlined an ambitious vision for our role in Europe during his address to the European Parliament. We can and do act as a bridge between some of the ideological and geographic fault lines. Embracing this role will help increase our influence and effectiveness in the post-Brexit Union. The new Strategic Agenda and incoming Commission and Parliament present an ideal opportunity to do so.

Third, be clear on our EU legislative priorities and take a lead role in establishing like minded groups on these files. Given the reality of QMV post-Brexit, we must continue our efforts to build support with the larger Member States and with the key players in the European Parliament on these priorities.

Fourth, Catherine Day recently advised the Committee that our engagement with the Commission, Parliament and other EU institutions should be strengthened. This is undoubtedly true. They should not be places we visit only when we have a problem, but instead there must be ongoing engagement to shape and influence policies and legislative proposals before they are published. The programme of Ministerial visits to the European Parliament has been an
important additional element in this regard. I would stress that early anticipation is vital. Again, this is not a task to be left to Government alone.

Thank you very much Mr Chairman. I look forward to hearing the Committee’s views and questions.