Thank you, Chairman.

Firstly, I’d like to thank you for another opportunity to set out the views and concerns of business to your Joint Oireachtas Committee as you undertake your work on considering alliance-building within the European Union.

As you know Ibec is the country’s largest business organisation representing our members at national, European and international level.

Over recent years, we have been working intensely at a national and European level to support member companies as they manage the ongoing uncertainty of Brexit disruption. More recently, we have also been working to highlight business priorities during the recent European Parliament elections, and subsequently as the focus turn to the election of the new Presidents of European Council and Commission, and the appointment of the new college of Commissioners.

Brexit unsurprisingly remains a top concern. The failure of the UK government to ratify the Withdrawal Agreement, has left business with the complex task and enormous cost of managing the uncertainty of moving Brexit deadlines.

Millions of euro has already been spent putting in place, and in many cases activating, costly contingency plans. The divisive and ongoing polarisation of the UK political debate has increased the likelihood of a ‘no deal’ outcome, driving up the cost of contingency planning further.

For the record, business fully supports the terms of the Withdrawal Agreement, which comprehensively address the key challenges that arise in the exit process. From the perspective of business, customs and regulatory alignment across the island of Ireland is vital to avoid the return of a hard border, safeguard the all-island economy and protect the Good Friday Agreement.

The unique challenges facing Ireland and Irish business in the Brexit process, has meant we have invested enormous energy in strengthening our link and cooperation with other EU and international business groups over recent years.

It is vital that our partners in Europe fully understand the specific economic and political challenges that Brexit presents Irish business and support an outcome that comprehensively addresses them.
Ibec has had a permanent office and staff in Brussels since the 1970s and the organisation is a member of BusinessEurope - the leading advocate for growth and competitiveness at EU level. The group brings together business federations from 35 European countries and Ibec actively participates on its Council of Presidents, Executive Committee and policy committees and working groups.

We are also the Irish members of Business at the OECD, based in Paris, and the International Employers Organisation, based in Geneva.

In addition, Ibec’s numerous trade associations are affiliated to their different sector associations at EU level. An audit of our activities shows that over 60 of our staff are involved in approximately 200 committees and working groups in over 65 different organisations.

Given the challenges on the horizon, we have stepped up our engagement with strategic business partners significantly over recent years. We have travelled across Europe to meet with our business partners in their cities – including Berlin, Paris, the Hague, Vienna, Prague, Copenhagen, Tallinn, Helsinki, Athens and other places where Ireland does business.

Indeed, the breadth and depth of our ongoing work makes us among the top business federation lobbyists at EU level, alongside the key German business groups.

All of this means that Ibec has a truly unique capacity to ensure Irish concerns are understood and shape common EU-wide positions. This has been the case when it comes to Brexit, with Ibec ensuring that Irish concerns reflected clearly and strongly in EU-wide business positions, but it is an issue that goes far beyond Brexit.

Ibec has set out in detail or priorities for the Future of Europe, and the direction of a post-Brexit EU – and of course and EU without the UK will be very different.

Ireland and other remaining EU member states must seize the opportunity to reinvigorate their commitment to a stronger, more prosperous EU, which further develops the Single Market and international trade, and enshrines pro-jobs, pro-growth conditions at the very heart of decision-making. We are working with our partners across Europe to make that happen.

And our work also focuses on global issues and connection, that are so important to an open globalised economy like Ireland.

In recent years, Ibec delegations have visited Washington DC, New York and elsewhere to strengthen our engagement with US business and their representative organisations such as the US Chamber of Commerce, the National Association of Manufacturers and the US Council of International Business. We have also welcomed leaders from these organisations to Dublin to meet with Irish business leaders.

In conclusion, key international challenges have intensified the work of Ibec in forging strong alliance with our partners in Europe and further afield. This is work we carry out typically in close cooperation with government and our international embassies.
Of course, there is more to do, and we intend to further strengthen our engagement to like-minded EU and International business groups as we face the challenges ahead.