Meeting with the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Rural and Community Development  
12 June 2019 

The “Towards a New Common Chapter” project

Opening Statement

Dr Anthony Soares, Acting Director, Centre for Cross Border Studies: On behalf of the Centre for Cross Border Studies and the other organisations here present, I would like to thank the Chair, Vice-Chair and members of this Committee for the invitation to meet with you to discuss the “Towards a New Common Chapter” project, and the resulting New Common Charter for Cooperation Within and Between these Islands.

If the Chair is in agreement, I will begin by saying offering a brief overview of the Centre for Cross Border Studies and the “Towards a New Common Chapter” project before Tara Farrell, Deputy CEO of Longford Women’s Link, and Aidan Campbell, Policy and Public Affairs Officer at Rural Community Network, tell you about their own organisations and their involvement in the project. But before doing so, I would like to draw your attention to the New Common Charter for Cooperation Within and Between these Islands, of which you should have a copy, as this will be the ultimate focus of our conversation here today and where rural concerns are particularly evident.

Since its creation in 1999, the Centre for Cross Border Studies has sought to contribute to the increased social, economic and territorial cohesion of the island of Ireland by promoting and improving the quality of cross-border cooperation. The Centre’s pursuit of its mission has been framed by two primary public policy imperatives: the European Union’s Cohesion Policy with its focus on social, economic and territorial cohesion, and the commitment to cross-border and North-South cooperation integral to Strand 2 of the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement.

Throughout its existence, therefore, the Centre for Cross Border Studies has been deeply concerned with community, social and economic development and cooperation particularly on the island of Ireland, but also between the island of Ireland, Great Britain and beyond. This concern informed the Centre’s desire to initiate the “Towards a New Common Chapter” project.
The “Towards a New Common Chapter” project began in late 2014, and has been made possible with the generous support of the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, the Northern Ireland Community Relations Council, and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade’s Reconciliation Fund. The project has looked to support and inspire grass-roots community commitment to cross-border cooperation in all its dimensions: cooperation at the border (where rurality is a predominant characteristic), wider North-South cooperation, and East-West cooperation between the island of Ireland and Great Britain. It has worked towards a “bottom-up” vision of the importance and role of cross-border cooperation within and between these islands, whilst also noting the need for community groups to possess the necessary skills and capacity to not only engage in their own cross-border initiatives, but also to enter into more productive dialogues with relevant local, regional and central government policies and strategies.

The New Common Charter for Cooperation Within and Between these Islands that you have before you is the result of a series of intensive conversations between a range of community groups from Northern Ireland and Ireland, and more recently with groups from England, Scotland and Wales. The New Common Charter represents a shared desire to maintain and strengthen relations between communities across these islands, to work together on issues of common concern, and to advocate for the provision of the requisite structures and means to cooperate within and between these islands in whatever circumstances may arise.

In light of this Committee’s specific interests, and given that the sets of relations envisioned within the New Common Charter for Cooperation Within and Between these Islands are both the product and supportive of rural communities, we would ask members to support it and work with us in ensuring all administrations across these islands put in place policies and funding structures to encourage cross-border and cross-jurisdictional cooperation at grassroots community level. We hope that today’s meeting will offer an opportunity to discuss in greater detail the work undertaken as part of the Towards a New Common Chapter project, and how members of this Committee and political representatives more generally can champion the objectives of the New Common Charter for Cooperation. These are outlined in more detail in the series of recommendations within the supporting information provided to the Committee. They include how capacity-building measures should be introduced to improve how all levels of government and public bodies across these islands engage with community organisations in the development of policies and strategies with a cross-border or cross-jurisdictional dimension, and that such policies and strategies should be rural-proofed. The Charter also calls for a comprehensive assessment of the current funding landscape for cross-border and cross-jurisdictional cooperation initiatives aimed at community organisations, and what that landscape should look like going forward. Crucially, we would also like to see concrete support in advancing the work undertaken in the “Towards a New Common Chapter” project, bringing it to a wider audience, and perhaps looking towards a platform for cross-border, cross-jurisdictional dialogue for community organisations that recalls the structure provided for governments and administrations across these islands through bodies such as the North South Ministerial Council and the British-Irish Council.

---

1 For more on the “Towards a New Common Chapter” project, visit http://crossborder.ie/towards-a-new-common-chapter/.
These are issues we may explore further during today’s meeting, but I will hand over now to Tara Farrell of Longford Women’s Link.

**Tara Farrell, Deputy CEO, Longford Women’s Link:** Longford Women’s Link is a social enterprise founded in 1995 and providing services to 900 women and 130 children in Longford annually including education, entrepreneurship, community employment and domestic violence via our unique model of Integrated Service Delivery. We engage in widespread regional and national advocacy – represented on the board of NWCI and I sit on the board of Irish Rural Link and am the current chair of AONTAS the national adult learning organisation. Our flagship programme, the Women’s Manifesto Programme is a unique model of local democratic participation which aims to support women in Longford and other counties to play an active and meaningful role in their local decision-making structures and we have identified barriers to accessing these structures which are critical factors in preventing full and equal participation of rural women in their communities. Just last month, we launched the SHE Project with 50:50 North West, supported by the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government which aims to change the face of local government in rural Ireland, supporting women in rural Ireland to play an active role in public life. The Women’s Manifesto Programme was supported by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust from 2012 until the cessation of the Trust’s funding support in Ireland in 2016. Longford Women’s Link and the Women’s Manifesto Programme have been active members of the Towards a New Common Charter initiative since 2015 and see it as a key all-island programme of sustained engagement as we move beyond the Brexit referendum. We believe that working at the grassroots level, as this programme most definitely does, is absolutely critical if we are to see meaningful cooperation and community development alongside an empowered civic society across these islands. We have seen with Brexit what happens when civil society is largely excluded from central discussions and we believe the voices of grassroots women, especially in rural areas not only need to be heard but are essential in building inclusive and resilient communities. There is significant potential within the New Common Charter to do this.

**Aidan Campbell, Policy and Public Affairs Officer, Rural Community Network:** Rural Community Network (RCN) is a regional voluntary organisation established by community groups from rural areas in 1991 to articulate the voice of rural communities on issues relating to poverty, disadvantage and equality. RCN is a membership organisation with 250 member groups across Northern Ireland. RCN adopts a community development approach to its work and employs a team of staff with a broad spectrum of skills.

Our Vision is of vibrant, articulate, inclusive and sustainable rural communities across Northern Ireland contributing to a prosperous, equitable, peaceful and stable society. Our Mission is to provide an effective voice for and support to rural communities, particularly those who are most disadvantaged.

RCN’s work is focused on three broad areas, supporting and developing good practice amongst rural community groups, articulating the voice of rural communities and promoting reconciliation. We provide information and training on community development, funding opportunities, and governance. We have also worked with our members and other groups to implement the Social Value Engine, developed by our partners Rose Regeneration, to allow grass roots groups measure the social impact of the work they do. We have a strong focus on policy issues that affect rural areas.
and lobbied for the introduction of legislation on rural proofing of government policy. The Rural Needs Act NI 2016 introduced a statutory duty on government departments and local authorities to rural proof policy and service delivery. We monitor the roll out of the Rural Needs Act and continue to challenge duty holders on their implementation of the legislation. RCN is represented on the Joint Forum between Government and the Community and Voluntary Sector which raises issues of concern from across the Community and Voluntary Sector with Departmental officials. RCN also sits on the Northern Ireland Rural Development Programme Monitoring Committee.

RCN supports the New Common Charter as it provides a framework to encourage co-operation amongst civic society groups on the island of Ireland and between Ireland and Britain. Many of the challenges rural communities face are similar. RCN has a long tradition of partnering with like-minded NGOs in Britain, Ireland and further afield. We delivered the Rural Enabler project in partnership with Irish Rural Link, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development in NI and the then Department of Community Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs in the Republic of Ireland. This was a Peace III funded project based in Northern Ireland and the 6 border Counties of the Republic of Ireland. We are currently completing a project with partner networks in the UK and Ireland which is developing key asks for future rural development policy post Brexit. We know and value the importance of engaging with partner organisations across the UK and Ireland and further afield. We hope to continue to develop and deepen these links in the future and the New Common Charter will support us in doing so.