OPENING STATEMENT ON BEHALF OF ICBAN TO THE OIREACHTAS JOINT COMMITTEE ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE GOOD FRIDAY AGREEMENT, 14/01/2019

The Irish Central Border Area Network (ICBAN), is the local authority-led cross-border development partnership which works in the area of the island known as the Central Border Region. The 8 Council members of the partnership are: Cavan, Donegal, Leitrim, Monaghan and Sligo and Armagh City Banbridge and Craigavon, Fermanagh and Omagh, and Mid Ulster.

The partnership has been advocating for common solutions to common cross-border problems since 1995. The Region, though largely rural, contains some larger urban centres. It is remote from national or regional capitals, and as a consequence the area and its communities have been regularly overlooked in terms of investment.

The Committee has sought evidence on the challenges and issues facing the area.

The next sections will focus on commentaries relating to key matters in cross-border development, Brexit, industry and infrastructure, broadband, tourism, canals and waterways, education and regeneration.

Cross – Border Development

ICBAN’s area of focus is in promoting and developing cooperation between member Councils and their communities on matters of cross-border and regional development. There has been a positive history of collaboration between the local authorities and their communities. This has been delivered in spite of often historic ‘back-to-back’ development short-comings. The ICBAN partnership instead works against this in joining-up planning. A recent example has been a joint submission to the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy of the Northern and Western Regional Assembly.

Brexit

The need to foster cross-border collaboration is now even more acute, given the challenges of Brexit. As a by-product of the Brexit process, the border has been front and centre in discussions and media coverage. Indeed the questions of the border and cooperation have been elevated to levels not seen for many years.

With the potential implications of the UK Referendum decision to exit the EU still to be finally determined, it is considered that the area of these islands which is likely to be most significantly impacted will be the Central Border Region. Even though the border areas could eventually see some communities within the EU (Irish border areas) adjoining what will become areas then not within the EU (NI border areas), the issues in maintaining cooperation across the border will remain. Conversations have taken place between members Councils, who have reaffirmed their commitment to cooperation.

One notable issue is the important role that local authorities must play in the continued delivery of local services. Whilst national governments and political attention will likely continue to be focused on Brexit for some time yet, the delivery of local services to citizens must continue. In the vacuum of a NI Executive, local authorities in NI continue to play a key role in the democratic functioning of
government. Through engagements and joint delivery in Community Planning for example, and its focus on the economic and social elements of well-being, the impact on local services could be minimised. **Cross-governments support to this developing key role would be welcomed.**

In over 20 years the partnership has helped lever significant investment into the Region and Cross-Border projects between local authorities have had a positive impact on local communities. The significance of these investments on both sides of the border cannot be underestimated and given the importance of the challenges in the times ahead, the continuation or replacement for such cooperation funds must be a key priority. **It is vital that a high-level strategic focus is prioritised for the wider border region by both governments, and involving the EU where appropriate.** It would be considered that whilst important, EU programmes can only marginally make a difference to lives and the economy of the area. A much more intensive and encompassing intervention will be necessary to help resolve long-standing issues which still challenge the fabric of border living.

**It is hereby recommended that consideration is given to developing an island-wide territorial cohesion policy, which would include a Cross-Border Infrastructure and Investment Plan / Fund, to replace any loss of common INTERREG and Peace funds.** However, there is little evidence of such a debate or consideration yet on either side of the border, which is very concerning.

Brexit is not the only significant challenge facing the area. There are pre-existing infrastructure deficits which existed before Brexit and still remain. There has been a lack of attention to the Central Border Region in the National Planning Framework, which highlights supports for the North-West and Eastern areas of the border region by comparison.

Brexit, reinforces the importance of giving due recognition to the Central Border Region. **We hereby ask that the Committee explicitly identify and promote the Region as an area of national importance. Such designation must be reinforced by a national commitment to address the identified strategic infrastructural short-comings and redress historic underinvestment.** This would help mitigate the impacts of any negative Brexit out-workings.

Component areas of such a policy already have precedents for further exploration – for example, in 2014 the Centre for Cross Border Studies published a Scoping Study into the creation of a Cross Border Development Zone, an initiative actively supported by ICBAN. The objective would be to promote the economic development of the cross-border zone on a coordinated basis, maximising the use of national resources and stimulating the use of local resources and expertise. There would be 3 component parts: spatial, sectoral and institutional. Forms of support would include, infrastructure programmes, capital allowances and business rate relief, focused around sectoral clustering. The geographic concentration would be across 3 spatially defined areas, one being the Central Border Region.

**Industry and Infrastructure**

Businesses need a modern effective transport infrastructure through which they can get their goods to market. Whilst there have been improvements across the Region, there remains important strategic projects which have not been sufficiently advanced and thus hinder regional growth and regeneration. The ways and means must be found to accelerate their delivery.

The wider area includes sub-regional pockets where key industries include engineering, manufacturing, tourism and agri-food etc. In planning terms it must be recognised that it is not just about connecting urban areas, but is also about connecting centres of production with customers, workers, supply chain etc.
There is a high dependency on travel by road in the Region. In the absence of a rail network, strategic road corridors are key for access and movement. Both Governments must formally recommit to the long-planned A5-N2 Dublin to Derry dualling project, highlighting its priority nature, and re-pledging what was originally agreed.

Elsewhere, upgrades are needed to the N16-A4 from Sligo to Ballygawley, the East-West link to Dundalk, and the N4 from Sligo to Carrick-on-Shannon, with an extension of the M3 to Cavan Town, and the A29 from Coleraine to Monaghan must be highlighted as a key road corridor for North-South freight movement in agri-food, minerals, engineering and quarry products.

There is evidence to suggest that the border area has not received its fair share of infrastructure investment compared to other areas. For example, a review of Transport Infrastructure Ireland investment in road schemes suggests that spending per head on transport infrastructure in the border area is only around 45% that of other regions. If this disproportionate spending pattern continues, the border area will fall further behind economically, amplifying the issue of a 3-speed economy.

There has been an absence of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in the border region, which has been historically concentrated towards existing centres. The area’s connections to Belfast and the North Dublin commuter belt have the potential to attract investments, as alternative locations for larger employers in comparison to city areas where increasingly, issues like water supply, traffic congestion and lack of housing are acting as barriers to FDI, as well as offering a better quality of life with less drive time etc. It is recommended that government agencies are encouraged to specifically target such border locations as alternatives to Dublin.

The border region does not have the requisite third level facilities and a University would be a major strategic boost in driving the area's economy in helping develop skilled jobs in key regional industries such as engineering, agri-food/science and construction etc.

Broadband

The lack of broadband connectivity is one of the most pressing and concerning issues for the Councils. Improvements are critical to help maintain competitiveness and to realise economic and social ambitions. It is vital that peripheral rural areas are not left until the end for delivery.

There are real concerns about the pace of delivery of the National Broadband Plan:- the ambitions were first promoted in 2012 and delays will see the latest delivery targets of 2022 not being realised.

Related to this, equally ambitious programmes must ensure that mobile telecommunications coverage is also effectively delivered. The investments in fibre roll-out can help ensure that mobile infrastructure is enhanced and that ‘not-spots’ are corrected and negated. However, there would not appear to be any effective joint planning of these two platforms, and mobile connectivity is not referenced in the NBP.

Our small towns and villages could flourish again, because they would be effectively ‘future-proofed’. Such connectivity would enable many businesses to operate in rural areas instead, which offer the added attractiveness of idyllic locations, leisure & recreation, cheaper living, less crime.

Delivering on the NBP is critical - the border region can’t afford to wait another 7 years. As interested commentators we would encourage that if the NBP cannot be advanced further to delivery in its
current format, that an alternative solution is quickly realised. It is not too late for considerations to be given to where North-South alignments could benefit, given that the need and stage of development to enhance broadband is at a similar stage in NI. Indeed, it could be very timely to yet look at potential all-Island solutions and synergies.

Tourism / Canals and Waterways

There is collective local authority support for opportunities to promote ‘slow tourism’ markets, such as cycling and walking, utilising interlinked Greenways across the border area. These are prospective areas of growth and aided by the requisite government investment can increase overnight occupancies and visitor spending.

The Business Case for the Ulster Canal highlights the many positive outcomes. It has been regularly referenced in cross-government agreements, including Project Ireland 2020-2040. It could be delivered on a phased basis to minimise short-term demands on public funds. All the cross-border Councils directly involved promote the Canal’s regeneration. The Committee’s highlighting of support for the phased development of the Ulster Canal and associated tourist amenities, would be welcomed.

Border Towns provide a key spatial and economic role in their immediate areas and in serving surrounding hinterlands. This needs to be recognised and supported nationally, with infrastructure investments around public realm, pedestrian priority and visual attractiveness.

In Conclusion:

This afternoon we have set out the key needs and challenges facing the Central Border area. We appreciate the Committee taking the interest and would welcome representation within government. It is indeed a critical time for the area. There are new arising challenges but it could be argued that the border area’s weaknesses should have been more strategically addressed in the advent of peace and the end of conflict. As can be seen through our sizeable delegation today, this is a collective issue for all of the area’s Councils. We are not here asking for government to solely resolve the issues but we seek over-arching high-level interest and assistance to help tackle these, through cross-government, cross-sectors, cross-border and cross-community.

We, for our part as a partnership of local authorities, are ready to play our role. Often when we engage government, we are challenged that cooperation must happen locally first. Examples such as the UNESCO Marble Arch Caves Global Geopark between Cavan, and Fermanagh & Omagh, the referenced ‘Statement of Common Good’ on planning between 4 Local Authorities, and the collective attendance today are proof of the commitment by local government. We genuinely need the recognition and support of central government to address the challenges, just as government has assisted other regions, including the North-West and the eastern border areas.

Thank you.
ANNEX: FULLER NOTE ON CHALLENGES AND ISSUES FOR THE CENTRAL BORDER REGION, FOR WHICH COMMITTEE SUPPORT AND ASSISTANCE WOULD BE WELCOMED

1 To promote an island-wide territorial cohesion policy, which would include a Cross-Border Infrastructure and Investment Plan / Fund, to replace any loss of common INTERREG and Peace funds which the area has benefited from.

2 To explicitly identify the Central Border Region as an area of national importance. Such designation must be reinforced by a national commitment to address the identified strategic infrastructural investments and redress historic underinvestment. Such high-level interventions could include the establishment of the area as a Border Development Zone.

3 To promote the quality of life in border region locations as alternatives to the Dublin area for Foreign Direct Investment.

4 To develop a Regional Employment Strategy which would form the basis for enterprise and employment creation by all stakeholders, including government departments and agencies, helping ensure the potential of all areas are realised, relative to their capacity for sustainable development.

5 To recognise regional drivers in Food Production, Engineering, Building Materials, Insulation Products, Green Technologies, Financial, ICT and Tradable Services Sectors and support the expansion of these key growth areas and emerging areas such as agri-tech, value added food production and the digital knowledge economy, and their growth potential in supply chain linkages with NI areas.

6 To seek that a reaffirmed commitment by the Irish Government to the upgrading of the N2/A5 corridor is supported by the pledge to provide the original match-funding shares, which will enable the road to be advanced for completion.

7 To highlight the importance of N16/A4 scheme as a strategically important cross-border corridor linking Sligo and Enniskillen, and reflecting the ambitions of the NI RDS 2035.

8 To promote improvements to other important accessibility routes for the Region including the M3, A29, N3/A509, and the Dundalk/Cavan/Sligo East West strategic route.

9 To include a definitive statement of ambition relating to the N4 route, the primary road artery serving the Regional Growth Centre of Sligo and the key town of Carrick-on-Shannon.

10 To highlight the critical need for the urgent delivery of high-speed broadband and telecommunications infrastructure, and across rural regions in particular.

11 To promote the border region as a prospective area for tourism growth and which can serve as a focal point in linking the regional experience brands.
To highlight and support the Ulster Canal development as an important regeneration project for the border region.

To promote the siting of a University within the border region, to help develop skilled jobs in key regional industries such as engineering, agri-food/science and construction etc.

To secure national support for the regeneration of Border Towns, as having key spatial and economic role in their immediate areas and in serving surrounding hinterlands.

To expand the delivery of gas infrastructure within the Region, and particularly to those areas of the Border Region not currently supplied, having regard to the location of existing infrastructure in assessing potential developments.

To promote a review of the effectiveness of the 2010 Framework on Cooperation on Spatial Strategies Between Ireland and Northern Ireland, and within which the delivery of regional and national plans could effectively complement comparable strategies in NI.

To encourage regional cross-border Community Planning and its focus on the economic and social elements of well-being, to positively impact on the delivery of local services to border citizens.