

Joint Oireachtas Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage

Opening Statement by

Mr. Mark Mellett, Vice Admiral DSM (Rtd),

Chair Maritime Area Regulatory Authority

Tuesday 7th November 2023

Introduction

Chairman and members of the Committee,

I thank you for the invitation here today. I am joined by Ms. Laura Brien Chief executive Officer of MARA and by Mr. Rory O’Leary, Principal Officer in MARA.

Ireland’s capacity to tackle the existential threat of climate change is inextricably linked to the sea. For over a century the Irish State has been ‘sea blind’ to the extraordinary opportunity that our ocean jurisdiction presents.

The establishment of MARA probably represents the most strategic marine related decision made in the history of the State. Under the auspice of the Maritime Area Planning Act, it will enforce a governance framework with authority to harness Ireland’s ocean wealth while ensuring good environmental status. I am privileged with my eleven board colleagues, to have been appointed by Minister O’Brien and I confirm my commitment to this important role as Chair.

It might be helpful for the committee if I set out firstly a brief introduction to the role of MARA; my background and experience that makes me suitable for the role of Chair; and finally I would like to spend some time setting out my ambition and vision for this agency.

Background to MARA

MARA is an independent agency, established by the Maritime Area Planning Act 2021, under the aegis of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

Established on July 17, 2023, it is responsible for the sustainable management of Ireland's diverse and unique maritime area.

The role of the Board of MARA, set out in the Maritime Area Planning Act, it is to set the strategic direction of the organisation; to ensure that the functions of MARA, as outlined above, are performed efficiently and effectively, and to ensure appropriate processes and procedures are in place. MARA is responsible for carrying out the following day to day functions:

- Granting of all Maritime Area Consents (MACs) for the maritime area;
- Marine licencing for specified scheduled activities;
- Compliance and enforcement of MACs, licences and offshore development consents;
- Administration of the extant Foreshore consent portfolio; and
- Fostering and promoting co-operation between regulators of the maritime area.

I can assure the Committee that the Board are working cooperatively and diligently, with each other, and the executive to ensure the necessary oversight and support is in place to allow the agency to fulfil its important mandate.

Expertise and Qualifications of Chair

Chair, if I may turn to my own experience and motivation for this role.

I have spent most of my life in and near the sea. I have amassed experience and competency levels in diverse, mainly marine related settings, from days as a

youth working on my father's trawler, growing and exploring in the marine, to being appointed as Chief of Staff of the Defence Forces, Ireland's most senior Naval Officer, and the Government's Principal Military Advisor.

Over the decades, working the seas off the Irish Coast, I have built a close affinity with government departments, agencies, and local authorities. I have built strong links with coastal communities and environmental NGOs. I have worked hard with industry, marine developers, the supply chain and the ports. I have invested significant time in my own development in higher education, its institutions and research programmes, helping deliver significant marine related infrastructure.

In the context of the role of Chairperson I bring key competencies such as,

- Unique insights and experience from a career in the marine and public sector environments.
- Visionary leadership with a proven track record in inspiring and motivating teams to deliver change.
- Integrity and commitment to protecting the institutions of governance, including responsibility for budgets, procurement, legal obligations, risk management and ESG.

As a leader, the Chairperson of MARA is responsible for ensuring its effectiveness on all aspects of its role displaying high standards of integrity and probity while setting the expectations regarding culture, values, and behaviour for the State body and tone of discussions. As Chief of Defence I have led in many strategic and challenging environments where complex and often conflicting agendas prevailed. I have always endeavoured to institutionalise values based on respect, integrity, loyalty, courage, and selflessness. I have led on core issues, notably diversity and inclusion and gender equality and empowerment of women striving to inculcate a culture by design and not one by default. I have experienced the subtle and sometimes not so subtle push back

when leading change. Ultimately the MARA board must operate as a unit ensuring the key competencies are appropriately inter meshed and build trust.

For most of my professional career I have led in maritime security, upholding sovereignty and sovereign rights and the norms and principles associated with ocean governance in particular focussing on property rights, sustainability and ecosystem governance. For twenty-five years, in parallel with my professional career, as naval officer, I have developed and led in integrated ocean management, specialising in marine spatial planning and ecosystem-based ocean governance on which my PhD is based. I have a deep professional, practical and academic understanding of the government, enterprise and civil society considerations of marine governance; recognising that, as the market does not always tell the ecological truth, the importance of ensuring good environmental status and sustainable development can only be assured where all externalities are internalised. This requires that norms and principles such as sustainability, subsidiarity, ecosystem-based approach, good science, simple rules, are institutionalised in the governance framework supported by an appropriate compliance regime. Over the decades I have contributed in a significant manner through national and European programs in the identification of areas of conservation, their designation and the enforcement of relevant regulatory frameworks for their protection.

I have a strong record of action in private and public sector transformation that inform the vision and leadership I will bring to the role. For most of my life I have provided leadership in maritime affairs and elsewhere. I was Ireland's Senior Government representative in Afghanistan at a pivotal time. During my commands I led the first Irish Naval deployments to the South Atlantic and also into a northern Irish Port, visiting Derry in 2005. Since that time my visits to Northern Ireland have improved my insight into the opportunities enabled by the three strands of the Good Friday Agreement, an experience that will be of value

in the role of Chairperson of MARA and striving for congruence in the development of the marine where jurisdictions are adjacent or shared. I commanded and led the Naval College, served as Associate Head of the National Maritime College of Ireland (NMCI) and I lead the Irish Naval Service. My experience as Chief of Staff of the Defence Forces and the Government's principal military advisor have enhanced my competency levels for the role of Chairperson of MARA. For over 18 months I lead the Defence Forces response to the pandemic. I have effectively managed large public organisations in challenging and complex environments building strong links with the private sector.

I was co-founder of the Irish Maritime and Energy Resource Cluster, pioneering the development of offshore renewable energy in Ireland. I contributed to engagements with the Higher Education Authority (HEA) and Science Foundation Ireland (SFI) and previously with the Government Task Force on seafarer training. Each was pivotal to successful Infrastructure development programs such as the NMCI, the *Program for Research in third level institutions* (PRTLTI) funded Beaufort Laboratory and the Science Foundation Ireland (SFI), Research Centre for Energy, Climate and Marine (*MAREI*). In my research endeavours I have worked closely with National and International Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) serving as a visiting professor at Liverpool Hope University and currently in my Adjunct Professorship role at UCC I work closely with the School of Business and Law. As a programme chairman I have facilitated complex international EU FP7 funded programs lead by NUIG where I undertook my PhD.

My performance has been recognised internationally in my nomination by Government as Chairman of the European Union Military Committee, the award of two Distinguished Service Medals (DSM) from the Irish Government and appointment by The President of the French Republic, to the rank of Commander

in the National Order of the Légion d'Honneur, the highest award ever made to a member of the Irish Defence Forces.

Vision for the Future of MARA

In the role of Chair, my responsibility will be to ensure, working with the members of the Board, Chief Executive Officer, Ms Laura Brien and her team, to deliver effectively on this mandate.

The inauguration of MARA is a decisive step forward in upholding Ireland's sovereignty at sea. Sovereign rights that are not upheld are more imaginary than real. Right now, in some cases, Ireland's sovereign rights and indeed potential state property rights are the subject of open access. MARA can address this becoming a key player in the governance, co-ordination and protection of our ocean, quickly providing the necessary reassurance and building the trust with all its key stakeholders, government, the citizen, industry, fishers, environmental NGOs, offshore renewables sector, ports, local communities and more. As an overarching priority: MARA must have the vision to develop into the 'best offshore consenting agency in the world' with a global reputation for efficiency, probity and foresight.

One of our first priorities is to work with the Board and the executive in the preparation and adoption of MARA's Strategic Plan 2024-2027 establishing trust with all relevant stakeholders. Trust takes two forms in this context: trust in the probity of the organisation with transparency, good corporate governance, effective communication and trust in MARA's efficiency in service delivery.

The preparation of our first strategy is a great opportunity to identify our shared vision for the MARA implementing world class marine planning while addressing the challenges associated with the Climate Action Plan and its implications for the various dimensions of the maritime area.

Working collaboratively with all its partners, MARA will support the pillars of Ireland's marine planning system by:

- (i) bringing its expertise, knowledge and skills to enhance forward planning in the maritime area;
- (ii) developing a well-functioning transparent consenting system, consistent with the principles of proper marine spatial planning, for all maritime users and activities; and
- (iii) Implementing a rigorous, but proportionate, compliance and monitoring programme to ensure the sustainable use of our maritime area and challenge unauthorised development and non-compliance with maritime planning permission.
- (iv) MARA will achieve this by building expertise in its people, its processes and its technology. As a key custodian of the maritime area, MARA will ensure that through good management and transparent decision making we will optimise our maritime resource on behalf of all citizens.
- (v) MARA will be a key enabler in respect of Ireland's ambitions for the Offshore Renewable Energy (ORE) sector, by facilitating a streamlined consenting process, providing certainty to project promoters and delivering a pathway to realising the necessary investment. MARA, at the centre of the new regulatory regime, will also support delivery of other projects of strategic importance (cabling / telecoms projects, ports development, drainage projects, sewerage schemes etc.), facilitating the State to harness significant benefits from realising a low-carbon economy, ensuring energy security, and presenting new opportunities for economic growth.

MARA has a key role working with key stakeholders in particular, Minister O'Brien, Minister Noonan and the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, Minister Ryan and the Department of Environment, Climate and

Communications, Minister Coveney and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, Local Authorities, An Bórd Pleanála, together with a range of other Government departments and State agencies.

Ireland's offshore wind ambitions

Chair, let me turn briefly to the twin challenge and opportunity of our time, in which MARA will play a central role in – offshore renewable energy to address the climate crisis. Ireland is a key emerging market in the offshore renewable wind energy space. The scale of our resource is huge - our sea area has the potential to be more than ten times that of our land area. With the richest accessible wind resource on the planet, harnessing our offshore energy resource will make a massive contribution towards achieving regional renewable energy self-sufficiency putting us on a direct path to zero CO₂ emissions while at the same time future-proofing our economy and quality of life. Ireland has extraordinary potential for Offshore Renewable Energy, initially wind but into the future also wave and tidal.

To deliver our climate and offshore wind energy ambitions, the state has moved to a plan-led approach. This will help ensure that development of offshore renewable energy is delivered through a number of overlapping phases in a planned, strategic, economical and sustainable way, which will also guide investment within this sector. This is a challenging time internationally for the market so we need to be sure footed, with the ambitious vision for the future balanced with a pragmatic eye on enabling the next key steps for Phase 1 and 2, while also building towards a future framework. Working with its partners across Government and in industry while building the required confidence, MARA will be a critical agency to deliver this ambition.

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I thank the Chairperson and Committee members for your attention and, together with the Chief Executive Officer, we will try to respond to any questions you may have.

ENDS.