

Opening statement by Aodán Mac an Mhíle
Department of Rural and Community Development
at Joint Committee on Social Protection, Community and
Rural Development and the Islands
Wednesday, 6 December 2023 at 9.30am

I thank the committee for the opportunity to address it this morning. With me today is my colleague Mr. Robert Nicholson, Principal Officer in the Rural Strategy & Social Enterprise Unit. I welcome the opportunity to update the committee on the work of the Department in the context of Our Livings Islands, the new national islands policy and action plan, which was published by Minister Humphreys in June this year.

You will be aware that the Islands function transferred to the Department of Rural and Community Development just over 3 years ago, in September 2020. The Islands Unit is mainly based in offices in the Connemara Gaeltacht at Na Forbacha, Co. na Gaillimhe with staff also in Doirí Beaga, Co. Dhún na nGall and at the Department's head office here in Dublin. The unit operates primarily through the Irish language on a daily basis, providing a bilingual service to both Gaeltacht and non-Gaeltacht islands.

Our Living Islands is an ambitious new ten-year national policy designed to support vibrant and sustainable island communities. It was launched by Minister Humphreys on Árainn Mhór island, Co Donegal in June this year.

The policy is backed up by rolling three-year action plans, with time-bound commitments so that Departments and agencies across Government can be held to account. These include real and tangible actions in areas such as housing, connectivity, remote working and health services.

The offshore islands are an integral part of rural Ireland, as reflected in Ireland's Rural Development Policy 2021-2025, *Our Rural Future*. The delivery of *Our Living Islands* is therefore underpinned by the same principles as *Our Rural Future* as we work to incorporate the islands in our efforts to provide equality of opportunity and participation by all communities in society, regardless of where they are located.

Our Living Islands is underpinned by five high-level Strategic Objectives, identified by islanders themselves as being of key importance for the sustainable future of their communities.

The policy is a result of a wide and deep consultation with island communities. It aims to ensure that sustainable, vibrant

communities can continue to live – and thrive – on our offshore islands for many years to come.

The policy aims to reverse the population decline witnessed on most of the islands while building sustainable futures for island communities as well as empowering them in developing their own islands.

The outcomes of delivering this policy will see:

- more people living on the islands
- more people working on our islands
- islands contributing to, and benefiting from, the transition to a low-carbon economy and a climate-neutral society
- island communities having an active role in their future

From our consultation with communities, it is clear the number one reason young people leave our islands is in search of quality employment.

We now have a unique opportunity to reverse that trend. Remote working is a game-changer for our islands. With high speed broadband, you can now potentially do the same job on the offshore islands as you can here in Dublin city.

If we're going to have more people working on our islands, then we need to make sure they have somewhere to live.

Housing and planning were key areas of concern for island communities during the consultation process.

In the weeks before the finalisation of the policy, Minister Humphreys worked closely with her Cabinet Colleague, Minister Darragh O'Brien on these issues, as responsibility for housing and planning rests with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, and the relevant local authorities.

Minister Humphreys secured a strong commitment from Minister Darragh O'Brien that the forthcoming draft planning guidelines for rural housing will recognise the specific challenges that island communities face.

The consultation process also highlighted the number of vacant or derelict properties on islands. In response, Minister Humphreys announced in June that this Department will provide a 20% Top Up Payment under the Vacant Homes Refurbishment grant (Croí Cónaithe) specifically to support islanders who wish to turn vacant or derelict properties into long-term homes.

The policy recognises the need to deliver long-term solutions to meet the water supply needs of offshore islands. The action plan includes measures in this regard, to be delivered by Uisce Éireann and the relevant local authorities as responsibility for water services rests with them.

Islands are ideally placed to participate in and benefit from the transition to renewable energy, with many taking part in the Clean Energy for EU Islands initiative. This initiative is within the remit of the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications, which has responsibility for energy policy.

As the Committee will be aware, access between the islands and the mainland is the most fundamental requirement for those living on our offshore islands and is a lifeline for island communities. Access impacts on every aspect of island life, including health and welfare services, education, employment, social and family life, and business.

Physical connectivity to the mainland depends on the availability of safe harbours both on the islands and on the mainland. Notable improvements have been made over the years through State investment in major pier construction

projects, though work is needed on other piers over the coming years.

Our Living Islands commits to continued investment in piers serving our islands with the priority major infrastructure projects funded through the National Development Plan. This includes pier developments on Inis Oírr and on Inis Meáin in Co. Galway and at Machaire Rabhartaigh, Co. Donegal serving Toraigh.

In addition, this Department's island allocation will continue to fund an annual programme of minor capital works on the islands to be delivered in conjunction with the relevant local authorities. This work programme includes, amongst many other works, investment in piers and repairs to slipways.

As well as piers, significant funding is also invested in island roads. Minister Humphreys announced in June that future rounds of the Department's Local Improvement Scheme will have ring-fenced funding which can only be used on the islands. An initial allocation of €550,000 has been provided for island roads under LIS in 2023.

Following the State's acquisition of Aerfort Chonamara almost four years ago, the Department has made significant

investment in bringing the facilities up to standard. We are also investing in the airports on the three Aran Islands.

If we want to make our islands more attractive places to raise a family then we must also invest in our local amenities – that means more funding for playgrounds, for sports facilities, for walking and cycling trails and for community centres.

Too often, however, island communities can be competing with applications from the mainland and, depending on the Local Authority, the island applications might end up falling short.

For that reason, this Department's main funding schemes such as CLÁR, LIS, and Town and Village Renewal, will now have ring-fenced allocations specifically for applications from our island communities.

Under *Our Living Islands*, we want to empower island communities to have an active role in decisions that affect their future. This Department has committed to provide funding to island communities for the development of Integrated Development Plans for islands groupings, to include priorities to maintain sustainable communities.

Our Living Islands is a whole of Government policy and the Minister has acknowledged the cooperation and support from colleagues across other Government Departments in providing their expertise and contributions to the policy.

As agreed by Government when approving the policy, funding of the commitments contained in the policy and action plan will be met from the budgets of relevant Government Departments, agencies and other bodies responsible for the delivery of the relevant actions and policy measures. This is consistent with the approach agreed by Government in Our Rural Future.

I hope I have provided the Committee with an overview of Our Living Islands and the Department's work to support our island communities, which are an integral part of the fabric of rural areas. I am happy to take any questions that members of the committee may have.