

## **Opening statement to Committee by Assistant Secretary Aingeal O'Donoghue on work of the Shared Island unit**

**12 November 2020**

Thank you, Chair.

I welcome the opportunity to brief the Committee this afternoon.

I have responsibility at Assistant Secretary level in the Department of the Taoiseach for the Shared Island unit.

I am joined by Eoghan Duffy, Principal Officer in the unit.

As the Committee will be aware, the Programme for Government sets out the Government's commitment to working with all communities and traditions on the island to build consensus around a shared future, underpinned by the Good Friday Agreement.

On 22 October, in major address in Dublin Castle the Taoiseach set out the Government's vision and priorities on Shared Island.

Over 800 invited guests from Ireland, North and South, as well as from Britain, joined the online event. I know that a number of Committee Members were able to attend the event.

As the Taoiseach outlined on 22 October, the Government's approach to a shared island involves:

- Working in partnership with the Executive, through the North South Ministerial Council, and with the British Government to address strategic challenges faced on the island;
- Further developing the all-island economy, and deepening cooperation in areas such as Health and Education and investing in the North West and border regions; and
- Fostering constructive and inclusive dialogue and supporting a comprehensive programme of research to support the building of consensus around a shared future.

The Taoiseach outlined that the Shared Island agenda is a whole of Government priority and the Shared Island unit in the Taoiseach's Department is as a driver for this work.

The work of the unit is underpinned by the principles of the Good Friday Agreement and it operates in close cooperation with the ongoing and extensive work across Government on Good Friday Agreement-related issues, including with the Department of Foreign Affairs, as well Government engagement through the North South Ministerial Council, the British Irish Council and the British Irish Intergovernmental Conference.

Operationally, the current focus of the Unit's work is on three areas: commissioning research, fostering dialogue, and building a Shared Island agenda, including delivery of the commitments in the Programme for Government.

I will briefly set out each of these areas of work.

- *Building a Shared Island agenda:*

The promotion of all-island approaches to the strategic challenges facing Ireland, North and South, and delivering on the commitments in the Programme for Government is a key focus.

Many of these Programme for Government commitments are also reflected in the Irish Government commitments under the New Decade New Approach agreement.

The Committee will be aware that in Budget 2021, the Government announced the Shared Island Fund, with €500m to be made available out to 2025, ring-fenced for Shared Island projects.

As the Taoiseach has set out in the Dáil, the Shared Island Fund provides significant new, multiannual capital funding for investment in collaborative North/South projects.

The funding will support the delivery of the key cross-border infrastructure initiatives as set out in the Programme for Government.

It will also support new Government investment in all-island initiatives in areas such as research, health, education and the environment, and for addressing the particular challenges of the North West and Border communities, again further to commitments in these areas in the Programme for Government.

The Taoiseach has emphasised the importance of moving ahead with cross-border investment commitments, working closely with the Executive to achieve full delivery without undue delay.

This was discussed at the North South Ministerial Council Plenary in Dublin on 31 July, and an update on progress will be provided to the next NSMC Plenary meeting in December.

- *Research*

In terms of research, a comprehensive programme is being developed by the Shared Island unit, to provide high quality and evidence-based policy analysis, across the full range of areas, which will support considerations both in Government and in broader public discourse on a building a shared island and consensus around a shared future.

The Shared Island unit is finalising a research partnership with the Economic and Social Research Institute and North/South and East-West collaboration will be an important part of this research work.

The National Economic and Social Council has also been asked to prepare a comprehensive report on Shared Island issues in 2021, which will provide valuable input from economic, social and environmental partners.

There will also be scope for collaboration with academia, other experts on the island, from Britain and potentially drawing on wider international expertise.

The Shared Island unit will work closely with Government Departments and their Agencies on research priorities.

- *Dialogue and Outreach*

The Taoiseach launched the Shared Island Dialogue Series at Dublin Castle on 22 October, to foster constructive and inclusive civic dialogue on all aspects of a shared future on the island.

The Dialogue series will start later this month and will:

- focus on key sectoral issues including environment, economy, health and education; and
- engage on an inclusive basis on overarching concerns for the Good Friday Agreement including around issues like identity rights and the equality agenda.

The Dialogue series is complimentary to the range of discussions and engagement that already happening in community and civic settings on Peace Process issues.

The Shared Island Dialogue series is intended to provide a focus for people to engage on an inclusive basis on a shared future on the island, which can be a starting point for broader and deeper discussions in civil society.

The Dialogue series will actively seek as broad a range of perspective and experience as possible, and ensure the inclusion of voices that traditionally been under-represented in the peace process, including women, young people, and new communities on the island.

That concludes my statement on the work of the Shared Island unit in the Department of the Taoiseach.

I thank the Committee Members for their interest and we are happy to answer your questions.