

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

**18 May 2021**

Thank you, Chair.

I'm glad to have the opportunity to update the Committee this morning on the work of the Shared Island unit, following on from meeting with the Committee last, in November.

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 outlines 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.

In October, the Taoiseach set out the Government's vision and priorities on Shared Island, in a major speech in an online event at Dublin Castle.

As the Taoiseach has noted, Government priorities under the Shared Island initiative are to:

- Work in partnership with the Executive, through the North South Ministerial Council, and with the British Government, to address strategic challenges faced on the island;
- Enable priority delivery of all-island infrastructure commitments and foster new investment and development opportunities on a North/South basis; and,
- Foster constructive, inclusive dialogue and deliver a comprehensive programme of research, to support the building of consensus on a shared future on the island, underpinned by the Good Friday Agreement.

The Taoiseach established the Shared Island unit in his Department to drive and coordinate the initiative, which is proceeding on a whole of Government basis.

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

The unit operates in close coordination with other work across Government in support of the Good Friday Agreement, including with the Department of Foreign Affairs, and the Government's engagement through the North South Ministerial Council, the British Irish Council and the British Irish Intergovernmental Conference.

I will briefly set out for the Committee updates on the unit's three 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 as part of Budget 2021, the Government announced the Shared Island Fund, with €500m being made available out to 2025, ring-fenced for North/South projects.

The Shared Island Fund will support the delivery of key investment commitments and objectives, set out in the Programme for Government, including to:

- Work with the Executive on cross-border infrastructure initiatives, including the A5, the Ulster Canal, the Narrow Water Bridge, and cross-border greenways;
- Work with the Executive and UK Government to achieve greater connectivity on the island;
- Commit to new investment and development opportunities in the North West and Border communities;
- Support a north/south programme of research and innovation, including an all-island research hub; and,
- Enhance all aspects of North/South cooperation and the all-island economy.

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

In this respect, on 28 April, the Taoiseach and the Minister for Community and Rural Development, launched Phase 2 of the Ulster Canal restoration project enabled by an allocation of €6m from the Shared Island Fund and €5.6m from the Rural Regeneration Development Fund. The Shared Island Fund has also provided a further €1 million for Phase 3 of the project, to undertake feasibility and pre-construction work, which has now begun.

The Ulster Canal is a good example of how, with political priority by the Government, a partnership approach with the Executive and other stakeholders, and necessary additional resourcing provided through the Shared Island Fund and other sources, impactful North/South cooperation can move ahead as part of the Shared Island initiative. In the case of the Ulster Canal, delivering a public amenity and sustainable tourism initiative that connects communities and support jobs and business opportunity on both sides of the border.

The all-island Strategic Rail Review that was jointly launched by Minister for Transport Eamon Ryan TD and Minister for Infrastructure in the Executive, Nichola Mallon MLA, in April, is also an important part of the Government's Shared Island agenda. The review will consider how the rail network on the island of Ireland can improve sustainable connectivity between cities, enhance regional accessibility and support balanced regional development. The review will also consider the feasibility of high and higher speeds on the network.

The Government will make further allocations from the Shared Island Fund to invest for a more connected, sustainable and prosperous island, consistent with the priorities set out in the Programme for Government. The Taoiseach has referred to the particular potential and priority of delivering a North/South programme of research and innovation, and of supporting enterprise growth in border regions, including through cooperation on technology parks.

The Government will proceed in a partnership approach, working with the Executive, with the British Government and at Local Authority levels.

In terms of Local Authority engagement, there is already strong cross-border cooperation, including through the North West Strategic Growth Partnership, the Irish Central Border Area Network, the Dublin Belfast Economic Corridor and the East Border Region.

The Taoiseach and a number of Government Ministers have engaged directly with these cross-border initiatives in recent months to affirm the Government's support for their work and readiness to collaborate with them as part of the Shared Island initiative.

The Taoiseach also met with the Chairs and CEOs of North South Bodies in February and with the Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce in April, in the course of which the Government's Shared Island investment priorities were also discussed.

The Shared Island unit is actively engaging with line Departments, with cross-border Local Authority forums and other partners and stakeholders for Government in follow up, to support delivery of the commitments on Shared Island in the Programme for Government.

- *Research*

Secondly, on Research, the unit is progressing a comprehensive programme, working with the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI), the National Economic and Social Council (NESC) and the Irish Research Council (IRC).

The research programme with the ESRI is on *'The Economic and Social Opportunities from Increased Cooperation on the Shared Island'*. 2021 work is examining aspects of health, education, enterprise and the services economy on the island. Scoping papers on each of the ESRI research topics were published yesterday, 17 May.

The National Economic and Social Council is preparing a report to Government on Shared Island this year, informed by broad consultation, which NESC is conducting with stakeholders North and South.

In February, NESC published a scoping paper setting out their approach and focus on issues including: the economy and regional development; tackling poverty; mental health; social enterprise and, climate, biodiversity and environment. NESC will also conduct a cross-sectoral examination of issues relating to sustainability and connectivity on the island.

The Shared Island unit is also working with the Irish Research Council and a funding call is open at present for academic contributions to the research programme across two strands:

- Political, policy and economic cooperation; and,
- Civic, social and cultural connection and understanding on the island.

Up to ten research projects will be funded, starting this year and concluding in mid-2022, as part of the Irish Research Council's New Foundations programme.

- *Dialogue and Outreach*

Thirdly, on Dialogue, the Taoiseach launched the Shared Island Dialogue series to foster constructive and inclusive civic dialogue, engaging all communities and traditions, on issues for a shared future on the island.

So far, four Dialogues have been held:

The Taoiseach addressed a Dialogue with young people on 26 November, on the theme of "New Generations and New Voices on the Good Friday Agreement";

On 5 February, the Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications participated in a Dialogue on climate and environment on the island;

On 25 March, a Dialogue on civil society engagement on the island was held, with participation by the Minister for Foreign Affairs; and,

On 10 May, the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth participated in a Dialogue on 'Equality on a Shared Island'.

The Dialogue series will continue through this year, including with a focus on Economy, Health and Education on the island.

The series is actively working to ensure that perspectives and voices that have traditionally been under-represented in the peace process - including those of women, young people and new communities - are represented in civic discussion on a shared future on the island.

We have seen really constructive, imaginative and practical discussion and suggestions through the Dialogues series so far.

Some of these suggestions and proposals - for instance on how civil society groups engage and work together on the island, including women's representatives - have been followed up on already by the Shared Island unit, working with the relevant Departments and partners.

Reports and recordings of the Dialogues are available online at [gov.ie/sharedisland](http://gov.ie/sharedisland) and on social media, to contribute to wider civic discussions, and the Dialogues will inform how the Shared Island initiative is further developed.

That concludes my statement updating 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.