

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

4 November 2021

Thank you, Chair.

I welcome the opportunity to update the Committee this afternoon on the work of the Shared Island unit, and following on from previous meetings with the Committee, in May and last 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 is aware, the Programme for Government outlines the Government's commitment to work with all communities and traditions on the island to build consensus around a shared future, underpinned by the Good Friday Agreement.

Just over a year ago, the Taoiseach set out the Government's approach and priorities for Shared Island, in a major speech in an online event at Dublin Castle.

We want to work with the Executive, and through the North South Ministerial Council, and with the British Government, to address strategic challenges and take up opportunities on an all-island basis.

The Initiative is focused on: building a Shared Island; fostering inclusive civic dialogue; and commissioning research to inform discourse on a shared future on the island.

The Shared Island unit in the Department of the Taoiseach works to drive and coordinate this initiative, which is being taken forward on a whole of Government basis.

I will briefly set out updates on the unit's three areas of work.

Building a shared island:

First, on building a shared island: the Government's focus is on delivering on cross-border investment commitments and promoting all-island approaches to strategic challenges and opportunities.

These objectives were significantly elaborated and progressed as part of the revised National Development Plan, that was announced by the Government on 4 October.

Under the revised NDP, the Government committed to allocating ring-fenced capital resourcing for all-island investment out to 2030, at least at the current level of the Shared Island Fund.

In total, under the revised NDP, there is an all-island investment commitment of more than €3.5billion, through the extended Shared Island Fund, the Project Ireland 2040 funds, the Government's annual funding for North/South cooperation and the PEACE PLUS programme, delivered with the EU, UK and Northern Ireland Executive.

The Shared Island dimension of the NDP sets out the Government's all-island investment priorities for deploying this funding, across virtually all sectors.

And it affirms the Government's approach of working through all-island investment partnerships, under headings of working for a more connected, more sustainable and more prosperous island, for all communities and traditions.

The NDP Shared Island investment priorities include:

- the creation of an island-wide greenway network;
- enhanced all-island rail connectivity;
- coordinated investment to roll-out Electric Vehicle charging networks across the island;
- funding for all-island climate actions;
- enhancing support for enterprise development on an all-island basis;
- the creation of new all-island research centres;
- further development of third-level education infrastructure in the North West; and,
- new cross-border built and natural heritage initiatives.

As set out in the NDP, there are clear opportunities for more impactful investment by working at an all-island level to meet common concerns for both jurisdictions, for instance by:

- taking up advantages of investment at scale at an all-island level;
- combining complementary capacities, North and South;
- harnessing the full potential of border regions; and,
- coordinating and enhancing transport and other connectivity across the island.

The Shared Island dimension of the revised NDP sets out where and how the Government will seek to harness those opportunities.

It is worth noting as well, that with a total investment commitment of more than €165bn the entire National Development Plan presents significant business and employment opportunities, North and South, given the skills and labour demands generated by the scale of infrastructure, green and digital investment that will be undertaken by Government between now and 2030.

Importantly, also the NDP Shared Island investment priorities were informed by consultation with the Executive, the UK Government, and with cross-border Local Authority initiatives, all of which the Government will work with on investment cooperation on a cross-border basis, under the revised NDP.

Moving on then to look at progress with specific Shared Island projects, since I last briefed the Committee. I will refer to four projects:

First, as the Committee is aware, in April, the Taoiseach and the Minister for Rural and Community Development announced €7m in funding from the Shared Island Fund, alongside €5.57m in funding from the Rural Regeneration Fund to enable the delivery of Phase 2 of the Ulster Canal and development work for Phase 3.

Phase 2 of the Canal restoration is now moving ahead and is due to be completed in 2023. The Shared Island Fund allocation has also enabled acceleration by Waterways Ireland of development on Phase 3, to a point where that planning application is about to be commenced.

Secondly, the Committee will recall that in April, the Minister for Transport and the Minister for Infrastructure in Northern Ireland jointly announced the all-island strategic rail review. As well as examining the potential for high and higher speed rail, the review will consider all issues in relation to inter-urban and inter-regional rail connectivity, including the potential for rail freight and improved connectivity to the North-West. The tender process for the review has been completed and substantive work commenced on the review in September and is expected to take up to 12 months to complete.

There have also been two significant allocations by Government from the Shared Island Fund in recent months:

In June, the Taoiseach and the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, joined by the Northern Ireland Minister for Infrastructure, announced an allocation of €3m in funding from the Shared Island Fund, to bring the Narrow Water Bridge project to tender phase. The Taoiseach also affirmed the Government's commitment to allocating further resourcing from the Shared Island Fund, once the due diligence process has been completed and the final costs of the project are determined.

I know that this Committee appreciates the symbolic, economic and social importance of the project for the people of Omeath and in Warrenpoint and for the wider region.

Following up on the funding announcement, the Minister for Housing, Heritage and Local Government and the Northern Ireland Minister for Infrastructure visited the Narrow Water Bridge site on 15 October and met with local stakeholders. They discussed the new momentum with the bridge and the related cross-border active travel and recreation activities it will enable, including greenways, walking trails and park amenities. Work is now underway, led by Louth County Council, to bring the project to tender stage.

The second recent Shared Island Fund allocation announcement was in July. The Taoiseach and the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science announced the Government's new North-South Research programme, with Government investing €40 million from the Shared Island Fund over five years.

This significant investment will support the deepening of links between higher education institutions, researchers and research communities on the island of Ireland, delivering all-island approaches to research and innovation, and open to all disciplines and research areas.

The programme is being run by the Higher Education Authority, with a first call for applications open at present, closing on 8 November. There has been very strong interest in the programme from researchers and institutions across the island.

The North/South Research Programme is a clear example of the benefits of thinking and investing on an all-island basis, as recognised in the revised NDP, in terms of operating at a greater scale; bringing together complementary capacities North and South; and, bringing a knowledge base to bear for our common concerns and interests across the island.

Research:

Turning then to update the Committee on the Shared Island unit's research programme. The purpose of this work is to provide high-quality evidence and analysis on the opportunities, as well as the challenges, around deepening cooperation and connections on the island.

The unit is working with the National Economic and Social Council, the Economic and Social Research Institute, the Irish Research Council, and other partners. North/South and East/West partnerships are core to the research approach.

The National Economic and Social Council has progressed Shared Island research this year, with a series of papers, consultations and stakeholder engagements, which will culminate in a comprehensive report to Government on Shared Island, to be published in early 2022.

On 28 October, the Council published a report and recommendations on the challenges and opportunities of climate change and biodiversity loss across the island, drawing on an extensive consultation with stakeholders, North and South. The Government welcomed this report, which will help to inform and progress all-island approaches to climate and biodiversity issues.

Under the Shared Island research partnership with the ESRI, following on from scoping papers published in May, final reports are now being prepared on aspects of healthcare; education; foreign direct investment; and, the services economy on the island. These reports will be published in December and early next year, and will provide an important evidence base and analysis for policy consideration in each sector.

In April, a call with the Irish Research Council was undertaken for academic contributions to the Shared Island research programme across economic, social, cultural and political themes. The top ten ranked applications by the IRC will be announced and commence next month, with work to be completed and published by mid-2022.

And, a partnership with the Standing Conference on Teacher Education North and South (SCoTENS) has been developed. A call for proposals opened in October for action-oriented North/South research on: enhancing educational attainment; and, on a range of teaching,

learning and curriculum delivery themes. Applications are currently being assessed by SCoTENS and the first awardees will be announced next month.

- *Dialogue and Outreach*

Finally, on dialogue, the Committee will recall that the Taoiseach launched the Shared Island Dialogue series last October to foster constructive and inclusive civic engagement, involving all communities and traditions, on key issues for a shared future on the island.

7 Dialogue events and 2 roundtables have been conducted by the unit to date, in cooperation with other Departments.

Since the last update to the Committee in May, there have been Shared Island Dialogue engagements on:

- *Economic recovery on the island*, in June with participation by the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, and over 150 economic stakeholders.

- *On Working for a healthier island*, in July, with participation by the Minister for Health and over 120 medical practitioners, researchers and patient advocates.

- *And, on The future of education on a shared island*, on 2 October, with participation by the Minister for Education and the Minister of State for Skills and Further Education and over 130 education and civil society stakeholders.

The Dialogue series is bringing together more than 1,000 civic representatives this year in different sectors and across all regions, communities and traditions on the island.

Exciting projects are also emerging from the Dialogues, such as the newly-established All-Island Women's Forum, which is bringing together women leaders from across the island to address underrepresentation and further develop women's role in peacebuilding and civic society.

The Dialogue engagements have proved really worthwhile and valuable from our perspective and from feedback we have received from participants, and the exercise will be continued next year. We are looking now at how this next phase on dialogue is undertaken, including on hopefully being in a position to convene more in-person discussions next year.

The unit is also continuing to regularly engage with stakeholders across the island to inform its work, with over 80 engagements since we last met with the Committee in May.

That concludes my statement updating on the Shared Island initiative and 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.