

Statement from the Core Working Group of the All-Island Cancer Research Institute (AICRI) to the Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement (JCIGFA)

Thursday 23rd February 2023

Witnesses

Prof. William Gallagher (University College Dublin)

Prof. Mark Lawler (Queen's University Belfast)

Prof. Maeve Lowery (Trinity College Dublin)

Ms. Eibhlín Mulroe (CEO, Cancer Trials Ireland)

Mr. Aidan McCormack (Chair, NI Cancer Research Consumer Forum)

Observers

Mr. Ciaran Briscoe (CEO, Northeast Cancer Research & Education Trust)

Dr Rosemarie Gannon (University College Dublin)

SLIDE 1

Dear Cathaoirleach O'Dowd, Deputies and Senators,

Thank you for the opportunity to meet today to provide an update on our progress and future plans for the All-Island Cancer Research Institute, or AICRI for short.

SLIDE 2

Since our first meeting with the Committee in October 2021, we have made very substantial progress towards realising the vision that our team presented. Indeed, that meeting was a major boost in our efforts in advancing AICRI at the time.

SLIDE 3

Cancer is now one of human health's greatest challenges and the number one killer of people on the island of Ireland. By 2045, someone will be diagnosed with cancer every 7 minutes on this island; this is due to the expected doubling of cancer incidence among our citizens over the next two decades.

To recap, AICRI is centred on creating an overarching framework for cancer research on the island of Ireland, covering scientific discovery to the clinic. A critical feature of AICRI is facilitation of cross-border research in key priority areas, such as precision cancer medicine and data analytics.

AICRI has successfully brought together 10 academic institutions across Ireland and Northern Ireland, as well as key stakeholders from the healthcare and charity sectors, along with industry leaders and patient advocates.

SLIDE 4

AICRI is in the process of creating an ambitious long-term programme covering 3 thematic areas, namely (1) providing the appropriate environment for discovery science, (2) fast-tracking new innovations into the healthcare system, and (3) developing an attractive ecosystem in the biotech and allied industry sectors. **Substantial progress towards this vision has been achieved since we last met.**

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Highlights include the commencement of the *AICRIstart* project, which was funded via a €4 million award under the HEA North-South Research Programme, supported by the Shared Island Fund. This grant has allowed for the creation of a unique All-Island Doctoral and Post-Doctoral Research Training Programme in Precision Cancer Medicine, which I have the pleasure of leading along with my good colleague Prof. Mark Lawler (Queen's University Belfast).

By bringing together ten academic institutions on the island of Ireland in this foundational initiative (a substantial achievement in its own right), *AICRIstart* will catalyse a unique all-island network of excellence in cancer research. Through its broader work, *AICRIstart* will contribute to policy development relevant to the Shared Island initiative, particularly in terms of building a healthier island.

Under the same HEA North-South Research programme, two additional large-scale AICRI-linked cancer research awards (€4 million each) have recently started in the areas of **digital health** (led by Prof. Aedin Culhane, University of Limerick and Prof. Mark Lawler, Queen's University Belfast) and **liquid biopsies** (led by Prof. Lorraine O'Driscoll, Trinity College Dublin and Prof. Paul Mullan, Queen's University Belfast).

Several additional North-South cancer research projects linked to AICRI were also funded, covering various aspects of cancer diagnostics and therapeutics, as well as cancer survivorship/quality of life.

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Over the last 15 months, we have organised multiple highly successful in-person, hybrid and virtual workshops covering priority research topics, such as 'Living With and Beyond Cancer' and 'Digital Health'. We have also brought together the representatives from the cancer charity sector in Ireland and Northern Ireland, as well as hosted dedicated workshops with cancer patients, so as to ensure that their voice is heard.

SLIDE 7

AICRI was also delighted to have former Taoiseach Micheál Martin provide the opening address at a special showcase event held in Dublin on the 28th September 2022, in collaboration with Prof. John Crown's 15th International Symposium on Translational Research in Oncology.

SLIDE 8

[A short video summary of this event will now be played – circa 60 secs]

SLIDE 9

A key focus of AICRI going forward will be furthering of international collaboration.

As part of an initial approach last July, the AICRI vision was presented at a panel discussion on '*The Future of Precision Medicine: Fast-Tracking Innovation*', at the British Ambassador's Private Residence, Glencairn, Dublin.

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Later in the same month, a productive meeting took place with the US Ambassador to Ireland Claire Cronin on engagement and collaboration with the US in terms of cancer research.

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Indeed, tripartite collaboration between the US National Cancer Institute, Ireland and Northern Ireland has its roots within the Good Friday Agreement, with an Implementation Committee now in place following re-invigoration of this initiative in March 2021.

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The first of a planned series of on-site engagements in the US took place recently, with a highly successful trip to Boston in late November 2022. This

included a networking evening called '*Cancer Research Across Borders - Ireland's Reach*' organised by the Ireland America Science Forum, Boston College, the Consulate General of Ireland in Boston and UCD Alumni.

Bringing together a sizeable contingent from the Irish diaspora in the Boston area, the event provided an opportunity to highlight AICRI and focus more broadly on US-Ireland collaboration in cancer research and areas for future potential partnership.

The AICRI Team were glad to find unanimous support for the AICRI vision, especially in terms of cross-border and inter-institutional partnership.

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Later in February and March, it is intended to have similar engagements, including further Irish diaspora outreach, in the New York and Washington DC areas.

Next week at the New York Irish Center in Long Island City, AICRI will bring together different stakeholders for a discussion and networking event called "*Cancer Research Across Borders: US Influence on the Good Friday Agreement*". Support for this event has been received from the Consulate General of Ireland in New York, the Ireland America Science Forum, as well as UCD and QUB Alumni.

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The Washington visit, taking place in the week leading up to St. Patrick's Day will include a joint Queen's University Belfast – National Cancer Institute Symposium entitled "*Cancer Knows no Borders – Celebrating Tripartite Cooperation to Enhance Cancer Research*" at the world renowned US National Cancer Institute, where both past successes and future activities for cancer research and cancer care on the island of Ireland will be discussed, including an update on AICRI activities and plans.

Queen's University Belfast is also hosting a major event in mid-April 2023 in relation to the 25th Anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement and this will include specifically a special showcase on cancer (*Showcase GFA25 Event: Cancer Knows No Borders*), with speakers & panellists from the island of Ireland (including AICRI members) and international speakers.

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In summary, AICRI has made very significant progress since the original concept was put forward in 2020. Critical foundation stones have now been put in place via funding under the HEA North-South Research Programme. However, we have just only begun our mission.

To fully achieve our goals, there is a requirement to attract additional funding to establish a large-scale Co-Centre for Cancer Research so as to fully harness our best skills and expertise across Ireland and Northern Ireland, together with our colleagues in Great Britain.

Calls for similar Co-Centres in the climate and food security areas are now live, with funding to be provided by Science Foundation Ireland (SFI), Northern Ireland's Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) and UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), with co-funding from industry.

AICRI investigators have also been very actively involved in seeking and acquiring funding under a range of European Union programmes focused on cancer research, such as the EU Cancer Mission.

Finally, very active interest is being taken by the AICRI team in the potential offered by the PEACE PLUS programme in facilitating cross-border collaborative cancer research.

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In closing, we should remember that one in two people on the island of Ireland will be diagnosed with cancer at some point in their lifetime.

This could be any one of us, our loved ones or friends.

Cancer research is cancer's enemy – we know that patients treated in research active hospitals have better outcomes than those who are not.

It is critical that we each play a role in helping to secure a better future for our families and society. Thank you.

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[Please keep this slide on if possible as background during Q&A]