

Opening statement to Oireachtas Joint Committee on Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement on Shared Island initiative implementation

27 April 2023

Thank you, Chair.

I am glad to have this opportunity to update the Committee on implementation of the Government's Shared Island initiative, and following on from earlier meetings with the Committee.

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 set out a series of objectives on Shared Island and a commitment to engage with all communities and political traditions to build consensus around a shared future, underpinned by the Good Friday Agreement.

The three main elements of the Government's Shared Island initiative are to:

- Move forward long-standing and new cross-border investments, enabled by the Shared Island Fund and other sources;
- Engage with all communities through a comprehensive dialogue series on how, in practical ways, we could better share the island into the future; and,
- Commission and publish research to help deepen understanding of the whole island, in economic, social, cultural and political terms.

This is informed by the Government's view that there is a need to work in an ambitious, sustained, comprehensive way to realise the full potential of the Good Friday Agreement, and to deepen cooperation and societal connections across the island.

The ongoing reflections around the 25th anniversary of the Agreement - including this Committee's engagements and recent report - are rightly celebrating the achievement of enduring peace on this island, but also reminding us of the fragility and uneven nature of progress on reconciliation.

There is clear scope to deepen and strengthen all of the relationships accommodated in the Agreement - within Northern Ireland, North/South and East/West. That is a key dimension of the Shared Island initiative, which is very much integrated with the Government's overall engagement in support of the Good Friday Agreement.

Clearly, the continuing absence of the Executive in Northern Ireland and resulting inability of the North South Ministerial Council to meet, impacts what can be done through the institutions of the Agreement at present, and the overall context for all-island cooperation and interaction.

Nevertheless, over the last two and half years, significant progress has been registered with the Government's all-island investment and cooperation objectives.

Importantly also, there has been a good, encouraging level of engagement from civic stakeholders, North and South and across different communities, with the Government's Shared Island approach, which we are seeking to build on and expand in the time ahead.

This Committee's engagement on the Shared Island initiative, in formal meetings here and through participation of the Chair and Members in events and discussions is a very important contribution. The Committee's wider interaction to support all-island cooperation and the relationships of the Agreement is also recognised and highly valued.

I will briefly summarise the main elements of implementation on the Shared Island initiative, and will be glad then to answer Members' questions.

- Building a Shared Island

The Government has so far allocated €191m from the Shared Island Fund, to move forward with long-standing cross-border infrastructure projects and with new investments.

These are all projects that meet commitments under the Programme for Government and the objectives under the revised National Development Plan to invest for a more connected, sustainable and prosperous island, for all communities.

Shared Island Fund allocations are made by Government and projects are taken forward by Ministers and their Departments. Departments work through all-island partnerships with counterparts in Northern Ireland, the British Government, and with Local Authority, Education and Civil Society organisations.

The full list of allocations and projects under the Fund are included in the briefing material provided for Committee Members.

I would highlight the following themes for the Committee:

- Moving forward with landmark cross-border infrastructure projects: €47m has been committed to enable delivery of Phase 2 and Phase 3 of the Ulster Canal restoration, as a major recreation and sustainable tourism asset in the central border region. Also, with support through the Fund, the Narrow Water Bridge has progressed to tender stage, which is now underway, following a pre-tender evaluation of bidders by Louth County Council.

- Developing the all-island research, development and innovation ecosystem: This includes a €50m contribution to the North South Research Programme administered by the Higher Education Authority, which under the first round last year, made awards to 62 cross-border research partnerships. There has also been a €20m contribution to new All-Island Co-Centres for Research and Innovation, which are led on by Science Foundation Ireland working with Northern Ireland and UK counterparts and co-funders, on themes of Climate and Food Sustainability and Resilience, with applications currently being assessed.

- *Supporting border region economic development*: To date, there has been resourcing to enable tourism agencies to conduct brand collaboration and marketing of the Wild Atlantic Way and Causeway Coastal Route to increase visitor stays across the region; also, for development of a cross-border innovation hub in the North West; and, for feasibility and development work on 25 cross-border investment proposals which are being progressed now by local authority partnerships.

- *Climate action*: This is evidently a common strategic challenge for the whole island and there is a need and an opportunity to meet that through deeper all-island cooperation, both in government and at citizen levels.

So far, there has been €3m allocated for Shared Island dimension to the Government's Community Climate Action Scheme and €15m for Electric Vehicle charging points at Sports clubs across the island, with both programmes launched by Minister Eamon Ryan in January. There were over 600 initial applications from Sports Clubs - across every county on the island - to the Department of Transport under the EV charging point scheme.

There are also new cross-border peatland restoration and biosecurity actions being funded, which sees our Departments and Agencies working with counterparts in Northern Ireland and Scotland.

- A further feature is *stronger support for arts, culture, heritage and creativity on an all-island basis*. Here again, there are opportunities being pursued to increase interaction across different communities and regions including through a Shared Island dimension to the Government's flagship Creative Ireland programme from 2023 to 2027.

And, in January, the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs commenced a new Shared Island Civic Society funding scheme, with resourcing of €3m to support civic organisations in working together on a cross-border basis, as a means of deepening societal connections.

In terms of future allocations from the Fund, the Taoiseach has affirmed that the Government wants to undertake significantly more all-island investment cooperation with a new Northern Ireland Executive and with the British Government.

Developing and preparing options for that is a focus of work across Departments at present, in line with priorities set by Government on Shared Island for this year, including on: higher education; education attainment; promoting all-island enterprise development; supporting the bioeconomy and progressing cross-border greenways.

Research programme:

Moving on to the research programme, the purpose is to provide a stronger evidence-base and analysis of the whole island, in economic, social, environmental and cultural terms.

The unit is working with the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI), Irish Research Council (IRC), National Economic and Social Council (NESC), and other partners.

There have been over 20 reports published over the first two years of the programme, and a comparable number of projects are underway at present, to be published through the second half of this year.

The research outputs contribute to development of a more ambitious agenda for all-island cooperation and to wider discussions on how we share the island into the future. For instance, research has examined how to maximise foreign direct investment for the whole island, and the services economy. Other work has looked at migrant experiences; the circular economy; legal mapping and trends North and South; and early years care and education. There is work underway at present on gender equality and the pay gap.

We also commissioned the ESRI to undertake the first ever comprehensive examination of education systems and outcomes on the island, and this was published last year. Among the findings of note, the research mapped out the stark and concerning trend differences on early school leaving rates, between North and South.

This is work that helps to foster and inform discussion on how the Government could work more strategically with a new Executive in Northern Ireland on Education attainment issues, something which is already provided for through the North South Ministerial Council.

Dissemination of the research outputs is essential and the unit works with the research bodies to support launch events and engagement with the reports in civil society, academia, media and briefings for political representatives and Departments, both North and South.

Dialogue series:

Finally, inclusive dialogue with all communities is central to the approach on Shared Island.

Over the last two years, 14 dialogue events were convened by Government with participation of more than 2,500 citizens and civic representatives, to discuss how cooperation and interaction can help address common challenges and concerns for the future on the island.

Dialogues focused on sectoral areas like Healthcare, Tourism, Community Development and also on wider societal issues like Equality and Tackling Gender-based Violence and Abuse.

There has been strikingly positive interaction at the dialogues, which have involved civic representatives from across all communities and traditions.

We have strived for inclusion of underrepresented voices in these events, in particular of women, young people and ethnic minority communities. That of course added a lot to the richness of discussions and breadth of experiences that were brought to bear.

As I said, continuing to expand the diversity and reach of participation in the Shared Island initiative is a focus now, both in dialogues and through all of the programmes and projects that are underway, which currently engage some 1,200 organisations across the island.

A clear message from the dialogues so far - set out in our two annual reports - is the interest and support that there is in civil society, across the board, for stronger cross-border and cross-community interactions. The dialogues are informing how the Shared Island initiative is developed and progressed, and influenced for instance, the introduction of both the Shared Island Civic Society Fund and Community Climate Action scheme.

The dialogues have also led to new civil society-led projects, notably the All-Island Women's Forum of the National Women's Council and iCommunity project of The Wheel and the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action, which each undertook significant first year programmes of work and are continuing this year, supported through the Reconciliation Fund.

The unit surveyed participants in January on how the dialogues could be continued and improved. Taking on board that feedback, a refreshed programme is now being progressed, which is aiming for more free-flowing discussions and on somewhat more intrinsic societal and sectoral concerns for the future of the island.

The first event was held this week on Monday on the topic of 'media representation of the island of Ireland'. This was held at the Convention Centre Dublin with participation by over 150 stakeholders including journalists, media sector leaders, and political and civil society representatives, again from across all communities and political traditions.

The dialogue explored successes and shortcomings of media representation of the island; how different communities, regions, and political and social issues are presented in media and social media; and, how this influences political and public debates.

There was also a session looking at the media sector across the island and the scope for development of deeper cross-border networks and collaboration in news and other media, looking both North/South and East/West.

A report and video summary will be published in the coming weeks and we hope it will help to highlight the significance of media issues for the whole island.

Further dialogues are in preparation and will be announced and convened in the months ahead and the programme will be developed by the unit through this year and into 2024.

That concludes my opening statement. I thank the Committee Members for their interest and we are happy to answer your questions and take note of comments.