

# DÁIL ÉIREANN

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## AN COMHCHOISTE UM FHORBAIRT TUAITHE AGUS POBAIL

## JOINT COMMITTEE ON RURAL AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

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*Dé Céadaoin, 12 Meitheamh 2019*

*Wednesday, 12 June 2019*

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The Joint Committee met at 10.30 a.m.

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Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair/Members present:

Michael Collins,	Paudie Coffey.
Martin Kenny,	
Éamon Ó Cuív.	

I láthair/In attendance: Senator Gerard P. Craughwell.

Teachta/Deputy Joe Carey sa Chathaoir/in the Chair.

## **Towards a New Common Chapter Project: Discussion**

**Chairman:** Apologies have been received from Deputy Burke and Senators Hopkins and Grace O’Sullivan. I congratulate Senator Grace O’Sullivan on her election to the European Parliament. I understand she will cease to be a Member of the Seanad and a member of the joint committee when she takes her seat at the first sitting of the European Parliament which is likely to be on 2 July. I wish her the very best in her endeavours.

I remind members, staff, delegates and those in the Visitors Gallery to turn off their mobile phones as they interfere with the sound and broadcasting systems.

By virtue of section 17(2)(l) of the Defamation Act 2009, witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of their evidence to the committee. However, if they are directed by the Chairman to cease giving evidence on a particular matter and continue to do so, they are entitled thereafter only to qualified privilege in respect of their evidence. They are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given and asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against any person or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable.

Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the Houses or an official, either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable.

On behalf of the committee, I welcome Dr Anthony Soares, acting director, Centre for Cross Border Studies; Ms Tara Farrell, deputy CEO, Longford Women’s Link; and Mr. Aidan Campbell, policy and public affairs officer, Rural Community Network. It is proposed that any opening statement, submission or other document supplied by delegates or other bodies to the committee on the topic of this meeting be published on its website. Is that agreed? Agreed.

In a referendum held on Thursday 23 June 2016 the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union. While the withdrawal agreement and political declaration on future relations were agreed to between the United Kingdom and the European Union, the House of Commons seems to be unable to approve the agreement or any other way forward. The United Kingdom’s departure date of 29 March 2019 was extended to 12 April and then 31 October. As a result of Theresa May’s resignation as leader of the Conservative Party on 7 June, there will probably be a new UK Prime Minister towards the end of July. We are also facing the prospect of a hard Brexit, that is, a Brexit without a withdrawal agreement. Numerous experts agree on the impact of a hard Brexit on the Border region, the North and North-South trade, but politics is the art of the possible. The committee is preparing a report on Brexit and the Border and the impact on rural communities. We have heard from many people on both sides of the Border. We are delighted to hear from the delegates who are outlining a way forward. I welcome them and call Dr. Soares to make his presentation.

**Dr. Anthony Soares:** I thank the Chairman and members of the joint committee for the invitation to discuss the Towards a New Common Chapter project and the resulting New Common Charter for Co-operation Within and Between these Islands. With the Chairman’s agreement, I will begin by offering a brief overview of the Centre for Cross Border Studies and the project before handing over to Ms Farrell from Longford Women’s Link and then Mr. Campbell from the Rural Community Network who will tell the committee a little bit about their organisa-

tions and their involvement in the project. Before I do so, I draw the committee's attention to the New Common Charter for Co-operation Within and Between these Islands which will ultimately be the focus of our conversation today and future conversations and in which rural concerns are particularly evident.

Since its creation in 1999, shortly after the signing of the Belfast or Good Friday Agreement, the Centre for Cross Border Studies has sought to contribute to increased social, economic and territorial cohesion of the island of Ireland by promoting and improving the quality of cross-Border co-operation. The centre's pursuit of its mission has been framed by two primary public policy imperatives: the European Union's cohesion policy and strand 2 of the Good Friday Agreement. Throughout its existence, therefore, the centre has been deeply concerned with community, social and economic development and co-operation, particularly on the island of Ireland but also between the island of Ireland, Great Britain and beyond. From the beginning this concern informed the desire to initiate the Towards a New Common Chapter project which began in late 2014 and has been made possible by the generous support of the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, the Northern Ireland Community Relations Council and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's reconciliation fund. The project has looked to support and inspire grassroots community commitment to cross-Border co-operation in all of its dimensions, including co-operation at the Border, where rurality is a predominant characteristic; wider North-South co-operation on the island of Ireland; and east-west co-operation between the island of Ireland and Great Britain. It has worked towards having a bottom-up vision of the importance and role of cross-Border co-operation within and between these islands, while also noting the need for community groups to possess the necessary skills and capacity not only to engage in their own cross-Border initiatives but also to enter into more productive dialogue with relevant local, regional and central Government policies and strategies that may affect them.

The New Common Charter for Co-operation Within and Between these Islands which members should have before them is the result of a series of intensive conversations between a range of community groups from Northern Ireland and Ireland and, more recently, with groups from England, Scotland and Wales. The new common charter represents a shared desire to maintain and strengthen relations between communities across these islands, to work together on issues of common concern and to advocate for the provision of the requisite structures and means to co-operate within and between these islands in whatever circumstances may arise. The Chairman has alluded to the circumstances that may potentially arise in the political dimension. In light of this committee's specific interests, and given that the sets of relations envisioned within the New Common Charter for Co-operation Within and Between these Islands are both the product of and supportive of rural communities, we ask members to support it. We ask them to work with us in ensuring all administrations across these islands put in place policies and funding structures to encourage cross-Border and cross-jurisdictional co-operation at grassroots community level. We hope that today's meeting will offer an opportunity to discuss in greater detail the work undertaken as part of the project, and how members of this committee and political representatives more generally can champion the objectives of the new common charter for co-operation.

These are outlined in more detail in the series of recommendations within the supporting information provided to the committee. Those objectives include how capacity-building measures should be introduced to improve how all levels of government and public bodies across these islands engage with community organisations in the development of policies and strategies with a cross-Border or cross-jurisdictional dimension and that such policies and strategies should be rural-proofed. The charter also calls for a comprehensive assessment of the current

funding landscape for cross-Border and cross-jurisdictional co-operation initiatives aimed at community organisations and what that landscape should look like in future. Crucially, we would also like to see concrete support in advancing the work undertaken in the Towards a New Common Chapter project, bringing it to a wider audience. It might also, perhaps, look towards a platform for cross-Border, cross-jurisdictional dialogue for community organisations that recalls the structure provided for governments and administrations across these islands through bodies such as the North-South Ministerial Council and the British-Irish Council. These are issues that we may explore further during today's meeting, but I will hand over now to Tara Farrell of Longford Women's Link.

**Ms Tara Farrell:** I thank the committee for giving us the opportunity to present today. I will start with just a few words about Longford's Women's Link. We are a social enterprise founded in 1995. We provide services to about 900 women and 130 children in Longford annually. Those services include education, childcare, entrepreneurship, community employment and domestic violence support. We do this via our unique model of integrated service delivery. We engage in widespread regional and national advocacy. Our chief executive officer is on the board of the National Women's Council of Ireland, NWCI, while I sit on the board of Irish Rural Link. I am also the current chair of AONTAS, the national adult learning organisation, and I sit on the steering group of The Next Chapter project, an initiative of Irish Rural Link and Politics Plus based in Stormont.

One of our flagship programmes at Longford Women's Link, the Women's Manifesto Programme, is a unique model of local democratic engagement which aims to support women in Longford and other counties to play an active and meaningful role in their local decision-making structures. Just last month we launched the See Her Elected, SHE, project with 50:50 North West, supported by the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government. The project aims to change the face of local government in rural Ireland and support women to play an active role in public life. The Women's Manifesto Programme was supported by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust from 2012 until the cessation of the trust's operations in the Republic of Ireland in 2016.

Longford Women's Link and the Women's Manifesto Programme have been active members of the Towards a New Common Charter initiative since 2015 and see it as a key all-island programme of sustained engagement as we move beyond the Brexit referendum outcome. We believe that working at the grassroots level, as this programme most definitely does, is critical if we are to see meaningful co-operation and community development alongside an empowered civic society across these islands. We are already involved in a cross-Border project with WOMEN'STEC in Belfast, and our first cross-Border conference takes place in Monaghan later this month.

We have seen with Brexit what happens when civil society is largely excluded from central discussions. Whatever happens with Brexit, we believe that the voices of grassroots women, especially in rural areas, not only need to be heard but are essential in building inclusive and resilient communities. There is significant potential within the new common charter to do this. If we want an effective democratic society that embodies the spirit of the Good Friday Agreement with active and engaged citizens and communities, then we need, first, support for the new common charter and, second, support for civil society organisations. That means financial support from all the administrations. We believe, however, that that is an investment in our communities and in the future of these islands.

**Mr. Aidan Campbell:** I thank the Chair and members very much for inviting us here today.

I will say a little about Rural Community Network, RCN, and what we do, and then I will move on to give some information about the new common charter. RCN is a regional voluntary organisation established by community groups from rural areas in 1991 to articulate the voice of rural communities on issues relating to poverty, disadvantage and equality. RCN is a membership organisation with 250 member groups across Northern Ireland, and we adopt a community development approach to our work. We employ a team of staff with a broad spectrum of skills.

Our vision is of vibrant, articulate, inclusive and sustainable rural communities across Northern Ireland which contribute to a prosperous, equitable, peaceful and stable society. Our mission is to provide an effective voice for and support to rural communities, particularly those who are most disadvantaged. RCN's work is focused on three broad areas. These are supporting and developing good practice among rural community groups, articulating the voice of rural communities and promoting reconciliation. More detail on our work and some of our projects can be found in our written submission. RCN supports the new common charter and we have been involved over the past year in trying to promote it. The charter provides a framework to encourage co-operation among civic society groups on the island of Ireland and between Ireland and Britain.

Many of the challenges rural communities face are similar. RCN has a long tradition of partnering with like-minded NGOs in Britain, Ireland and further afield. We delivered the Rural Enabler project in partnership with Irish Rural Link, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development in the North and the then Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs in the Republic of Ireland. This was a PEACE III funded project based in Northern Ireland and the six Border counties of the Republic of Ireland. We are completing a project with partner networks in the UK and Ireland to develop key asks for future rural development policy post Brexit. We know and value the importance of engaging with partner organisations across the UK and Ireland and further afield. We hope to continue to develop and deepen these links in the future, post Brexit, and we believe that the new common charter will support us in doing so.

**Chairman:** I thank the witnesses. I ask the members for any questions, observations or comments they may have. I call Deputy Martin Kenny.

**Deputy Martin Kenny:** I thank the witnesses for their presentations. This is one of the big issues facing us where I live in rural County Leitrim. We are next to the Border with Fermanagh and we are very conscious of the potential of Brexit to heighten the difficulties that already exist for many people living in rural communities. It can be seen from travelling around the Border region that much of it is rural. There are some middling-sized towns such as Enniskillen or Monaghan town, but mostly we are talking about vast rural areas. I take issue sometimes with statements being made that suggest that people in rural areas are disadvantaged. I would rather call them under-resourced. This is really an issue of resources and about having people living in a part of the world where they have a tremendous quality of life compared with what we call the really developed parts of the country. The major concern is about being able to ensure that the people who live in those areas have access to the required employment and services. That issue centres on resources and how to get those resources in place. The work that the witnesses have spoken of today is about drawing attention to that and seeing where and how we can put the required resources in place that will produce the maximum impact.

Nobody knows what the outcome of Brexit is going to be. We are, however, just measuring how negative that impact will be. There is nothing to talk about on the positive side at all. Everything focuses on the degrees of negativity that may be reached. One of the key things we need to be considering, and this committee may have a role to play in this, is to explore

mechanisms of working with community organisations across the region to leverage funding to get those resources in place where they are most needed. While Brexit is about Britain, the North, which voted to remain, is being forced to leave as well, and I think the European Union has a responsibility in that regard. We need to work with every agency we possibly can to put as much pressure as possible on the European Union to meet its responsibility to put the resources in place to assist with what is going to be a transitional period. That support will be necessary until we get to a stage where some common sense comes back into play.

We all know that whether Britain leaves with a deal now or in six months, there will have to be an arrangement at some stage. It is ridiculous for anyone to imagine that a country the size of Britain would leave the EU and then never have a trade deal with its neighbours. That arrangement is going to happen. If it does not happen in the next six months or a year, it will happen in the next few years. Between now and then, we need to have the funding mechanisms in place to protect communities in the Border region in particular.

There are also the issues in regard to rural Ireland more widely and how we can assist in making rural Ireland a place where more people want to live or are able to live. One of the projects we have been looking at seeks to enable people to work remotely for big companies while living in rural areas. We want to enable the infrastructure that is required for that, in particular the infrastructure around communications, but also to ensure adequate health services, education systems and so on are in place so people can access them wherever they live, in any part of the country and regardless of what jurisdiction they are in.

I very much welcome the work that has been done. I have read through the new common charter for co-operation. We are talking about putting in place a structure that will be fit for purpose. One of the problems we have had is that there have been a lot of itty-bitty structures, as it were, all over the place and they have not been co-ordinated properly. If we can try to do that, and this committee will be up for that challenge and will assist in any way we can to make it happen, we can go with a number of clear asks in regard to what will make a difference and move the position forward. I again welcome the witnesses and thank them for their contributions.

**Senator Paudie Coffey:** I apologise for being late as I was attending the Commencement debate in the Seanad. I welcome the witnesses and thank them for their presentations. I recognise the work they have done, which is very important. It is more important now than ever, given the challenges we have heard about in regard to the onset of Brexit. I have no doubt that existing relationships and partnerships will be tested. There is a concern that Brexit will bring a great deal of uncertainty as to where all this will end up and how it will impact on our communities. Even when talking about the Border, it brings uncertainty all round.

We need fundamental flagship projects like the common charter that we can latch onto and build on to build collaboration into the future. We need to be careful that a lot of the good work that has been done in building partnership and collaboration over the years is not undone, and there is certainly a threat to that with the onset of Brexit. It behoves all of us, whether policymakers or those working in the field, to try to find new ways to strengthen these partnerships, which is what the groups represented today are trying to do.

As policymakers, we have an obligation to identify what supports these groups need in their work. Like Deputy Kenny, I believe this committee can be of some help. If new areas of partnership or collaboration can be identified that need resources, support or recognition, we need to understand where they are and how we can support them. Basic community work

and starting from the grassroots is preferable, and the best way to work is from the ground up because that is where people are committed. We have had various voluntary groups before the committee that work with rural communities, and we find the biggest problem nowadays is with volunteerism and people having the time to commit to projects. I am sure the witnesses have experience of that in their fieldwork. It is often left to the few. They are very committed but they are left to paddle the canoes on their own, essentially. We need to find new ways to involve younger people, to support people who are already involved in projects, to excite them about this, and to show them the benefits of joint partnerships with other communities.

I come from County Waterford and my wife comes from County Down, so I am very aware of a lot of the social integrations that happen. I am a member of the GAA, for example, and I know a lot of clubs from both communities travel up and down, North and South. That can happen in other communities as well, and whether it is a hockey club or a GAA club, it does not matter to me. I would like to see more involvement.

Deputy Kenny is from a more northerly county and many of the partnerships I see happening are in the Border regions, which is understandable. However, there are people in the southern counties who would also be interested. For example, I come from a place called Portlaw, an old cotton mill, Quaker town, built by the Malcomsons, which was a planned social village. I am aware there are such places in Northern Ireland, such as Bessbrook. There might be social histories there that we can connect, finding new ways of identifying each other's history and culture, and building relationships and partnerships. There is a lot that can be done in those areas and I would be interested to see how we can help.

Ms Farrell mentioned support and resources, which we always hear. Is there a targeted programme of work outlining where there are resources that match? If there are deficits of resources and supports, we would like to hear where they might be so we might be able to assist into the future.

**Chairman:** I, too, recognise the work of all the organisations represented. What is the long-term vision for the new common charter, if there is one, and what are the next steps in its development? I agree with my colleagues that it is very important the grassroots would be involved. This is particularly the case in regard to the impact on rural communities, whether in the Border region or elsewhere. We can foresee the impact Brexit will have there. We do not want to go back to that vision of the past, which is what Brexit represents to me. Any policies or collaboration of community groups and grassroots organisations must be listened to. State organisations, whether north or south of the Border, should be working in collaboration with groups such as those represented here today, and listened to and engaged with. That is why we, as a committee, are delighted to host these groups today. The witnesses might take the opportunity to outline what the charter means in practice.

**Dr. Anthony Soares:** I will try to address the points made and then try to link them. I will start with the question on the long-term vision for the charter and the next steps. This relates back to some of the comments made by Deputy Kenny at the outset, where he noted there has to be some sort of arrangement in terms of where we are going with Brexit. I agree with that. However, it is vital that, whatever the arrangement is, that arrangement listens to and is shaped by communities on the ground, North and South, east and west, and that we are all involved in coming to whatever the arrangement is. Otherwise, we will end up with a structure that is not fit for purpose and end up with remedies that are short-term and do not address the needs of communities. It is vital that, as we move forward, we listen to communities, North and South, close to the Border and away from the Border.

In all sorts of sectors, community organisations are already involved in conversations. The Rural Community Network is involved in conversations in co-operation with similar organisations in England, Wales, Scotland and here in the Republic of Ireland. It is supporting them and allowing those conversations and that co-operation to continue. It would be tragic if we were to lose that connectivity and that dialogue.

Deputy Kenny also mentioned that the European Union has a responsibility in terms of what happens here. The EU has already made a commitment that it wants to support the Republic of Ireland, in particular, but the island of Ireland as a whole in how it deals with Brexit and how it moves forward. The Irish Government has also made a similar commitment but we are waiting for one important partner, which is the UK Government, to show its commitment. It is a commitment that needs to be made because the UK is a co-guarantor of the Good Friday Agreement, which represents the totality of relations within and between these islands. The UK Government must live up to that commitment.

That returns us to the question of what are the next steps for the common charter. We want to scale this up, involve more organisations and involve more administrations. We are in conversations with political representatives from Scotland, Wales and England, and, obviously, although it is a bit more difficult at the moment as there is no Executive or Assembly, with political representatives in Northern Ireland. I hope that will resolve itself.

We also want to highlight the fact this is not just about the Good Friday Agreement. Relations are not just about those between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland or between Ireland and the UK as a whole or the UK Government. Scotland and Wales are part of the Good Friday Agreement and strand three binds us all together. The administrations there also have a responsibility to ensure their communities in Scotland and Wales are given the opportunities, structures and funding to continue these vital relationships in and between these islands. The next step in the terms of the charter is to ensure those conversations lead to a point whereby a proper structure is in place that is fit for purpose and encourages relations between community groups throughout these islands so they continue their dialogue and co-operate and exploit opportunities. A potential tragedy is that we will miss out on existing connections to exploit opportunities just because of administrative obstacles or the structures not being there to enable us to exploit those opportunities. That is where we are going with a common charter. We want to ensure administrations throughout the islands put in place the structures community groups need to continue the work many of us already do in terms of co-operation at the Border, wider co-operation on an all-island basis, North and South, and co-operation east and west.

**Ms Tara Farrell:** To follow Dr. Soares's point, from our perspective as a grassroots organisation there has not been any other space of this nature. When we speak about structures that are fit for purpose, bearing in mind the project started in 2014 and we have been involved since 2015, our concern is if we do not continue to facilitate this grassroots dialogue and all-island co-operation and co-operation between these islands, we will not have an understanding of the issues we all face on these islands. There is a huge opportunity and we are working at various levels. We took part in a Northern Ireland European Women's Platform, NIEWP, discussion with the five nations on the economic impact of Brexit for women. It covered a wide range of issues that perhaps do not always make headlines every day, for example, the issue of domestic violence and barring orders in jurisdictions for women living in Border areas. This is very important. We became involved in this because we could see the necessity for it. At the time, we felt the idea of grassroots co-operation was not necessarily a priority for many of the administrations. Our participation was driven by these concerns. To echo Dr. Soares's point on

the Good Friday Agreement, the Irish Government is a co-guarantor of it. While the economic dialogue is absolutely critical, we also have to focus on grassroots communities and the issues they will face whatever happens as a result of Brexit.

**Mr. Aidan Campbell:** To add what Ms Farrell and Dr. Soares have already said, and to pick up on a couple of points made by Deputy Martin Kenny and Senator Coffey, much of the networking and work we have done with rural partner organisations in the South and in Britain has come from personal contact. We know individuals in rural networks in England to whom we can lift the phone and speak to about certain issues. We are a networking organisation. We employ six staff, which is not a big team. A total of 90% of our 250 member groups are volunteer-based and do not necessarily have these networks. If they are working on issues, whether local economic development, women's issues, youth issues or environmental issues, they are not necessarily as networked as organisations that can employ staff. It is very important that we start to think about how we could be more systematic in ensuring groups have these networks and know who to contact. The common charter is a way to facilitate this. If we can get administrations throughout these islands to start promoting it more, and to think about how we promote it more and embed it more, there would be huge power in it to deal with some of the issues Deputy Martin Kenny spoke about with regard to remote working, and how we build sustainable economic development in rural communities. Looking at what is coming down the line with regard to climate crisis, how do we reduce the number of people in rural areas having to jump in their cars to do a two-hour commute into urban centres to get work? These are huge issues and there is huge potential. Our board members were at the Grow Remote conference held in Tubbercurry in Sligo last month. They see huge potential in trying to extend that model into rural communities in the North. These are the types of issues that we deal with in rural Northern Ireland. They are very similar to what is being dealt with here. That is how the common charter can help.

**Deputy Martin Kenny:** Education and tourism are highlighted in the charter. It has always struck me that in the past 20 years, the Good Friday Agreement and the peace process did something on this island that has not happened in many countries throughout the world. Some of the peace process was a high-wire act between political parties but an awful lot of it was done on the ground between communities involving people who had not spoken to one another about difficult issues. They may have met at the mart and spoken about the price of cattle or they may have met somewhere and shared scones but they never spoke about the issues that were affecting their lives. They began to talk about those issues and this had an impact on the peace process. This is something we missed. Throughout the world we have conflict. We speak about climate change. If we could end all the wars in the world the problem of climate change would be pretty quickly resolved because an awful lot of it flows from conflict and the inability of governments or structures to be able to work together properly.

In Ireland, we have an example of how divided communities and societies found a way of working with one another on a way forward. There is an opportunity in this, from a educational tourism point of view, to bring people to meet these communities, speak to them, share experiences and build a knowledge base among people in the community sector throughout all of the island.

Senator Coffey mentioned a Quaker village. Many of the towns and villages in the country go back 400 or 500 years. They were the consequence and outflow of plantations and other events that happened. We are all both victims and products of our histories. Anywhere in the world the history of people is similar. It is all about power imbalances and economic imbal-

ances. We have the history of these imbalances and their impact on the future. The potential of what we have in Ireland has never been properly realised, in respect of bringing people from all over the world to learn, understand and build on the huge effort made. The consequence of that effort has never been fully examined. Some universities have done work and people have come to do studies but that is also a high-wire act. Getting into communities where the real action happens has the potential to bring different types of tourism and education. This could be part of it.

When I read through the charter, I was interested that two of the issues mentioned were tourism and education. The idea other countries could learn from Ireland is a no-brainer. Everyone can see it. Throughout the world we see political conflict and ideas coming to the fore that are about resentment and one-upmanship rather than the type of co-operation we have managed to develop here. Not only would it be good for people to come here, it would also be good to sustain and bed down the process we have had for the past 20 years. Some people speak about the peace process as if it were something that is finished. It is far from it. It is a work in progress and it requires continued evaluation, work and resources. Particularly, it requires continued effort from all of the parties involved to ensure that we bring it to its conclusion. One way of doing it might be to invite others from outside and develop tourism and education projects around it.

**Senator Paudie Coffey:** Following on from Deputy Martin Kenny's observations, we should recognise the achievements in North-South and east-west collaborations. The Good Friday Agreement was a significant achievement for this island. It must be continuously protected and worked on to support it. As Dr. Soares noted, strand 3 and the commitments contained therein were voted on by the people living on the island. We must recognise that achievement. However, there is a fear that some of that work could be unwound.

Other things we have achieved include accessing funding through the EU Cohesion Funds under the INTERREG programme. In the south-east region there was collaboration with Wales to access INTERREG funding in education and other areas. My concern which I have raised here previously relates to what the future holds and might replace these supports which have been hugely valuable to rural communities. Education and renewable energy projects, as well as other initiatives, have benefited, both in Wales and the region from which I come. I am sure the position is the same in the North of Ireland and elsewhere in the South. As Dr. Soares rightly pointed out, the European Union has a responsibility to continue to provide support for the regions, including rural communities on the island of Ireland, as well as in Wales and Scotland and similar places mentioned by him. Looking at the successes of funding programmes such as the INTERREG programme, what can we access or where can we go to access similar programmes? The European Commission and other organisations have a role to play in that regard.

Mr. Campbell made a good point about networking. Strong and successful networking was down to strong individuals who knew where to go. Mr. Campbell is correct in saying we need to be more systematic in that regard. We cannot just depend on individuals. In time we could lose some of these good individuals and then what would happen? Would the network be lost or break down? We need to tap into new ways to systematically build networks in order that no matter who comes into an organisation, the network will be in place or there will be an axis with which they can identify. It is already working. As Mr. Campbell spoke, I recalled how two or three years ago individuals from rural development groups across Northern Ireland visited the LEADER group in Waterford to discuss rural development programmes. I was invited

to meet them. They shared information, for instance, from a small start-up business in rural Ireland which was making yogurts and cheese. It struck me that there were more links than we recognised. That is one example I came across and I hope it will continue. There are also women's groups North and South, east and west, and opportunities to tap into them. Farm organisations such as Macra na Féirme could share their experiences with similar organisations in other regions. There are structures in place. We just need to identify them and connect with them systematically. Energy will come from them in building new partnerships. Therefore, I am hopeful for the future, although there are great challenges.

What level of commitment have the delegates experienced in terms of political engagement? I know that they must be careful, as they will not want to chastise anyone in public, but among the local authorities, North and South, for instance, what level of commitment have they experienced? The regional assemblies are very important organisations from which they need a commitment. Is there commitment or a stand-off approach taken by parliamentarians, North and South and in the United Kingdom, as well as by the UK and Irish Governments? I hope the Northern Ireland Assembly will soon be back up and running again as there is a vacuum. We need political leadership to engage with and advocate for communities. I wish the parties in the North well in order that the Assembly can be re-established.

What is the level of commitment among EU institutions, including the Commission and MEPs? Is there something on which we can improve?

**Chairman:** A lot of questions have been asked. I invite Dr. Soares to respond to them. He might pass some of them to Mr. Campbell and Ms Farrell.

**Dr. Anthony Soares:** On political engagement, we recently addressed the 58th plenary of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly and presented on the new common charter. The reception was extremely good. There were many comments supportive of the new common chapter and questions about how members could take it forward. The challenge for us is how to plug in to that goodwill to ensure those parliamentarians will put the good words into action. We will continue to address that issue.

On local authority engagement, we are planning to address the all-Ireland Local Authority Forum which brings together the chief executives of local authorities, North and South, to try to bring them on board. The Centre for Cross-Border Studies has good relations with the three local authority cross-Border networks, the East Border Region, the Irish Central Border Area Network and the North West Regional Strategic Partnership, which are very important in terms of what the common charter represents.

Up to now, political engagement has been positive, although we have only started in the last month or so. Turning the positive reception into something more concrete is key. The common charter talks about all relationships - relationships at the Border, all-island relationships and relationships between the islands; we do not focus on one to the detriment of others. It allows political representatives to engage in a more positive manner.

I refer to engagement with Brussels and the European Commission, in particular. I should emphasise that the common charter is not my product but that of the organisation and the community groups that have been involved in the project. It is their work, not mine, and they might hold a different view. However, before we go to the Commission to seek its engagement, we must have something solid between these islands.

Senator Coffey referred to the Structural Fund and the connections with Wales. It has been a topic of conversation with the groups in Wales and the Welsh Assembly. A recent report discussed how Wales wished to have external engagement post Brexit. They want the relationships which have been facilitated by the EU Structural Fund until now to continue. On the island of Ireland Northern Ireland is involved in one INTERREG programme which also involves Scotland and the Republic of Ireland. There is also an INTERREG programme between Wales and the Republic of Ireland. The EU commitment applies to the island of Ireland and North-South co-operation. It does not really address the connections we have through the INTERREG programme with Scotland, on the one hand, and Wales, on the other. It is really important that something be done to ensure there will be structures in place and funds available to enable these relationships to progress after Brexit. With others, we are involved in following the progress which is somewhat slow of the UK Government's Shared Prosperity Fund, its proposal for what will replace the EU Structural Fund. Up to now, we have seen no evidence that that programme will enable cross-Border co-operation. It is to deal with regional disparities in the four nations which make up the United Kingdom. It does not recognise the fact that Structural Funds are absolutely crucial to cross-Border co-operation between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, co-operation with Scotland and between Wales and the Republic of Ireland. That is something we are attempting to address.

Deputy Martin Kenny made the important comment that we are all victims and products of our histories. That can be seen in the context of the Good Friday Agreement, what it has achieved, all the connections it has created and the ability for us to talk to each other and identify common issues. We sometimes miss those types of granular things in the entire Brexit debate, which is more concentrated on the big ticket issues of high politics, business and trade. The small but vital connections that have been enabled and facilitated by the Good Friday Agreement are sometimes missing from the Brexit debate.

The groups involved in the common charter insisted on introducing a section that I had never thought of: a preface within which the community groups wanted to highlight the fact that this charter is not just being dropped from outer space but is building on things that exist. They made the precise comment about shared histories and languages, cultural and sporting connections that exist within these islands. They wanted to ensure those things are recognised.

The common charter represents an attempt to ensure we capture the lifeblood of relations within and across these islands. I do not think that, with Brexit, we will necessarily see the end of the institutions that were created by the Good Friday Agreement. We should not, and cannot, see the end of those institutions, including the North-South Ministerial Council and the British-Irish Council which are not, and cannot be, at risk. However, for those structures to operate properly and to give them added value, that lifeblood must exist underneath them. There must be community groups working together because there would be no point in having a North-South Ministerial Council or British-Irish Council that brings Ministers or political representatives together for a dialogue if there is little or nothing happening on the ground. The common charter is an attempt to ensure that, whatever happens with Brexit, those connections and relations will happen post Brexit.

**Ms Tara Farrell:** I will pick up on a couple of points because I am furiously writing notes. The first is in response to the reaction we have had. Within our own networks, the reaction has been very positive and we are referring to that and including it in any submissions we are making, for example, to the Department at this meeting and to the third national action plan on peace and security, because of the role of women in peace building and conflict resolution.

I will pick up on the point that Dr. Soares raised about networking and Senator Coffey's query about the impact on volunteering. The volunteer strategy consultation is starting. There was local government reform in 2013 and we have done considerable work on the impact of that. We are losing institutional memory and we are losing volunteers across communities because the new, changed structures are impacting on their time. It is important to try the new structure of the common charter. We must bring in new blood, new volunteers, while also holding onto that institutional memory and knowledge because it is important.

Going back to the comments made by Deputy Kenny about the product of history is important, as is that idea of learning from the approach we have taken for the new common charter. We have been involved since 2015 and I do not say that the conversations were always easy. There were some interesting conversations particularly at a cross-community level. We brought the first draft of the new common charter - or chapter as it was then - to Scotland first and there were a considerable number of questions about the language in it which we had not anticipated because it was a product of our history. For example, they were asking why we had so many references to culture and language. It meant a very different thing to us, from an all-Ireland version of the charter, than it did from a Scottish perspective. That was interesting and important. We have a platform and structure in place now after five or six years of work and that is very important.

**Mr. Aidan Campbell:** Senator Coffey mentioned the LEADER programme and networking. That is built into LEADER and the rural development programme across Europe and that is an important lesson that the UK Government needs to take on but it may need prompting from the Irish Government. Once we get past high politics and whenever a deal emerges, whatever the UK replaces rural development funding with, there must be an external element. We cannot just do it within our own jurisdiction. We need to look outwards. There are many lessons we can learn from each other across the Border and from what countries across Europe are doing in terms of rural development.

LEADER invested in the importance of networking and placed it as being very important. Our organisation is trying to do that when it talks to the UK Government about the UK shared prosperity fund. There needs to be an external element, it needs to look outwards and that costs money, is valuable and worth investing in. That is one of the key lessons and learnings from that European rural development programme.

The only other point I wanted to pick up on was the idea of peace building and reconciliation. I agree with Deputy Martin Kenny that much work has been done in local areas and communities. That is the day job of a colleague of mine, Ms Charmain Jones, who concentrates on local reconciliation and communities and having those difficult conversations. Significant progress has been made at community level in Northern Ireland. Our concern, as an organisation, is that Brexit has become an issue that divides people along community lines in Northern Ireland despite the vote in the most recent European election. Our concern is that Brexit has the potential to be divisive again, especially in rural communities, depending on one's view of the constitutional issue. We are grappling with that as an organisation. The Rural Community Network has a diverse membership, some of whom are leavers and some remainers. We are finding it challenging to plot our way through this stuff.

My view is that rural development and these challenges will be there regardless of what deal the UK comes to with the EU. The issues will remain and we will continue to work on them.

**Chairman:** Are there any other final comments?

**Senator Paudie Coffey:** I wish our guests well in their work. It is vital now more than ever.

**Chairman:** We all agree with that comment and I thank our guests for their presentations and engagement with the committee. I am sure we will be in further contact in due course.

**Senator Paudie Coffey:** Perhaps it is something we can revisit in six months. There will be a good bit of water under the bridge at that stage and we can see how our guests are doing and get an update. A written submission to that effect would be helpful so we can continue engagement.

**Chairman:** Absolutely. We are currently drafting a report about this so we will be in contact with our guests. We need to work together. That has been showcased in this hearing.

The joint committee went into private session at 11.39 a.m. and adjourned at 11.47 a.m. until 10.30 a.m. on Wednesday, 26 June 2019.