

# DÁIL ÉIREANN

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## AN COMHCHOISTE UM CHOIMIRCE SHÓISÍALACH, FORBAIRT POBAIL AGUS TUAITHE AGUS NA HOILEÁIN

## JOINT COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL PROTECTION, COMMUNITY AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT AND THE ISLANDS

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*Dé Céadaoin, 6 Aibreán 2022*

*Wednesday, 6 April 2022*

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Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 9.30 a.m.

The Joint Committee met at 9.30 a.m.

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Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies	Seanadóirí / Senators
Joe Carey,	Paddy Burke,
Joan Collins,	Róisín Garvey,
Paul Donnelly,	Eugene Murphy,
Claire Kerrane,	Mark Wall.
Marc Ó Cathasaigh,	
Éamon Ó Cuív.	

Teachta / Deputy Denis Naughten sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

## **Business of Joint Committee**

**Chairman:** We have a quorum. Is it agreed that we go into private session to discuss house-keeping matters? Agreed.

*The joint committee went into private session at 9.33 a.m., suspended at 9.42 a.m. and resumed in public session at 11.07 a.m.*

### **National Action Plan on the Development of the Islands: Discussion (Resumed)**

**Chairman:** I remind members participating remotely that they must do so from within the precincts of Leinster House. I am pleased to continue our discussion of the priority item on the committee's work programme, which is our continued consideration of the proposed national action plan on the development for the islands with the Department of Community and Rural Development. In this regard I welcome Ms Bairbre Nic Aongusa, assistant secretary, community development division; Ms Bríd Ní Chonghaile, assistant principal officer, islands division; Mr. Aodán Mac an Mhíle, principal officer, islands division; and Mr. Colm Mac Donncha, assistant principal officer, islands division. They are all very welcome.

Witnesses are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not criticise or make charges against any person or entity either by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable, or otherwise engage in speech that might be regarded as damaging to the good name of the person or entity. Therefore, if witnesses' statements are potentially defamatory in regard to an identifiable person or entity they will be directed to discontinue their remarks. It is imperative that they comply with any such direction. Witnesses participating remotely and from outside the precincts of Leinster House today, are reminded that parliamentary privilege does not apply in their case and the same level of caution should be applied as previously mentioned.

Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that 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.

I call Ms Bairbre Nic Aongusa to make her opening statement on behalf of the Department.

**Ms Bairbre Nic Aongusa:** I thank the Chairman and committee for the invitation to appear before them to speak about the development of a national policy for the islands. Offshore islands and their communities are an integral part of the fabric of rural Ireland. The islands are also home to some of our most vibrant and culturally distinctive communities. They are a vital part of the State's heritage and have a special significance in Irish culture.

We, in the Department of Rural and Community Development, are now undertaking the development of an islands policy as it has been 23 years since the most recent national policy was published. There has been significant progress in many respects for the islands since that policy was published, particularly in the areas of access and infrastructure. However, there are other areas that must be addressed to make the islands more sustainable and to maintain or, indeed, increase their populations. The commitment to develop a cross-government islands policy was a key measure in the programme for Government. The Government's ambition in a national policy and action plan for the islands was set out in chapter 10 of Our Rural Future, the Action

Plan for Rural Development 2021-2025, published last year. Our Rural Future was developed following extensive consultation with people living and working in rural Ireland, including on our offshore islands, and in collaboration with rural stakeholders and colleagues across Government and State agencies.

As we emerge from the shadows cast by Covid-19, an unparalleled opportunity now exists to re-imagine and revalue what rural Ireland means to our society. The vision of Our Rural Future is to maximise a recovery for all parts of our country and for all our people. It is the Government's blueprint for the sustainable development of rural Ireland to 2025, with a framework to transform the quality of life and opportunity for people living in rural areas, including our offshore islands. The policy aims to facilitate more people living and working in rural Ireland, with meaningful career prospects, including by capitalising on new digital opportunities, improving access to public services and adopting flexibility within sectors. We have a unique opportunity now to capitalise on the changing nature of work, which has been significantly accelerated by the experience of Covid-19 which saw so many of us working remotely. Our Rural Future contains more than 150 commitments across the whole of government. Delivery of these will be reported on through a series of progress reports, the first of which was published in February and covered the actions in the 2021 Our Rural Future work programme.

With regard to the development of a national policy for the islands, it was recognised from the outset that obtaining input from island communities through a comprehensive consultation process was of crucial importance. In December 2019, a consultation paper was prepared with input from the participating Departments to act as a basis to advance the development of an island policy. It was agreed that officials from the Department would visit the islands in the initial stage of the consultation process, engaging directly with the communities and, where applicable, with the local development group or comharchumann representatives. The Department undertook an extensive consultation process through in-person meetings on the islands, online meetings, questionnaires and submissions. A small number of islands have recently requested that the Department hold an in-person meeting on their island, as it was not possible to visit them due to Covid-19 restrictions. It is intended that these meetings will be held next month.

A large amount of data has been gathered to date through the consultation process. What has emerged from the data is that, while many of the islands have individual or specific issues, a number of themes are common across the islands. The main issues highlighted in the consultation relate to education, health, housing and planning, employment, broadband, transport and access to services.

An interdepartmental committee for islands was established to develop a national policy for the inhabited offshore islands at the beginning of this process. This committee is made up of senior officials from across 13 Departments. The committee has been meeting regularly and directs and oversees the development of the policy. At the most recent meeting of the interdepartmental committee for the islands, participating Departments reviewed progress on the policy development and agreed the next steps to be taken. It was agreed that the various Departments would submit a list of action points that they could undertake to further enhance the future development and sustainability of communities on our offshore islands.

The inclusion of the islands function under the remit of the Department of Rural and Community Development since July 2020 has enabled a more integrated and cohesive approach to rural and community policy development for island communities and their economies. This closer policy alignment with the Department's suite of programmes which support community development, rural economic development and digital innovation is already yielding dividends

on a number of fronts and will become more apparent as the national islands policy is developed.

The Department is already progressing additional actions and programmes to further support the island communities. For example, the Department sanctioned funding of €2.09 million earlier this year for various works on non-county roads on a number of islands in Donegal. This was the culmination of ongoing dialogue between the Department and the local authority through various fora. In addition, a new measure for our islands has been included in the CLÁR programme this year. This has two aspects. The first is island community transport, which will provide up to 90% of the total cost of a community bus or vehicle with an electric charging point which is powered by solar PV panels. The maximum grant available will be €100,000 for a vehicle, increasing to €120,000 for a bus, where solar panel and charging point are included. The second aspect is an island outdoor community recreation amenities measure, which will provide up to 90% of the total cost of outdoor community recreation amenities on islands, subject to a maximum grant of €50,000.

The Department of Rural and Community Development has a strong track record of developing innovative policies and strategies in consultation with communities and stakeholder groups. Our approach to the development of the new national policy for the islands is no different. The island representative bodies, island development companies and the island co-operatives have been very effective over the years in supporting their communities and raising their issues of concern with the Government. I am aware that the committee has met those groups on a number of occasions as well. We see these groups as key stakeholders in the development of the island policy and we are committed to continuous engagement with them as the work progresses.

Overall, our vision is that the policy development process will lead to the agreement of a number of objectives across all policy areas to support, promote and empower our island communities. Implementation of the policy through the three-year action plans will improve the quality of life of island communities by fully taking into account the unique context of each island and by developing a system of reporting and review that will promote accountability. As noted in Our Rural Future, this new islands policy will be the first focused policy initiative for the islands for more than 20 years. It will focus on providing new opportunities for islanders and building sustainable futures for island communities. It will be developed in consultation with island communities and with input from across the whole of government to provide a blueprint for sustainable island development that will safeguard our island communities for generations to come. We welcome the views of the committee as a valuable input into the policy development process and we look forward to the discussion today.

**Chairman:** Thank you, Ms Nic Aongusa. I have a few initial questions on the consultation process. We understand that this was disrupted because of Covid-19. Perhaps you could outline how you overcame that in terms of the online meetings and how you facilitated that engagement. Second, I see that you are planning engagements on a number of islands next month. What timelines are you looking at for the completion of this body of work? Initially, we were looking at the end of this year, but members are very anxious to see this published. What sort of a timeline are we looking at on foot of this further engagement?

Another issue members have raised consistently is the 20% reduction in public transport costs for everyone using public transport except our island communities. This has not been extended to the ferries on our offshore islands. There is a tender process in terms of the competition that takes place but a separate charge is paid by islanders which is not the tourist charge

paid by visitors to the islands. Surely a mechanism can be found to reduce that in accordance with the reduction we have seen in other parts of the country. Will Ms Nic Aongusa and her colleagues address those two issues?

**Ms Bairbre Nic Aongusa:** The consultation process with the islands started in early 2020. From January to April 2020, public meetings were held on eleven islands and, when the pandemic happened, they moved online. I will ask my colleague, Ms Ní Chonghaile, to speak on those meetings and on our plans for the remaining meetings.

On the timeline for the policy, the Minister has given a commitment that the policy will be ready for her consideration by the middle of this year and we are still aiming for that timeline. We will have a draft for the Minister's consideration by the summer and hope to look at publishing it this year, subject to any issues that arise in the consultation process.

I ask Ms Ni Chonghaile to say a few words about the consultation, and then I will come back to the 20%.

**Ms Bríd Ní Chonghaile:** We did much of the consultation in person on the islands in spring 2020 but, with the Covid-19 restrictions, the process was suspended. It was reactivated through online meetings and focus groups. The community groups or co-operatives on the participating islands were asked to put together focus groups. Sometimes they were made up of members of the community and sometimes of committee members. We met online and went through a similar process to the in-person meetings. A number of islands felt the forum did not suit them that well. We have had requests from two islands that we visit them in person and we hope to do that next month. That is Clare Island and Tory Island. We are always available and accept submissions or correspondence from individuals or groups on any islands until after that period, so probably the end of May.

**Chairman:** I thank Ms Ni Chonghaile. Will the witnesses speak on the ferry service?

**Ms Bairbre Nic Aongusa:** As members may be aware, the Department of Transport recently announced a fare reduction scheme that would provide a 20% average fare reduction on all train and bus services managed by the National Transport Authority on its behalf. That scheme does not extend to any other subsidised transport service managed by the Department of Transport or to the offshore island schemes overseen by our Department. The Department is not opposed to looking at this but we have concerns that retrospectively applying a fair reduction scheme to contracts procured might cause some issues for private and subsidised operators. Our main concern is to protect the existing subsidised services and we need to be careful that we do not introduce a scheme that would undermine existing contracts or affect the ongoing public procurement process. The Minister has written to the Attorney General seeking advice on this issue. That advice will be made available to us, we hope, in the coming weeks.

**Chairman:** I will not dwell on it, but the National Transport Authority entered into contracts with private operators for public services on the mainland. If we can alter this in terms of contracts with private companies on the mainland, why can we not do it with contractors servicing our islands? The legal issue in relation to this is the same. It is a contract with a State body to provide a service and a contracted level of subsidy, in terms of the bus services we have in any other part of the country. How is there such a big challenge regarding the service to the offshore islands, particularly when the reduction could be applied specifically to the island transport fee rather than to the general population using the ferry service?

**Ms Bairbre Nic Aongusa:** When the decision was made, it was in the context of the Department of Transport's subsidised services, which are managed by the National Transport Authority. The scheme does not extend to any other subsidised transport services managed by that Department, including the PSO air services to Donegal and Kerry. Because the offshore islands transport services are managed by our Department, which is a different Department, the Government's decision in relation to that did not extend to us.

The Minister is not opposed to looking at this. We hear the concerns about it, but we need to be careful that we do not create difficulties in relation to procurement. It is worth pointing out that islanders already benefit from subsidised fares on all island transport services. I ask my colleague, Mr. Mac Donncha, to provide further details on that. As far as I know, on most subsidised ferry services, the islander rate is in the region of 50% less than the standard rate.

**Chairman:** When Mr. Mac Donncha comes in, will he address the following? We have different rates on public transport services where private contractors are subsidised to provide a service on PSO routes. Some people will pay a commercial rate on that and others will get it for free, namely, people who have the free travel pass. I accept it is a different Department and funding needs to be provided for it. However, I cannot see how there is legal uniqueness in terms of these contracts compared to those with the National Transport Authority. I accept that was not part of the original Government decision but we have heard evidence at the committee that the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform would welcome a request from the Department of Rural and Community Development for it to consider providing the reduction to islanders.

**Mr. Colm Mac Donncha:** It centres around the fact that many islands enjoy PSO contracts. They have subsidised services and private operations, as well. It is a mix of the two. Our problem is if we go back and apply a 50% reduction on a fare that we agreed with somebody with whom we went through the procurement process, we are worried we may be leaving ourselves open to a challenge from private operators saying we are favouring people who already get a subsidy over private operations. As we have pointed out a few times, that is a concern we have.

The Minister has written to the Attorney General to seek clarity on this. We fear we might end up undermining the work we are doing. We await the response from the Attorney General on that.

**Mr. Aodán Mac an Mhíle:** One point of clarification that has come to our attention in the last few days is that the 20% reduction applies to the PSO routes managed by the NTA. Contractors would enjoy exclusivity on the routes. There are no direct competitors on those routes. The contracts that we have in place for the islands are not PSO routes. They are tendered subsidised routes but there are competitive operators running on the same routes. There is a key difference there in our contracts versus the NTA contracts. That is one of the points on which we need clarification from the Attorney General. That is a question of whether we would effectively be distorting by giving an added benefit to one operator over others. We may be in a position then that all of the operators on those routes would look to get the benefit from the Department even though we do not have contracts with them. That is the key concerns. We are favourably looking at this but we are concerned in that regard.

**Chairman:** It is important to get the matter clarified because we do not want to undermine the contracts. Please correct me if I am wrong but I understand that the subsidised service for islanders is only on a particular service so there is no competing with visitors. We are not subsidising the visitors when they visit the islands whichever operator they use. I just cannot

see how we would undermine that. As a committee, we are anxious that the Department would conclude this matter quickly and make a formal request to the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.

**Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh:** I wish to ask a wider question. Tá brón orm nach raibh mé anseo nuair a thosnaigh sibh amach. Bhí mé as láthair toisc go raibh an tUachtarán Zelensky istigh linn sa Dáil. Gabhaim buíochas leis na finnétithe as a gcur i láthair. It is interesting that sometimes a delay can play into one's favour because had an island strategy been delivered in January 2020 I think that we would now be dealing with a completely different landscape. The Covid crisis, for all of its challenges, has presented opportunities to rural Ireland and significant opportunities to island communities that are prepared to grasp them. In particular, remote working should now be a possibility if we have the broadband connection available. The same goes for educational options for children who live on the islands and health. If the island communities talk about themselves as potential lighthouse projects in terms of renewable energy then they should also be lighthouse projects in terms of the roll-out of e-health measures. They could be hugely significant in that regard.

The delay has helped and an island strategy that was delivered in 2020 would now be out of date. However, we need one and we must tighten the timelines. We had hoped to have the strategy in our hands before we, as a committee, completed this unit of work. This morning I spoke on Raidió na Gaeltachta about the fact that we hope to have a committee meeting on an island, which will be an historic event, but it would have been great to have the policy in our hands so that we were not discussing it in the dark. I ask the Assistant Secretary to outline the timeline and say whether she is confident that we will hit those markers.

I will now discuss interdepartmental workings and this week I submitted a parliamentary question on the subject. An issue that Deputy Ó Cuív has referred to repeatedly is interconnection in terms of energy, communications and water provision on the islands. We know that island communities are small and for that reason find it difficult to find representation and have a voice. I think that this committee has played an important role in amplifying that voice but it does sometimes feel like the silos are difficult to break. The Department responsible for islands is a small one and needs help. Its initiatives need to be integrated with initiatives that are run out of other Departments such as the Departments of Transport, Health and Education, and the Department responsible for energy. Do the witnesses feel that cross-departmental work and structures exist? Are there still too many silos? Do those relationships need to be improved in order to deliver for the people in island communities?

**Ms Bairbre Nic Aongusa:** I will first address the point made about interdepartmental work. The Deputy is right that silos are often difficult to break. One of the biggest challenges for us across the civil and public service is to work across Departments, boundaries and agencies. Our interdepartmental group consists of 13 Departments. From the outset we have developed a whole-of-government approach to the preparation of the policy and we are committed to working with Departments on the policy.

In terms of e-health, another unit in my Department is responsible for digital development and it has been very active with the Department of Health in efforts to further the e-health agenda. A number of pilot projects are currently being developed and they will take advantage of the opportunities offered by connectivity. The Department, for example, identified an opportunity to use the connectivity provided by our broadband connection points network to develop a pilot e-health solution for a number of islands. My Department is currently supporting a working group that is overseeing the establishment of dedicated e-health virtual consultation rooms,

which will be located within the broadband connection points on both Tory Island and Clare Island. This is a collaborative effort with membership of the group consisting of representatives from the HSE, Donegal County Council and Mayo County Council. I stress that the initiative is being led by our colleagues in the Department of Rural and Community Development. The islands unit links in but other units, as I said in my opening statement, within the Department of Rural and Community Development are very much alive to the need to include the needs of the islands, and island communities, in all of our policies across both community development and rural economic development.

In this collaborative effort e-health consultation rooms are being developed in consultation with local stakeholders and relevant clinical staff. The e-health facilities will complement the HSE Attend Anywhere initiative and will be suitable for a range of virtual consultations. The initiative is being developed on Clare Island. An initial steering group met during the summer with the Cliara local development company, the Western Development Commission, HSE, NUIG and Cisco with a view to establishing a living lab on Clare Island. The discussions are ongoing. That is one example of very effective cross-government and cross-departmental work happening on the islands and being spearheaded by the Department of Rural and Community Development. I acknowledge that interdepartmental and cross-departmental work are always a challenge because each Department has its own priorities and agenda. Our challenge when we work on the national strategy is to tap into agendas that other Departments want to be prioritised, such as e-health, and we come to them and ask how can we help them to pursue their e-health priorities by using what we have got on the islands, namely the broadband connection points and island communities who are keen to work in a new way. We have successfully developed that in e-health. We will take that mindset and approach to the meetings of the interdepartmental committee in our discussions with other Departments.

On the whole-of-government piece we, as a Department, do not have responsibility for water systems or energy on the islands. The roles of the local authorities are very important. Again, our Department sees the local authorities as key stakeholders. They are key stakeholders for us right across the country in terms of furthering the objectives of the Our Rural Future policy. In particular, in terms of the islands, we engage specifically with the local authorities that have island responsibilities too.

**Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh:** The Chair is very committed to the sustainable development goals and I have made the following argument at this committee before. The SDGs are often viewed here in Ireland as something that happens in developing countries but I think that they are particularly applicable although I am not sure that we vindicate all of the SDG subtargets within communities on our islands. It is a tool that allows for that whole-of-government and cross-departmental approach. However, I often feel with Government strategies there is a process of retroactive badging of sustainable development goals whereby people look at the goals after the document is written and see where the nice graphics could best fit.

I praise again the work of the likes of Chambers Ireland, which have set out a first principles approach in terms of integrating the SDGs, particularly in paying attention to the subtargets underneath those goals. If one were still at the drafting stage of the policy, it would be interesting at this point to apply that kind of lens because it is a tool whereby we can ensure that whole-of-government and cross-departmental approach that is so important in delivering outcomes for island communities.

**Deputy Claire Kerrane:** I thank all the officials for coming in this morning and Ms Nic Aongusa for her opening statement.

I have only two questions. The first relates to the policy document itself. This is a ten-year plan. It will be an important policy moving forward and it will matter a lot. We can tell from the engagements we have had how important this policy is to people who live on the islands and what it will mean to them. The Department will be aware that Comhdháil Oileáin na hÉireann has asked for a draft copy of that policy document. The Department has spoken much about engagement and collaboration. I would ask if that is something that would be actively considered by the Department given it is so important the comhdháil is on board with this policy when it is published. After all of the work, all of the time and all of the delay, the reasons for which I appreciate and understand, it is important we get it right. There is no point in publishing a big ten-year document if the comhdháil is not on board and if such representative bodies are not on board. It is something the comhdháil has requested and I ask that it be considered. There is clearly still time to do that.

Housing is obviously a big concern. It is something that has been raised by everybody who has come before the committee in relation to the islands. I welcome that University College Cork is carrying out a survey of housing stock. I presume that will feed into the work the Department is doing because it will be important when it comes to the housing part of that document. Have the witnesses any update on that survey and will they confirm if it will, in fact, feed into the work of the policy?

**Ms Bairbre Nic Aongusa:** I agree with the Deputy that it is important we take the time to get this policy right. I also agree that we need to do it in consultation and collaboration with the island communities. We have an excellent track record in the Department of Rural and Community Development of engaging with communities and with our stakeholders in developing our policies. I was personally involved in working on Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities, which is our five-year strategy for the community and voluntary sector. When we developed that, we worked in partnership with a stakeholder group. That was widely welcomed by the sector when it was published by the former Minister, Deputy Ring, in 2019. I currently chair a stakeholders' group that oversees the implementation of the policy and I expect we can adopt that kind of model when we are working with the island communities on this policy. We are committed absolutely to engaging with Comhdháil Oileáin na hÉireann right throughout this process and we will continue to engage with it as the work evolves.

The process of policy development, as the committee will be aware, is an iterative one - we did this also when we were doing the community and voluntary strategy - and takes a variety of different forums such as stakeholder engagement, informal meetings and ongoing dialogue. We want to make sure we develop a policy that makes sense and is meaningful for everyone involved and to have all the conversations we need to have. The in-person consultations we will now have on the two remaining islands will also give us a fresh perspective on the issues given the time that has elapsed.

It is important to say that, ultimately, decisions on the policy will be a matter for Government and it may not be possible to deliver on everything to which island communities aspire. However, we are a while away from that yet and we are teasing out those issues. Teasing them out is what the consultation and engagement process is all about.

We are very much committed. I am personally committed to proceeding on that basis of full collaboration and consultation. As I stated earlier in terms of the timeline, our timeline is to have a draft for the Minister's consideration by the summer with the objective of publishing a policy this year.

**Chairman:** I wish to come back to Ms Nic Aongusa on the e-health pilot. That is a positive development that is taking place on the islands. If it is successful, there is no reason it cannot be rolled out to the other island communities and on the mainland as well. Sadly, the shortage of GPs is not only an island problem now. It is right across this country.

Another investment the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications undertook over a decade ago was to bring high-speed broadband to every second level school. The committee is concerned that has not been exploited to the full extent it should be in terms of broadening the subject choice at second level. We would be grateful if, in Department's engagement with the Department of Education, Ms Nic Aongusa would bring that concern to its attention.

An issue relating to second level schools that was also raised this morning is that two of the five post-primary schools on the islands have small school status but the other three do not. We have only five second level schools on the islands and surely they should have equality of treatment in terms of that small school status. Will Ms Nic Aongusa bring that to the attention of the Department of Education as well?

In the context of the Department's engagement with local authorities and other Departments, the committee is strongly of the view that if there is investment to improve the water supply to the islands, ducting for fibre-optic and electricity transmission cables would be installed in conjunction, and if the electricity transmission cable is being upgraded, provision would be made to improve the water supply and the fibre-optic cable. The big part of the cost in terms of delivering those two pieces of infrastructure is the physical ploughing of the seabed to lay the cable. Surely, from an Exchequer, cross-departmental and value for money point of view and from the point of view of developing the islands, there should be co-ordination in that regard. Sadly, the regulatory and planning mechanisms do not facilitate it, but through engagement with other Departments and local authorities, we should be able to come up with a broad-minded strategy that would achieve the targets that are set by the island communities to maximise the infrastructural investment when one project is taking place. We would appreciate it if those matters could be taken back and fed into the interdepartmental working group.

On behalf of the committee, I thank Ms Nic Aongusa and her officials for the engagement we have had with the Department, not only on the current work programme but in terms of the other engagements we have had with the Department to date. We look forward to working closely with the Department in the production of our report in the short term and our ongoing engagement on the development of island communities. Gabhaim buíochas leo, unless Ms Nic Aongusa has something to add.

**Ms Bairbre Nic Aongusa:** I was reminded that the second point Deputy Kerrane raised about housing was not addressed. Apologies, that was my oversight. Ms Ní Chonghaile has information on that.

**Ms Bríd Ní Chonghaile:** We fund Comhdháil Oileáin na hÉireann annually. We increased the funding last year because it wanted to undertake a survey of the housing stock on the island and we have continued that funding this year because the survey has not been completed yet. It is ongoing, as the Deputy stated, with UCC. We were speaking to the members during the week about their AGM, to which we have been invited, probably in September, where they hope to present the findings of that survey.

**Chairman:** I thank the witnesses for their constructive and positive engagement here.

6 APRIL 2022

The joint committee adjourned at 11.50 a.m. until 9.30 a.m. on Wednesday, 27 April 2022.