

# DÁIL ÉIREANN

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## AN COMHCHOISTE UM

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### FEIDHMIÚ CHOMHAONTÚ AOINE AN CHÉASTA

### JOINT COMMITTEE ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE GOOD FRIDAY AGREEMENT

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*Déardaoin, 1 Nollaig 2016*

*Thursday, 1 December 2016*

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The Joint Committee met at 2.15 p.m.

#### MEMBERS PRESENT:

Deputy Brendan Smith,	Senator Frances Black,
	Senator Mark Daly,
	Senator Frank Feighan,
	Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile.

In attendance: Pat Doherty, MP and Alasdair McDonnell, MP.

DEPUTY DECLAN BREATHNACH IN THE CHAIR.

## **Business of Joint Committee**

**Vice Chairman:** As the Chairman, Deputy Kathleen Funchion, is indisposed, she has asked me to chair today's meeting in my capacity as Vice Chairman. Apologies have been received from Deputy Funchion as well as Deputies Fergus O'Dowd, Sean Sherlock and Maureen O'Sullivan and Senators Denis Landy and Gerard Craughwell. Apologies have also been received from Margaret Richie, MP, and Mark Durkan, MP. I welcome Mr. Pat Doherty, MP, to the meeting.

Today the committee will examine cross-Border co-operation on road infrastructure. There will be two sessions. During the first session, we will hear from the representatives of Monaghan County Council, Donegal County Council, Fermanagh and Omagh District Council and Derry City and Strabane District Council. In our second session we will hear from the representatives from Louth County Council and Newry, Mourne and Down District Council.

I propose that we go into private session to consider a number of housekeeping items. Is that agreed? Agreed.

*The joint committee went into private session at 2.20 p.m. and resumed in public session at 2.40 p.m.*

### **Cross-Border Road Infrastructure: Discussion**

**Vice Chairman:** I take great pleasure in welcoming the witnesses to our first session today. I welcome Councillor P.J. O'Hanlon, cathaoirleach of Monaghan County Council; Councillor Mary Garrity, chair of Fermanagh and Omagh District Council; Mr. Seamus Neely, chief executive of Donegal County Council; Mr. John Kelpie, chief executive of Derry City and Strabane District Council; Mr. Eamonn O'Sullivan, chief executive of Monaghan County Council, and Mr. Brendan Hegarty, chief executive of Fermanagh and Omagh District Council.

I invite the witnesses to give their opening statements. There will then be an opportunity for a question and answer session. There are a number of housekeeping rules. I will reiterate a notice that is given here regularly about turning off mobile phones. I remind members, guests and those in the Visitors Gallery to please ensure that their mobile phones, iPhones, BlackBerry's, etc., are switched off completely - let me stress the word completely - for the duration of the meeting as they cause interference, even when in silent mode, with the recording equipment in the committee rooms. I ask everyone to refrain from switching phones on or off, as that can also interfere with the sound equipment for several minutes at a time.

I am also obliged to read a notice regarding privilege. 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 or body outside the House, or an official either by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable. 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 joint committee. However, if they are directed by the committee to cease giving evidence on a particular matter and they continue to do so, they are entitled thereafter only to a 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 they are asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against any person,

persons or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable.

On behalf of the committee, I am pleased to welcome our witnesses. I understand that Mr. Neely and Mr. Kelpie will give the opening statements, and that our other witnesses will come in later. I now invite Mr. Neely to make his opening remarks.

**Mr. Seamus Neely:** I thank the Chairman and other members of the joint committee for the invitation to meet with them today and present our case on the importance of strategic road access to the north-west of the island. We have travelled here as a collaboration of a number of councils, including Monaghan County Council, Donegal County Council, Derry City and Strabane District Council, as well as Fermanagh, Omagh, and the Mid-Ulster councils. Those councils represent 500,000 to 750,000 people so it is a significant cohort and critical mass in an area with much potential that has yet to be realised.

Councils both North and South are currently enjoying the first opportunities to work under extended powers and remits. Both sets of councils have worked together in recent months and years on responding to the development needs of our areas, including environmental, physical, structural and community planning. In so doing, we have formed views on the potential that exists within our regions. At the same time, we have got a first-hand understanding of the critical nature of access to our region. In that context, some progress has been made generally both in community and economic development across our region in the past ten years. However, we feel that much potential remains to be achieved under those headings.

One of the most critical deficits at the moment relates to the need to have a safe route into the north-west from the east with certainty of travel times. We need to dispel the notion of the north-west being distant or reached with some uncertainty. Part of that notion has already been dispelled but more work remains to be done. Over the past 20 years, there have been significant achievements on other fronts, but we want to build on them. There has been a considerable easing of cross-Border barriers and communities are now working collaboratively. In particular, councils North and South are working together on community planning. The most recent reform of local government has enabled us to plan for our communities collectively in a way that we have not done before.

We appreciate the overall commitment to the route. We are talking about a cost of €870 million to bring the stretch from the city of Derry through to Ballygawley. We appreciate the commitment from the Irish Government in contributing the sum of €75 million towards that. The difficulty concerns timelines. We are looking at the first phase being to Strabane, then Omagh to Ballygawley, and the last phase from Strabane to Omagh. That will impact on other plans by Donegal County Council, including links from Letterkenny to Strabane that would tie in with the A5. For some years we have had approval - previously from the National Roads Authority, NRA, and now Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII - for compulsory purchase for a new bridge at Strabane. In addition, there is a commitment that funding will become available for that. Our difficulty, however, is that what we had planned to tie in with on the Northern side does not exist at present. Being the last phase, it automatically sets back the new crossing from Lifford to Strabane quite a bit.

One of the fundamental changes in our approach in recent years is the fact that we fully understand that there is significant unrealised potential all along the route, but particularly in the north-west. Currently, there is a net cost to both Governments for running public services in the north-west region. We feel there is a potential to expand our economic base and the role of our territories, whether in tourism or foreign direct investment, to a point where economic activity

will be strengthened. In that way, the balance would turn from being a cost to a net contributor. The economic argument for this is much stronger now than in the past. It comes on the back of a lot of collaborative work to ensure that other things are in place to sustain necessary employment and economic growth.

I will now hand over to my colleague, Mr. John Kelpie.

**Mr. John Kelpie:** I thank the Chairman and other members for having us here today. I am the chief executive of Derry City and Strabane District Council. As Mr. Neely said, we are here as a collective group. Derry is very much the major urban centre at the core of that region. Derry is the fourth largest city region on the island of Ireland, with a catchment population for a travel-to-work area of approximately 400,000. It is the only city region on these islands that straddles an international border. In fact, it is the only city region in the whole of Europe that straddles a border of that nature.

In recent years, there has been fantastic progress in the north west. Some recent economic announcements have been pleasing in terms of new job creation opportunities. In addition, there have been physical and environmental improvements in our natural and built heritage. There has been an expansion in our third-level colleges. We have a high percentage of young people in the council's area, of which a large number attend third and higher-level educational colleges. Over the past five to ten years, therefore, there has been much positive progress. That said, the fundamental challenges of the region stubbornly remain and have been hard to shift. There has been a significant period of underinvestment which is a legacy. Our connectivity issues remain extremely challenging, including the issue of peripherality. All of that has led to high levels of social deprivation and continued, stubbornly high unemployment rates.

There are many challenges but, as Mr. Neely said, there is a new era of opportunity. On both sides of the Border, we have undergone local government reform. This provides councils with welcome new powers to drive forward their regions and economies. The north-west region has seen a specific focus through the North-South Ministerial Council, this joint committee and the North-West Gateway Initiative. The new strategic north-west partnership, involving councils and both Governments, is a unique model of cross-jurisdictional local and central government collaboration on the island. There is indeed a window of opportunity to transform the region and change those hard-to-shift statistics into what we aspire to, which is that the fourth-largest city region reaches its full potential in the same manner as Dublin, Belfast and Cork and eventually begins to become a net contributor to the economy on both sides of the island.

As councils, we have set off on a highly ambitious plan, and colleague councils around the table have similar strategic plans. In the city of Derry, that will involve an expansion of the university and a significant focus on the growing of skills and the attraction of new FDI, the building of our SME base and capitalising on our greatest asset, namely, our talent and young people. We in Derry city have developed a strategic plan to develop that area. The outcome of that plan will see significant job growth, approximately £500 million added to the GVA of Northern Ireland and an additional tax take of £100 million per annum for the economy.

The unemployment rate will fall to below the Northern Ireland average for the first time in history. These plans are predicated on increased and improved connectivity, in particular from the point of view of this committee, to Dublin Port, the city of Dublin as a centre of economic activity and, very importantly for us, to Dublin Airport. Most of our FDI companies have North American bases and cite connectivity to Dublin Airport as one of the primary issues that concerns them in respect of where they locate on the island.

Our plan has been carefully worked through over the past number of months. Consultation has taken place across our communities. All of our statutory agencies, the Government and statutory partners have bought into the process. We were very clear about our ambition for the future, but that ambition hinges on connectivity to the city of Dublin, its ports and airports. We require rapid and reliable safe conductivity, and some of my colleagues will discuss those important issues.

To sum up, it is a key economic driver for us and a paramount and priority project, and we call on the committee to support us in terms of ensuring that those sections of the A5 that have been designed rapidly start on site and those sections of the N2 that remain to be designed and scoped as soon as possible.

**Vice Chairman:** I apologise to Mr. Slowey, cathaoirleach of Donegal County Council. I was trying to figure out how six goes into seven when I realised my mistake. He is most welcome. Do any other witnesses wish to comment before I open the floor? They should feel free to contribute to the question-and-answer session.

**Mr. Brendan Hegarty:** I thank the Vice Chairman. To add to what my colleagues have said, the Fermanagh and Omagh District Council area is a very rural area and by far the largest geographic area of all of the new 11 councils, with just two large towns.

The biggest problems are connectivity, road infrastructure and telecommunications. The A5 project is key to the development of our area not just in terms of establishing the North-South link, but also how that can contribute to the east-west link in our area. I thank the committee for the opportunity to make the point.

**Mr. Eamonn O'Sullivan:** Monaghan is key to the delivery of infrastructure for the region. There is a certain amount of frustration among the cathaoirleach and members of Monaghan County Council that the Clontibret to Border section of the project was advanced by 2012 to preferred route corridor stage. That has been protected in the council's development plan, and rightly so, but it is having a very frustrating effect on economic development in the corridor.

I have staff and a council that are willing to fast-track the project to get it to the point whereby a preferred route is decided. That would not take a significant amount of funding - perhaps in the order of €1.6 million of an allocation would allow Monaghan County Council and its staff to progress the project to the point whereby a preferred route is identified. The commitment from the council and staff, working with TII and Transport Northern Ireland, is that we will fast-track this project because we recognise its importance to the region and are prepared to play our part. That is why we are jointly supporting today's submission to the committee.

**Vice Chairman:** I will open up the discussion. If other witnesses want to contribute they should feel free to do so.

**Deputy Brendan Smith:** I thank the Vice Chairman. I welcome the powerful presentation, including the written submission, along with the contributions that have been made. The witnesses very succinctly and comprehensively put forward a very strong case for this piece of infrastructure. Mr. Neely used the phrase "the deficit in infrastructure" and Mr. Kelpie spoke about the unrealised potential and the new era of opportunity.

In the Border context, we also have to consider that a new era of challenges faces us due to political decisions made outside of our jurisdiction. It was never more necessary for us, in particular those of us living in the province of Ulster and along the Border, to get our infrastructure

up to standard. We will face major challenges and will have no potential to meet them unless we have modern infrastructure. Connectivity is obviously key to any region.

Some years ago, the same councils, at cathaoirleach and chief executive level, made very good presentations to this committee. At one of the first meetings of the committee when the Dáil returned earlier in the year, I proposed to the Chairman that we invite the group to come before the committee to discuss this key piece of infrastructure, and I am very glad that the Chairman facilitated that request.

Mr. O'Sullivan, our chief executive in Monaghan, spoke about the frustration that the cathaoirleach of Monaghan County Council, Mr. O'Hanlon, I and other public representatives have endured over the past number of years in that a very small amount of money is required to finalise the preferred route. Subsequent to bringing the representatives of the councils before the previous committee, representatives of the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport and the National Roads Authority came before the committee. We want to see the larger project proceed as rapidly as possible, but Clontibret to the Border is a key enabling piece of infrastructure.

That Monaghan County Council and the local population do not know what the preferred route will be is unfair. A small amount of money is required to tie down the specific corridor. I wholly endorse the remarks of Mr. O'Sullivan, the chief executive of the council, in that respect. Mr. O'Hanlon has spoken at length about the project at local level. I appeal to TII and the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport to allocate the required funding. Our colleague, Senator Robbie Gallagher, has also raised this matter in the Seanad and has the full support of all political opinion in County Monaghan.

Mr. Kelpie spoke about advances in the development of higher education through the institutes of technology in Letterkenny and Sligo, which serve part of the area, and the higher institutes and university in Derry. We know from visits made by the previous committee to Derry, Letterkenny and the general area that there has been a great era of co-operation between North and South. Other colleagues have heard me say on numerous occasions, in particular in the context of Brexit and the challenges we face, that as a country we have underestimated the great growth in commerce and business on a North-South and South-North basis.

Business, commerce and people move seamlessly today, and it is to be hoped they will continue to do so in the future. We need to capitalise on the opportunities available to us. We need to deal with the deficits in our infrastructure which were highlighted in the presentation and the contributions of witnesses. I wholly endorse every sentiment that has been expressed by the witnesses. As a committee, we will continue to endorse very strongly the requests of the cathaoirleach of the different councils and their chief executives to try to get this much needed project progressed.

**Senator Frank Feighan:** I agree with Deputy Smith. I was Chairman of this committee for a number of years. This issue has been discussed at every second or third meeting of the committee and the witnesses have our full support. We have gone on site visits. We must do all we can do politically on both sides of the Border to progress this because it is urgent.

It is absolutely correct to state the north-west road would be an economic driver. The North West Gateway Initiative is great but it needs infrastructure. I live in Boyle, which is on the N4. When we look at a map of the island of Ireland, the M6 goes to Galway and the M1 goes to Dublin but the entire region, North and South, is devoid of motorways and dual carriageways. It needs this initiative. To be a little parochial, going from Sligo to Belfast, which is not that far,

we have the N16 to the Border and then the A5. Some work has been done on it and €3 million was spent. There are 30 km in Leitrim and 7 km in Cavan to Belcoo but there seems to be nothing on the A5 between Belcoo and Enniskillen. If we are talking about cross-Border from the west of Ireland, this should be included. I am not taking away from the argument, but we need to do much more on these routes because they have been neglected. Deputy Smith rightly said Sligo has an institute of technology. There is much cross-Border co-operation. It is correct to state we need better development of these routes. The witnesses have our full support and I believe this support is cross-party.

**Dr. Alasdair McDonnell:** I come at this as somebody not living that close to the Border but who uses the A5 quite a bit, particularly the bit from Ballygawley to Omagh. I know this fell down a few years ago because of planning issues. For the sake of the record will the witnesses specify what is holding us back in each section? Is it purely money? Is everything shovel ready? I want to see it done in bits or even bits of bits. We speak about the three main bits, but I would break them up. Before I leave here today, I would like to know what I can do personally to push this, because while issues such as this involve diplomacy, we need a cohesive but fairly aggressive demand. I fully recognise this demand must be more focused on the North than the South. I can talk happy talk and say nice things about the need for the A5 until the cows come home, but what will change this? What will move it? What will make a difference? How can I make a difference?

**Vice Chairman:** I ask the witnesses to address the questions and, to follow on what Dr. McDonnell has asked, what can the committee specifically do to move this forward?

**Mr. John Kelpie:** I thank the speakers for their support. In response to the comment on what specifically can be done, in very broad terms my understanding is that the northern part of the road, the A5, is in four phases. Phase 1 is fully funded and goes from south of Derry to north of Strabane. It is undergoing due process. Phase 2, going from Omagh to Ballygawley, and phase 3, going from Strabane to Omagh, are going through the design process. What will hold these two back is money. Money is not allocated to take either of these phases onto site when they are ready, and they will be ready design-wise and process-wise relatively quickly. Phase 4 goes from Ballygawley to the Border at Aughnacloy and is being held up because, as my colleague, Mr. O'Sullivan, might advise, the route scoping has not yet been done on the southern side of the Border. Even finalising the design for this phase on the Northern side requires the southern side scoping to take place and, of course, money to deliver it. In summary, phase 1 of the A5 should proceed quite quickly, which is the smallest length from Derry to Strabane. This would be very welcome. The remaining phases are developing through the design and legal processes but the big impediment is money to deliver them.

**Dr. Alasdair McDonnell:** Is there money for phase 1?

**Mr. John Kelpie:** Yes, as I understand it phase 1 is fully funded.

**Dr. Alasdair McDonnell:** What is holding it is up?

**Mr. John Kelpie:** It is going through the final phase of the legal process to ensure it clears those hurdles.

**Dr. Alasdair McDonnell:** So there is nothing much we can do on this phase?

**Mr. John Kelpie:** No.

**Mr. Pat Doherty:** I thank the witnesses for their presentation. I am very familiar with the A5 and all the various twists and turns from the court cases, the public inquiry, the inspectors report due in May and the Irish Government's commitment to revisit the finances in 2018, which will be a big part of what Dr. McDonnell spoke about and the other two phases. I have three questions, one for Mr. Neely and Mr. Kelpie and two for Mr. Hegarty and Mr. O'Sullivan. I would like more detail on how quickly the link from the A5 south of Strabane to Letterkenny on the N14 can be brought forward. We could end up with a situation where the road goes to Derry but does not have a link to Letterkenny.

My next two questions are interlinked. We have the preferred route for the N2 south of the Border. What are the obstacles to choosing the specific route? How far away are we from pinning down the link between Ballygawley and what will end up as the specific route on the N2? How much co-operation is there between road services in the North and the equivalent in the South?

**Deputy Fergus O'Dowd:** Ba mhaith liom fáilte a cur roimh na daoine a tháinig anseo inniu. I am very happy to see a fine body of men and one lady here to address this important issue. I live in the Border county of Louth, as does the Chairman, and we have seen the huge benefit of proper interconnectivity in the road network and the huge plus it has been, particularly for the cities of Dundalk and Newry, and how important the bond has been. Connectivity between Donegal and Derry is hugely important to the region. I am fully supportive of what is being done. We are very happy to work with our Ministers in Government if there is any pressure we can put on any of the agencies. We have had much discussion, and if the witnesses wish they can follow up if they identify three or four things we must do. I assure them that from my perspective it will be done.

We are entering into a period of uncertainty given Brexit, and there may not be European funding in the Northern part of the country, which there is at present. How will it impact on the budget from the UK? There are hugely difficult issues for everybody. I hope from our perspective in the South we maximise the importance of this and push it as far as we can as quickly as possible to ensure we complete whatever commitments are required as urgently as we can.

**Mr. Seamus Neely:** I will take the question on the progress on the link south of Strabane to Letterkenny. That has made progress over the past six months or so. Given the age of the existing design work on the route, it needs to be revisited. As environmental regulations are more stringent now than when the original piece of work was done, a consultant has been appointed recently, funded from TII, to re-examine the route in its entirety from Strabane to Letterkenny, including the relief bridge in Letterkenny and how the cross-over piece linking the city of Derry towards Stranorlar and Donegal town. That is progressing at as fast a pace as it can and the work necessary to see that piece closed out, which will bring it to preferred route stage, should take about two years. That is progressing and is funded right now.

**Mr. Eamonn O'Sullivan:** I will address if I may the question to Mr. Hegarty and me on Clontibret to the Border and Ballygawley to Aughnacloy. In the period 2017 to 2019, the statutory processes and final route selection for the Clontibret to the Border phase could be completed. Our latest estimate indicates that Monaghan County Council would require €1.6 million as project lead on behalf of TII to fast-track this process and get it down to preferred route selection, narrowing it from a current corridor of 400 m to approximately 50 m to 100 m. It would bring certainty. Obviously, within the same period, we would dovetail with our colleagues on the northern side of the Border to ensure that the Ballygawley-Aughnacloy piece, which is essential, could also go through the same procedure. They are vital. The only obstacle to doing

that is a financial allocation because we are quite prepared. As I mentioned earlier, I have staff. My road design team is ready, willing and able to take that on. It has readily been identified by my council and councillors as a key priority not just for County Monaghan but for the region. It is a strategic piece of infrastructure that is urgently needed. It is already long overdue, to be honest, and, in light of the changes this year, it has become even more essential to deliver it for the region. As to local government changes from 2014 on the northern side of the Border, we are now developing the links in relation to cross-Border co-operation. They have become more important than ever and we are willing to work hand in glove with our counterparts in Fermanagh and Omagh to ensure that this receives the priority it deserves.

**Mr. Terence Slowey:** The Good Friday Agreement came into existence and it was transformative. I refer to the North West Gateway Initiative and now this project, which is a really transformative one, not just for the north west but for the whole island from Dublin all the way up to north Donegal, taking in all of that hinterland through Northern Ireland as well. From economic, social and tourism points of views, it is the critical piece of infrastructure that needs to be put in place and it should be one of our highest priorities. It will not just impact on Donegal, but will impact on the whole economy between Dublin and the north west. It will be a great day's work when we get it done. It will not be done overnight but we really need to get at it. It is long since time that we started to put this in place.

**Mr. P.J. O'Hanlon:** If one takes the four counties of Donegal, Derry, Tyrone and Monaghan, they contain approximately 17% to 18% of the population of the whole island of Ireland. It is the only area that does not have a proper road infrastructure. In my own county of Monaghan, over 90% of those employed work in small to medium enterprises. Most of the companies in Monaghan are owned by people from the county who have grown their businesses there. The one thing we need is proper infrastructure. We need a proper road from Monaghan the whole way up to Letterkenny and on to Derry. Unfortunately, we do not have that. Deputy O'Dowd and the Vice Chairman alluded to the road from Dundalk to Newry and up to Belfast, which is the complete opposite of the north-west region. Alasdair McDonnell asked what was holding it up and it is the €1.6 million Monaghan County Council needs to fund the picking of a preferred route from Clontibret to the Border. We talk about challenges and we are all aware of the ones that are coming down the road but to be fair to the four counties concerned, I have no doubt that if they can get this investment, we will meet these challenges head on. This is vital infrastructure that is badly needed not just in Monaghan but the whole way up to Donegal and Derry.

**Vice Chairman:** It is a great day when we see four chief executives, two from the North and two from the South, and, indeed, collective local authorities working together. I thank the witnesses for their presentations, in particular Terence Slowey, PJ O'Hanlon, Mary Garrity, Brendan Hegarty, Seamus Neely, John Kelpie and Eamonn O'Sullivan. I hope we can progress this. I know Mr. Hegarty wants to say a final word. I conclude by noting in respect of the issues addressed by the witnesses today that it is about us trying to progress them. As Dr. Alasdair McDonnell said, it is what specifically we can do. Every effort will be made by all members here to ensure there is progress.

**Mr. Brendan Hegarty:** I speak on behalf of our chairperson here who is unfortunately not able to speak due to a sore throat. On the connectivity from Clontibret to Aughnacloy, it is probably the weakest part of the project at this point in time. We met recently on a cross-council basis with the Minister, Chris Hazzard, on this project. This touches on the point that was made earlier. We see an opportunity now with the review that is due in 2018 to secure additional funding to deliver more phases if not all phases to strengthen that link and address the

issue from Clontibret through to Aughnacloy. We see that as vital.

I want to refer to an area that has not been touched on today as we have been very focused on the economic aspects of the project. It is well recognised that the A5 is operating well beyond its capacity and, as a result, we have a high number of fatalities on the route. It is another aspect of the matter that we need to consider. Certainly, dualling would go a long way to address it. If we look at the recent investment in the dual-carriageway from Dungannon to Ballygawley, it has made a huge difference. It is an example of a short route which demonstrates the benefits that can be achieved. I wanted to reintroduce that aspect of the project. Unfortunately, there are several stretches of the route that are well known for all of the wrong reasons in terms of the number of fatalities that have occurred. I thank all the members.

**Vice Chairman:** I thank Mr. Hegarty. Again, I thank the witnesses for making such succinct and excellent presentations and wish them well in achieving their objectives.

**Vice Chairman:** In our second session today we will discuss the Narrow Water bridge proposal. I am particularly pleased to welcome the witnesses, Ms Joan Martin, chief executive officer, Louth County Council and Mr. Liam Hannaway, chief executive officer, Newry, Mourne and Down District Council. I invite the witnesses to make a brief opening statement to be followed by a question and answer session.

I ask everybody to ensure their mobile phones are completely switched off. My similar request at the first session was effective and we had no interruptions. The recording of proceedings will be much better if people follow that request.

I am also obliged to read a notice regarding privilege. 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 or body outside of the House or an official either by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable.

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I welcome Ms Joan Martin and Mr. Liam Hannaway in particular and the many people in the Visitors Gallery who are interested in this issue. I invite Ms Joan Martin and Mr. Liam Hannaway to make an opening statement.

**Ms Joan Martin:** I thank the Chairman for the invitation to make a presentation to the committee. I and Mr. Liam Hannaway will make a joint presentation. Members will already have a copy of our opening statement. To put it in context, our two councils have a long history of cross-Border co-operation dating back to 1976 when we both were founding members of the east Border region committee. In 1976, despite a history of back-to-back development and a very challenging political climate, which was not conducive to the notion of cross-Border co-operation, both councils realised the mutual benefit which could be gained through working in partnership. The introduction in later years of the EU-funded INTERREG programme and

subsequent programmes during this time enabled both councils to collaborate on a whole series of projects which have enhanced the cross-Border region. Early projects in the 1970s included the production of tourism promotional material such as *The Land of Cúchulainn* and St. Patrick and building on our shared heritage and history. Other projects supporting crafts and small business were undertaken with the assistance of the early INTERREG programmes.

As trust and mutual respect developed between both councils, further co-operation projects were supported such as the Newry-Dundalk twinning committee, the Newry-Dundalk linkages programme, Newry-Dundalk mini-metropolis, and most notably, the signing of a memorandum of understanding, MOU, between both councils in 2011. This MOU was launched in the Northern Ireland Executive office in Brussels and was hailed by the then head of INTERREG, Colin Woolfe, as the “first of its kind” in Europe. This confirmed the high level of cross-Border co-operation which had developed within our region.

Moving on to the Narrow Water bridge project specifically, that concept can also be traced back to the 1970s. An extract from *The Newry Reporter* in January of 1976 reads: “Councillors from both sides of the border met in Newry ... and gave their backing to a proposal to build a bridge linking Omeath and Warrenpoint”. For those who may not be familiar with this project, the picture in our presentation shows Carlingford Lough looking towards the sea and members can see the small bridge where there is a spit of land at the narrowest point. That picture shows a virtual bridge, as it is not built yet. Since 1976, the Narrow Water bridge project has been a strategic objective of both councils but, throughout the years the significant costs associated with the scheme have made the realisation of the project prohibitive. From 2010 Louth County Council progressed the scheme, with some funding from central government from the Department of Transport, and by 2013 most of the preliminary work, including design, planning permissions, vesting orders and so on had been completed but the capital element eluded us.

In 2013, the INTERREG IVA programme represented the first real opportunity to source significant funding for the capital element of the Narrow Water bridge project. A funding application prepared by Louth County Council and Newry and Mourne District Council in conjunction with the east Border region was successful and €17.4 million was secured. Unfortunately, the actual capital cost was significantly higher than the grant available. As I recall, it was around €34 million. Despite concerted and considerable efforts by all involved, we were unable to realise the shortfall and had to relinquish the INTERREG moneys in 2014 as otherwise they would have been lost to Ireland and to Northern Ireland. This was extremely disappointing, not only for both councils but for the people of the region who had been very vociferous in their support for this strategic project. The project remains a strategic priority for both councils. For example, it is included in Louth County Council’s county development plan as a strategic project, but in the absence of outside funding, the capital element cannot be progressed. Since that time in 2014, both councils have continued to lobby both Governments to support the scheme. Mr. Liam Hannaway might deal with some of the more recent developments.

**Mr. Liam Hannaway:** I will pick up from the publication of the Fresh Start agreement. On 17 November 2015, *A Fresh Start: The Stormont Agreement and Implementation Plan* was published in the North of Ireland. Both councils welcomed the commitment to the Narrow Water bridge within the plan. I will quote from the Fresh Start agreement.

The Irish Government remains committed to the concept of the Narrow Water Bridge project which would provide a valuable north south link between counties Down and Louth with the potential to provide jobs and a significant boost to tourism in the area.

It goes on to say:

The Northern Ireland Executive and the Irish Government agree to undertake a review of the project with a view to identifying options for its future development which will be considered by the North South Ministerial Council in June 2016.

That was considered in June 2016 and officials were appointed by both Governments to take on board the views of elected members within both jurisdictions and stakeholders from both council areas regarding the options. A report was presented to the North-South Ministerial Council on Friday, 18 November 2016, at which point it was agreed to continue further developments.

Since then, there have also been discussions regarding the southern relief road. At the time, the roads service division of Transport Northern Ireland, Transport NI, included the Newry southern relief road as part of its strategic programme of work. It began to devise options, some of which included the Narrow Water bridge scheme. The current Banbridge, Newry and Mourne area plan includes a proposal for a Newry southern bypass as a long-term strategic road improvement to link from the A1 Dublin Road, a key strategic route, to the A2 Warrenpoint Road, a trunk road leading to Warrenpoint Port. Transport NI's consultation document on proposals to expand the regional strategic transport network transport plan for 2015 includes the Newry southern relief road as a scheme that performed well in assessment but that was not affordable within ISNI funding envisaged to 2015.

Representations made by Newry, Mourne and Down District Council and Newry Chamber of Commerce and Trade resulted in the Department's agreement to undertake a local transport study of the southern side of Newry to assess the impact of the suggested southern relief road, the possible lines of a new link from the A2 Warrenpoint Road to the A1 Dublin Road at or in the vicinity of Cloghogue roundabout and also what alternative options are available to provide relief to traffic in the area.

The Newry southern relief road proposal has been progressed into Transport NI's forward planning schedule. Transport NI has appointed AECOM as consultants and work has commenced on the stage 1 preliminary options scheme assessment. This work will involve updating key project information and will require traffic and environmental surveys to be undertaken. AECOM has identified five options for consideration, two of the options are located in close proximity to the site of the Narrow Water bridge proposal and involve the construction of a vehicular bridge across the Clanrye River. I will hand over to Ms Martin to conclude.

**Ms Joan Martin:** From a council point of view, clearly no current funding options such as INTERREG moneys are available to allow us to progress the Narrow Water bridge project as envisaged. In the absence of funding opportunities, there is little we in the councils can do beyond continuing to lobby and meet on a regular basis with various stakeholders including Transport NI and others such as the committee today.

Louth County Council has also continued to progress the compulsory purchase order which it published in respect of lands required for the County Louth approach to the Narrow Water bridge. We are purchasing the land needed to bring the connection down from the existing Omearth-Newry road on to the site of the proposed bridge. Any progress regarding the southern relief road proposal would also be of great significance, particularly in view of the close proximity of some of the route options to the Narrow Water bridge site. It may be that if this project proceeds, the construction of a second bridge at Narrow Water itself may become unnecessary but that is all in the future. That concludes our joint statement.

**Vice Chairman:** We will now move to the question-and-answer session. Will the witnesses indicate specifically how the committee might be able to progress the project and how we can help to lobby on the issue?

**Deputy Fergus O'Dowd:** I welcome our guests. I know Ms Martin very well because she is my county manager. She is a very committed public servant. I welcome the work and co-operation between Newry, Mourne and Down District Council and County Louth. The infrastructural improvements are important. I also welcome the community and business involvement and the links between the chambers of commerce. The project would be hugely beneficial, not just to both counties but also to tourism and business generally.

I fully support the project. I echo the Vice Chairman's call for clarification on what steps we need to take. The Taoiseach visited the area approximately a year ago and there were hundreds of people in attendance. He engaged with them on their needs, concerns and support for the project. There is no doubt the project is critically important. I accept that it will cost a lot of money. The initial cost was seriously exceeded. It was strange that the money that was available was known before the job was priced. The technical and professional people will advise on the solution but I am 100% behind it.

The Vice Chairman is aware that I have a reason to leave early. I am obliged to travel to Belfast to attend to some business. I apologise for having to leave now but I fully support everything relating to the project and I am happy to help in any way.

**Dr. Alasdair McDonnell:** I thank both witnesses for their useful presentation. I have always supported the concept of the Narrow Water bridge and I was bitterly disappointed in 2014 when the concept did not quite meet the financial requirements. What indications do the witnesses have that the necessary finance will ever appear again? There was much emotional and practical support behind the project at the time, which pushed it on even though there was some resistance to it. What hope do we have that the money could be forthcoming at a later date?

Mr. Hannaway mentioned five options. Two of them are close to Warrenpoint, but what are the other three options? Leading on from that, is there a combined option between some sort of a Narrow Water bridge and Newry bypass option in some shape? In other words, will the bridge be strong enough to take some of the port traffic coming out of Warrenpoint and to put it over on to the Omeath side? How far upstream could the bridge be moved before it is out of County Louth? Is it 1 km or 2 km?

I fully support the concept but I am echoing some of the criticism that has been thrown at me at times about it. Where would the bridge lead to on the southern side? Would there be a run-off road? How would one travel from Warrenpoint to Omeath? Would it be a question of going around the Cooley Peninsula or back up into Newry on the southern side of the lough? There are a number of questions there, probably too many. The concept is very good and I fully support it. However, I am just worried, in the same way as the Vice Chairman outlined, about what we can do. To some extent what prompted my question on at what point does the bridge move out of Louth is based on the fact that it would then become a totally Northern operation. If the bridge were between Down and Armagh it is a northern operation rather than a Louth operation. Perhaps the witnesses could respond to some of those questions.

**Mr. Pat Doherty:** I thank the speakers for their presentation. I have two questions but I am a bit wary about asking the first in light of what was said. Is there a projected cost on the project? If progress is made on the southern relief road, how close in terms of mileage or kilometres is

that to the Narrow Water bridge? Will one cancel out the other? I ask the witnesses to elaborate.

**Senator Frances Black:** I welcome both speakers here today. I am familiar with the area of Newry, Warrenpoint and Rostrevor and the area of Omeath and Carlingford. A bridge is a wonderful idea and would be phenomenal for both counties from a tourism point of view. I imagine that securing funding for the project would be a huge undertaking. I hope my following suggestion will not cause trouble. While the money is being raised is it possible to provide a small car ferry? I know about a car ferry in Cork that works very well. Is a car ferry a good idea from a tourism point of view?

**Ms Joan Martin:** I shall answer some of the questions and then I shall hand over to Mr. Hannaway.

The aim and objective of the southern relief road is completely different from that of the Narrow Water bridge. The latter has existed since the mid-1970s. It was always about creating the loop where people could drive to the Cooley Peninsula, to Rostrevor and around to Newcastle. The aim of the project was to encourage people to disperse around the area and thus spread tourism. The purpose of the southern relief road is to get traffic from Warrenpoint port as quickly and as painlessly as possible and on to the Dublin-Belfast road without going near Newry. The road needs to get over the mountain and on to the North-South motorway so serves a different purpose. If the southern relief road goes ahead, and depending on where its bridge is built, then it may not make sense to build another bridge.

County Louth received money for a greenway along Carlingford Lough that spanned Carlingford to Omeath. We have now received a letter of offer to extend the greenway further under the INTERREG V programme. This year the greenway has attracted enormous numbers of between 50,000 and 80,000 visitors. Cyclists will be able to travel from Carlingford to Lough Neagh on the current greenway, the extension and a towpath along the canal north from Newry. The project attracts many tourists. In many ways the time is more right than ever for a project to support tourism in the area, particularly one that will encourage tourists to travel around the area of the Cooley and Mourne mountains.

Senator Black suggested a car ferry for the area and we have just talked about such a project. There has been a ferry concept as far back as the 1970s and early 1980s. Clearance has finally been given for a ferry from the mouth of the lough between Greenore port area over to Greencastle in County Down. A ferry will add to the loop and infrastructure that is already available to tourists. People will be able to take the ferry, travel around the Mourne mountains for the day and then return on the bridge.

A question was asked about costs. We have received tenders in excess of €30 million. We have had something of an argument with the consulting engineers because the original estimate was €17.4 million, which was based on our grant application to INTERREG, and the tender is in excess of €30 million. The huge disparity in cost was explained by the uniqueness of the bridge. Members will have seen the picture of the bridge included in our presentation. The bridge is unique as it requires a lifting mechanism in order to continue to allow access to the important canal and basin in Newry that is being developed as a marina and tourism area. Such an unusually designed lifting bridge would be a risk for a contractor and thus led to an increased cost.

INTERREG IVA is the only programme that offered us an opportunity to apply for funding. Normally there would not be an opportunity for a council to apply for large infrastructural

grants in the roads area. That money, on previous programmes, was kept within the Departments located in the North and South. It is the first time in the 30 or 40 years of the project that we have had such an opportunity. Unfortunately, today I must say to the committee that I do not know where the opportunity rests at the moment. There is nowhere for the councils to apply for funding. There is no opportunity with INTERREG V. The PEACE programme does not have that kind of infrastructural money available to it either. The Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport in the South does not have an enormous budget. It has suffered a lot of cutbacks and has not retrieved the level of budget that it had. The Department has never been in a position to offer us large funding for the project although it gave us some assistance when developing the designs.

The planning permissions for the bridge are in place. Obviously the project straddles two jurisdictions so it has two sets of everything. The compulsory purchase order in the Republic of Ireland does not have a lifespan and in theory lasts forever. On the Northern side, the permissions are five years in duration. We have moved rapidly through the allotted period as the project is fast approaching four years. Time is running out for all of the permissions, designs and everything we have at the moment. Therefore, we will have to go again and make the investment without some kind of security. I feel we are looking for support. The project is being seriously considered by the North-South Ministerial Council. It has met us and continues to consider the project. There may be some level of enthusiasm for the project at the moment and hard lobbying might unlock the money. The Governments will have to make a move as there is nowhere else for us to go.

Mr. Hannaway will respond to the remaining questions.

**Mr. Liam Hannaway:** I shall pick up on Dr. McDonnell's question on the five options for the southern relief road. There are five options between Warrenpoint and Newry. Two options are at ground level. One of the options is a road straight across at the Greenbank Industrial Estate in Newry.

**Dr. Alasdair McDonnell:** Is that at ground level?

**Mr. Liam Hannaway:** Yes. Another of the two options is a road at ground level that is roughly 1.5 miles to 2 miles down the road from where the Narrow Water bridge is located. It is roughly halfway down the A2 at Clady Quarries.

**Dr. Alasdair McDonnell:** Is it halfway between Warrenpoint and Newry?

**Mr. Liam Hannaway:** Yes. It is probably more towards Warrenpoint than Newry. The other two options are high level. They would bring a person on a large suspension bridge located at a high level and connected into Clough roundabout. The options are all on the same road but two are at ground level and two are at a higher level. The two ground level options are in close proximity. They are similar to the Narrow Water Bridge because bridges will have to open and deal with traffic. The council is committed to the Narrow Water Bridge in terms of a tourism project and promoting tourism.

Ms Martin has talked about the car ferry option mentioned by Senator Black. On my way here today I received a phonecall from the developer of the project. He told me that he hopes to have the roadworks finished this side of Christmas and to start drive piling. He also hopes to have the ferry operational in May and has commenced his marketing plan. We are trying to complete the Northern side of the greenway with a view to starting on the second side that will

join Newry with Carlingford. Our project is creating a level of the loop.

We are also, within the Newry, Mourne and Down development plan, considering greenways that will connect Newcastle. We are considering ways to connect Strangford Lough with Carlingford Lough in the long term. We are building on the tourism potential for the south Down area. The big issue for the southern relief road is that this time 12 months ago we had hoped to apply for status as a trans-European transport network, TEN-T, project. The roads Minister, Mr. Christopher Hazzard, was in Brussels and got a good hearing regarding the southern relief road as part of the TEN-T process but Brexit throws everything into the air with regard to funding, particularly whether we can attract European funding. The southern relief road is by no means a given either. The Narrow Water bridge and this project are sitting precariously because of considerations of where we will get funding. The Minister is committed to developing the environmental options and development proposals for the southern relief road. That is moving ahead. Ultimately, we need money to build the Narrow Water bridge and the southern relief road. These are strategic projects for our area.

Those are the answers to the main questions. There was a question about what can the committee do. I go back to the Fresh Start agreement, which indicates the Northern Ireland Executive and Irish Government agree to undertake a review of the project and identify options for future development that can be considered by the North-South Ministerial Council. We need it brought to a conclusion and whether both Governments will commit to develop the Narrow Water bridge. We must know what the Governments will commit to and how it can be developed. That is the answer we require. The process began with the signing of the Fresh Start agreement and it has been discussed at the North-South Ministerial Council. I know from November's meeting there is a commitment to meet stakeholders again in January. We must bring this to a conclusion as soon as possible. We urge this committee to work with us to bring that to a conclusion.

**Vice Chairman:** I thank the witnesses for a frank presentation. In welcoming them, I said that this demonstrates the level of interest in respect of the project. The witnesses have suggested that we write to the two Ministers responsible for transport and communicate with the North-South Ministerial Council about bringing the review to a conclusion, one way or another. I described the importance of the project as being tríocha cúig bliain ag fás but I am moving it now to daichead bliain ag fás, or 40 years growing. I am constrained today in what I would like to say as I am sitting as Vice Chairman. There is much passion about this project and many people despair about how it might be brought forward because there have been so many stops and starts along the way. The crossing of Narrow Water was described as being of strategic priority from an economic and, in particular, a tourism perspective. The critical mass of the Down, Mourne, Cooley and Gullion region has been described passionately by me and I will continue to do that. There are immense tourism opportunities and I have said it could be the Kerry of the North. I will continue to say that. I suppose the Troubles have not helped us in creating that tourism mass but it is very important that we welcome the participation and co-operation which is happening and which was outlined by the witnesses. They described how two local authorities have faced each other for many years and particularly with regard to the memorandum of understanding.

I laud that work, particularly the role of East Border Region, in helping that process. I also acknowledge the public representatives, both North and South, who have faced each other to try to deal with a myriad of issues. We must seek a commitment - and not just a verbal commitment - to see this project through, either as a transport and infrastructure project or a tourism

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project. Some crossing must be constructed across the lough in order to progress the aims and ambitions of everybody living in the region who want, regardless of Brexit, to see the spirit of co-operation continue. I thank the witnesses and members for their participation.

The joint committee adjourned at 3.55 p.m. until 2.10 p.m. on Thursday, 15 December 2016.