

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM

FEIDHMIÚ CHOMHAONTÚ AOINE AN CHÉASTA

JOINT COMMITTEE ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE GOOD FRIDAY AGREEMENT

Déardaoin, 14 Feabhra 2019

Thursday, 14 February 2019

The Joint Committee met at 2.15 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Deputy Tony McLoughlin,	Senator Frances Black,
Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan,	Senator Gerard P. Craughwell,
Deputy Brendan Smith,	Senator Frank Feighan,
	Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile.

DEPUTY DECLAN BREATHNACH IN THE CHAIR.

Business of Joint Committee

Vice Chairman: Apologies have been received from the Chairman, Deputy Crowe. I propose that we go into private session. Is that agreed? Agreed.

The joint committee went into private session at 2.20 p.m. and resumed in public session at 2.28 p.m.

Challenges Facing Cross-Border Authorities: Irish Central Border Area Network

Vice Chairman: Before we begin, I remind members, witnesses and persons in the Public Gallery to turn off their mobile phones. Members are requested to ensure that for the duration of the meeting their mobile phone is turned off completely or switched to airplane, safe or flight mode, depending on their device. It is not sufficient for members just to put their phones on silent mode as that will maintain a level of interference with the broadcasting system.

We will now meet representatives of the Irish Central Border Area Network, ICBAN. They are most welcome here today, both those who are giving witness and those in the Public Gallery. From ICBAN, I welcome Mr. Shane Campbell, CEO of ICBAN, Councillor Paul Robinson, chair, Councillor Pat Treanor, Councillor Alex Baird, Mr Adrian McCreesh and Mr. Eoin Doyle. In addition to the witnesses from the panel, I also welcome members of the visiting delegation from various member councils who are in the Gallery.

The format of the meeting is that we will hear the opening statements before having a question and answer session with the members of the committee. The two members who have had to leave - Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan and Senator Frank Feighan - will be back.

I draw the attention of witnesses to the fact that by virtue of section 17(2)(l) of the Defamation Act 2009, they are protected by absolute privilege in respect of their evidence to the 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.

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 House or an official either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable. I invite Mr. Robinson and Mr. Campbell to make their opening statements.

Mr. Paul Robinson: I thank the Vice Chairman and committee members for inviting us to meet with them this afternoon. We very much appreciate the opportunity to engage with them on challenges and opportunities for the central Border region. We attend with a delegation of 15 representatives from eight member councils in our cross-Border partnership, which is evidence of the strong interest shown by each council in cross-Border co-operation. The other members of the panel will briefly introduce themselves following which the Irish Central Border Area Network, ICBAN chief executive, Mr. Shane Campbell, will make the opening statement.

Mr. Adrian McCreesh: My name is Adrian McCreesh. I am a director of Mid-Ulster Council and I am here as part of the ICBAN region.

Mr. Shane Campbell: I am Shane Campbell, chief executive of ICBAN.

Mr. Eoin Doyle: Eoin Doyle is my name. I am a director of service with Cavan County Council.

Mr. Pat Treanor: I am Councillor Pat Treanor from Monaghan County Council and I am joint treasurer of ICBAN.

Mr. Alex Baird: I am Alex Baird, a councillor in Fermanagh and Omagh Council and director of ICBAN.

Vice Chairman: We will move on to the witness' statements.

Mr. Shane Campbell: ICBAN is a local authority-led cross-Border development partnership which works in the area of the island known as the central Border region. The eight council members of the partnership are Cavan, Donegal, Leitrim, Monaghan and Sligo, Armagh city, Banbridge and Craigavon, Fermanagh and Omagh, and Mid-Ulster.

The partnership has been advocating for common solutions to common cross-Border problems since 1995. The region, though largely rural, contains some larger urban centres. It is remote from national or regional capitals and, as a consequence, the area and its communities are regularly overlooked in terms of investment.

ICBAN's area of focus is on promoting and developing co-operation between member councils and their communities on matters of cross-Border and regional development. There has been a positive history of collaboration between the local authorities and their communities. This has been delivered in spite of often historic back-to-back development shortcomings. Instead, the ICBAN partnership works against this in joining up planning. A recent example has been a joint submission to the regional spatial and economic strategy of the Northern and Western Regional Assembly.

I will explain some of the challenges and issues being faced in the region. The need to foster cross-Border co-operation is now even more acute, given the challenges of Brexit. As a by-product of the Brexit process, the Border has been front and centre in discussions and media coverage. Indeed, the questions of the Border and co-operation have been elevated to levels not seen for many years.

With the implications of the UK referendum decision to exit the EU still to be finally determined, it is considered that the area of these islands likely to be most significantly impacted will be the central Border region. Even though the Border areas could eventually see some communities within the EU adjoining what will become areas then not within the EU, the issues in maintaining co-operation across the Border will remain. The central Border region councils have reaffirmed their commitment to co-operation despite what happens.

One notable issue is the important role that local authorities must play in the continued delivery of local services. While national governments and political attention will likely continue to be focused on Brexit for some time yet, the delivery of local services to citizens must continue. In the vacuum of a Northern Ireland Executive, local authorities in Northern Ireland continue to play a key role in the democratic functioning of government. Through engage-

ments and joint delivery in community planning, for example, and its focus on the economic and social elements of well-being, the impact on local services could be minimised. Cross-government support to this developing key role would be welcomed.

In more than 20 years, the partnership has helped lever significant investment into the region and cross-Border projects between local authorities have had a positive impact on local communities. The significance of these investments on both sides of the Border cannot be underestimated and given the importance of the challenges in the times ahead, the continuation or replacement for such co-operation funds must be a key priority. It is vital that a high-level strategic focus is prioritised for the wider Border region by both Governments and involving the EU, where appropriate. It would be considered that while important EU programmes can only marginally make a difference to lives and the economy of the area, a much more intensive and encompassing intervention over and above any such EU cohesion funds will be necessary to help resolve long-standing issues which still challenge the fabric of Border life.

It is hereby recommended that consideration is given to developing an island-wide territorial cohesion policy, which would include a cross-Border infrastructure and investment plan or fund to replace any loss of common INTERREG and PEACE funds. However, there is little evidence yet of such a debate or consideration on either side of the Border, which is concerning.

Brexit is not the only significant challenge facing the area. There are pre-existing infrastructure deficits which existed before Brexit and still remain. There has been a lack of attention to the central Border region and in the national planning framework, NPF, which highlights supports for other regions including adjoining Border areas by comparison.

Brexit reinforces the importance of giving recognition to the central Border region. We hereby ask that the committee explicitly identifies and promotes the region as an area of national importance. We can explain the untapped potential of the area as an economic driver later. Such designation must be reinforced by a national commitment to address the identified strategic infrastructural shortcomings and redress historic under-investment. That would enable economic growth and help mitigate the impacts of any negative Brexit outworkings.

Component areas of such a policy have precedents for exploration. For example, in 2014, the Centre for Cross Border Studies published a scoping study into the creation of a cross-Border development zone, an initiative actively supported by our partnership. The objective would be to promote the economic development of the cross-Border zone on a co-ordinated basis, maximising the use of national resources and stimulating the use of local resources and expertise. There would be three component parts: spatial, structural and institutional. The spatial part examines three spatially defined areas, one being the central Border region.

Businesses need a modern, effective transport infrastructure through which they can get goods to market. While there have been improvements across the region, there remains important strategic projects which have not been sufficiently advanced and thus hinder regional growth and regeneration. The ways and means must be found to accelerate their delivery.

The wider area includes subregional pockets. Key industries include engineering, manufacturing, tourism and agrifood. In planning terms, it should be recognised that it is not just about connecting large urban areas. It is also about connecting centres of production with customers, workers and the supply chain. The spatial approaches we take must be reconsidered in terms of development.

There is a high dependency on travel by road in the region. In the absence of a rail network, strategic road corridors are key for access and movement. Both Governments must formally recommit to the long-planned A5-N2 Dublin to Derry dualling project, highlighting its priority nature and re-pledging what was originally agreed. Elsewhere, upgrades are needed to the N16-A4 from Sligo to Ballygawley, the east-west link to Dundalk, the N4 from Sligo to Carrick-on-Shannon, with an extension of the M3 to Cavan town. The A29 from Coleraine to Monaghan must also be highlighted as a key road corridor for North-South freight movement in agrifood, minerals, engineering and quarry products. We can explore later the challenges of these freight movements, the impacts they have and the challenges for the area.

There is evidence to suggest that the Border area has not received its fair share of infrastructure investment compared to other regions. For example, a review of Transport Infrastructure Ireland, TII, investment in road schemes suggests that spending per head on transport infrastructure is only approximately 45% that of other regions. If this disproportionate spending pattern continues, the Border area will fall further behind economically, amplifying the issue of a three-speed economy.

The lack of broadband connectivity is one of the most pressing and concerning issues for the councils. Improvements are critical to help maintain competitiveness and to realise economic and social ambitions. It is vital that the peripheral rural areas are not left until the end.

There are concerns about the pace of delivery of the national broadband plan, NBP. The ambitions were first promoted in 2012 and the delays will see that the latest delivery targets of 2022 will not be achieved.

Related to this, equally ambitious programmes must ensure that mobile telecommunications coverage is also effectively delivered. There would not, however, appear to be any effective joint planning of these two platforms, and mobile connectivity is not even referenced in the NBP. Our small towns and villages could flourish again, because they would be effectively future-proofed. Such connectivity would enable many businesses to operate in rural areas instead. This would reduce congestion in Dublin, which is just one hour away. It would also offer the added attractiveness of idyllic locations, leisure and recreation, cheaper living and less crime.

Delivering on the NBP is critical. The communities and businesses in the Border region cannot wait another seven years. If the plan cannot be advanced further to delivery in its current format, as interested commentators we would encourage that an alternative solution is quickly realised. It is not too late for considerations to be given to North-South alignments given that the need and stage of development to enhance broadband is at a similar stage in Northern Ireland. It could be timely to examine potential all-Island solutions and synergies, in the same context as strategic approaches to all-island energy.

There is collective local authority support for opportunities to promote slow tourism markets, such as cycling and walking, and for utilising interlinked greenways across the Border area. A business case was developed by four councils for the Sligo to Enniskillen greenway. These are prospective areas of growth and aided by the requisite Government investment they can increase overnight occupancies and visitor spending.

The business case for the Ulster Canal highlights the many positive outcomes. It has been regularly referenced in cross-government agreements, including Project Ireland 2040. It could be delivered on a phased basis to minimise short-term demands on public funds. All the cross-

Border councils directly involved promote the canal's regeneration. This committee's highlighting of support for the phased development of the Ulster Canal and associated tourist amenities would be welcomed.

We have set out the key needs and challenges facing the central Border area. We appreciate the committee taking the interest and welcome representation and support within Government. It is a critical time for the area. There are new arising challenges but it could be argued that the Border area's weaknesses should have been more strategically addressed in the advent of peace and the end of conflict. Now is the time to address them.

As can be seen through our sizeable delegation today, this is a collective issue for all of the area's eight councils. We are not here asking for Government to solely resolve the issues but we seek overarching high-level interest and assistance to help us - the local authorities - to tackle these, through cross-government, cross-sectoral, cross-Border and cross-community engagement. We, for our part as a partnership of local authorities, are ready to play our role. When we engage government, we are often challenged that co-operation must happen locally first. There are many examples such as the UNESCO Marble Arch Caves Global Geopark between Cavan, Fermanagh and Omagh, and the referenced statement of common good on planning between four local authorities. This collective attendance today is also proof of the commitment by local government. Our local authorities bring resources and energies and we genuinely need the recognition and the support of central government to help realise the area's untapped potential.

Vice Chairman: Before I open up to the floor, I acknowledge the presence of Senator Diarmuid Wilson in the Gallery. I also welcome the visitors with the delegation.

Ms Michelle Gildernew: I thank Mr. Robinson and Mr. Campbell for their concise presentation. The witnesses are welcome and I am delighted to see them all here today.

Having grown up beside the Border between Aughnacloy and Culloden, I know all too well the challenges that have faced the region. It is worth remembering that when many of the Border roads were closed in the early 1970s, the final two Border roads to be reinstated were only reopened in 2010. This was a long time after the Good Friday Agreement and only a few years before the imminent Brexit. We do not know what the future is likely to hold for the region.

Mr. Campbell's presentation touched on a lot of the issues that are close to my heart such as rural roads, broadband, the greenways and the Ulster Canal. There is a lot in there. If we were able to bring about all of the things that Shane talked about then we would have a very dynamic region.

I am aware that this is outside of the witnesses' remit but I want to put it on the record today. We have a unique and special facility in the stroke unit in the South West Acute Hospital in Enniskillen. We have one of the best stroke units on these islands. Stroke patients are often treated with lysis therapy within ten minutes of coming into the hospital. Despite all the challenges in the region, we still can be world leaders in what we do.

The Border has Newry at one end and Derry at the other end. Our bit is the big section in the middle. Given the lack of infrastructure how does Mr. Campbell see the reality of Brexit affecting us in the future, and in the Border network trying to hold on to what it has achieved over the years to ensure we do not roll back from that?

Vice Chairman: I will take a second speaker. Mr. Baird has indicated. I apologise, Mr. Francie Molloy has indicated.

Mr. Francie Molloy: It is the beard that does it.

Vice Chairman: I am sorry, Mr. Molloy.

Mr. Francie Molloy: The witnesses are welcome and I thank them for attending. This is an important subject and it is timely to get their views on what is happening currently.

Looking at what has happened over the past while, there was talk of a commitment to the A5 road project for example, but, unfortunately, this week we have seen the lack of commitment from the Taoiseach on this. Once again it is being used as a political football. From the role that the witnesses play in the Border region, is there any indication from an EU angle of what can be achieved, particularly from the ICBAN? As a past member of the network, I am aware of the good work that has been done over the years in trying to build the infrastructure - and in some senses on a purely commercial basis - to try to utilise the Border area.

The other issue is the A29. Although it is not directly affected, if one looks at the map, there is no direct link North or South. It is a zigzag of roads back and forwards. Unfortunately, development has been east-west with very little North-South. That is an road we are going to need, especially from a cross-Border point of view.

The big one that has not been mentioned is the circumstances of the interconnector. From mid-Ulster's perspective, the interconnector is probably one of the most crucial issues. We need it to be in place as quickly as possible. Everybody knows and appreciates the work of the engineering sector and the job creation by the sector in mid-Ulster and right across the west. This is currently being curtailed because businesses cannot expand further. I was at a recent meeting at The Rock in Pomeroy where three companies were trying to divide up the electricity supply between them. They had 900 kW between them and each one of them was looking at it all, but it could not be got. They were working with generators in a makeshift situation. If we are serious about expanding west of the Bann - which we have complained about for so long - then we need the interconnector to be in place. Areas such as Cookstown, Magherafelt and west of the Bann could have no supply in 2020 if we do not get that connection. This is one area where we need to refocus to see what can be done to get that in place as quickly as possible.

Vice Chairman: I thank Mr. Molloy. The words of the Tánaiste were that the A5 was being postponed. This was reiterated by the Taoiseach in the Dáil earlier. Would the witnesses like to avail of the opportunity to respond to those two contributions?

Mr. Shane Campbell: I will respond first and others may join in. I may not touch on all of the points but I will cover Brexit and transport. The others and I may also address the issue of the interconnector, and they may also come in on Brexit and transport. I will pick up on a couple of the points that were made. If there is time, I will also present some other information to the committee.

The issue is not about what will be the impact of Brexit: it is already impacting. We carried out a study last year with Queen's University Belfast. It was a project through the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade reconciliation fund and we engaged with 600 people and businesses across the Border region. Three quarters of those people and businesses expressed the opinion that Brexit is already impacting upon them. That impact occurs in many ways, including confidence, uncertainties, businesses putting off job expansions and young people rethinking their education choices and study locations. We have also come across many case studies examining the impact of Brexit on investment in the region. There are, then, many concerns

about Brexit. We will all be concerned until we find out what the final direction of travel will be on this matter.

ICBAN, as a cross-Border group, is representative of the different political interests on both sides of the Border. We recognised, and the board took the mature attitude, that it was not going to be a network about rehashing arguments on issues such as remaining in or leaving the EU. Brexit, however, is a pressing issue on which we as a board have to make collective decisions. The collective decision and policy reached by the board was to work together, regardless of different opinions on issues, to withstand any negative consequences arising from Brexit impacting on the Border region. We have gathered and shared stories to which I have referred and presented them to MPs, Deputies, MLAs and Senators. Concerns about those issues are being expressed by people across the region. We are delighted they have been reviewed at the highest levels by the Irish Government, the United Kingdom Government and the negotiating team in Brussels.

Turning to transport, I would like to highlight some issues in the region. The A5-N2 road from Dublin to Derry and the A29 road from Coleraine to Monaghan are among seven key roads in our area. I will share a map illustrating my point with the committee. There are 45 million vehicle crossings annually and 11% of those involve light or heavy goods vehicles. Similar numbers cross from North to South. In the Border region, it is possible to estimate that each year there are between 4.5 million and 5 million freight crossings of the Border.

The key Border crossings can be seen from the map we have shared with the committee. Our area includes the Border crossings labelled D, E, F, G, H, I and J on the map. They span the central Border region and that is the geography of the area. The north west and the east are also shown separately on the same map. When we add up the percentage of the total number of goods vehicle crossings of the Border using these routes, give or take perhaps one or two percentage points, some 35% of crossings happen in the central Border region. One third of goods vehicle crossings take place in the north west, one third take place in the east and the remaining third are in the central Border region. That is mainly along the A5-N2 and A29 roads, which is our key industrial belt from mid and east Antrim right down through mid-Ulster and into Monaghan and Cavan. It is an area overlooked in Government policy. There was scant mention in the NPF of the region we inhabit. The north-west city region is profiled yet it has the same number of freight movements. The eastern corridor is also profiled and that is significant because of the Belfast to Dublin link through Newry and Dundalk.

I am not making an argument for the central Border region versus the north west or the east regions. Instead, I am highlighting that Government policy for the entire region, on both sides of the Border, has not been considered collectively. Taking into account just this one economic indicator of freight movement and travel, if we do not address the issues faced by the central Border region, we will not be effectively balancing development across the area. We might well all be sitting here again in another 20 years wondering what we are going to do about the Border.

The central Border region area is as important as any other. We may have seven routes overall, with two or three in the east and two or three in the north west, but when we examine our central Border region, it is as economically important. We could even argue that much of the traffic that should come through our area is not coming through because the roads are deficient compared with other areas. That is the collective case that must be made for these eight county areas to be considered as part of Government policy. To date, that has been missing. I will leave it at that to let others in.

Vice Chairman: I call Mr. Treanor.

Mr. Pat Treanor: I agree fully with Mr. Campbell's comments about concerns surrounding Brexit and the alarming prospect it raises for our community. I live in and represent a community which is about a mile from the Border. Until recently, people did not want to even engage with the issue of Brexit because it was such a hurtful experience remembering what happened in the past. We ask this committee to ensure that all of the elements in the Good Friday Agreement are used to try to defend our rural Border communities, including the reference to a Border poll. All possible solutions to the Brexit issue as it affects the Border should be investigated.

This issue has been the subject of much media attention. Members of our local community have appeared on many programmes and taken part in many interviews. They have explained the statistics and that in the recent past local businesses have withdrawn or withheld further investment and development because of uncertainty. Assistance, therefore, is needed in that area. While we welcome the focus on investment and development in the eastern and north west parts of the Border region, we feel that we are, in many ways, overlooked in ways similar to rural Ireland. Communities on both sides of the Border in the central region have suffered neglect over many years. We need some focus on our area as well.

Ms Gildernew's question on the health issue is vital. ICBAN, with the help of bodies such as the Centre for Cross Border Studies based in Armagh, has undertaken reports on the positioning of emergency hospitals, etc. We have been developing responses to emergencies, including enabling the ambulance services to travel across the Border. The fire brigades have also advanced greatly in co-ordinating and dealing with emergencies such as fires and road traffic collisions in a cross-Border context in our region. We are approaching the point where people are ignoring the Border and just delivering the services which all of the people of the region deserve.

The energy interconnector is a similar issue. Mr. Campbell mentioned in his presentation the importance of the all-Ireland energy strategy. Mr. Molloy also referred to the 400 kV interconnector being developed between County Meath and County Tyrone. It goes through the eastern part of County Monaghan, and, as the committee will probably be aware, EirGrid and SONI have turned that into a very controversial project. There is major opposition locally to it being constructed as an overhead project with approximately 300 pylons positioned along the path of the interconnector. I have been at public meetings with landowners. Those meetings sometimes include 300 to 400 people very determined that they will not allow the construction of that project over land. It is fully accepted that the interconnector is needed and that the all-Ireland energy strategy is a good one, which protects and delivers for us all. I appeal to the committee to bring to bear any authority or influence it may have to try to force EirGrid to consult and listen to the local communities. Constructing the energy interconnector underground is possible. We have been to Europe and to Brussels, and investigated a similar project between Belgium and Germany. We heard from Elia, the company responsible for that project, that there is a possibility of putting such an endeavour underground. What we been learned from that project is that public confidence is the first requirement of successful infrastructure construction anywhere in Ireland and particularly in the Border region. Public confidence is vital.

Vice Chairman: I call Mr. Mr. McCreesh. Most of the other members also want to contribute, so I am conscious of time.

Mr. Adrian McCreesh: I will be brief. I want to pick up on a number of comments made by Ms Gildernew and Mr. Molloy regarding potential investment and the impact of that invest-

ment within our region.

I am reminded as I look around that we, as a group, represent nine of the Thirty-two Counties of Ireland, North and South. This equates to approximately one fifth of the entire land mass of the island, a sizeable fraction, and one tenth of the entire population. When we refer to the central region, we are talking about a significant element of this island, North and South. I say this because many of us are of the view - as a practitioner in economic regeneration for 29 years, I am of this view - that all we have ever asked for in our part of the world is a level playing field. We have never asked for a handout; we have always asked for a leg up in order to ensure a level playing field. My ask today is exactly this because I genuinely know what we could do if we had decent roads, decent technology and decent access to investment and labour and skills development, as other areas have enjoyed over the past ten, 15 or 20 years.

I say this for two other reasons. Our part of the world has particular characteristics. We do not have public sector investment. We do not have the luxury of relying on significant public sector jobs. What have we done then? We have created our own jobs. Our people are the entrepreneurs of this island. We are the enterprise capital of this island. We are the ones who have created the greatest, biggest, boldest and broadest exporters on this island despite the lack of investment, North and South, that we have experienced. As a result, our ask is very simple: in any regional economic strategy, we urge a focus on where the entrepreneurship is and some focus on the creativity and the enterprises. Then we will demonstrate, by way of delivery, what we can do with a level playing field. In spite of poor roads, poor broadband and all the other deficiencies, we are very proud people. We boast a significant element of civic and economic pride throughout Tyrone, Derry, Monaghan and Fermanagh. We have pride in our families and our communities, and this is what keeps us going through the bad years and into the good years. We also say this: we do not want repeats upon repeats of emigration and losing our young people again and again. This is an opportunity through this strategy on the southern side of the Border to make a substantive investment in the central Border region. We ask and expect that this will be forthcoming, not just because we deserve it, but also because we will significantly return on the investment - fivefold, tenfold or perhaps more.

Vice Chairman: Two more of our guests have indicated. They should feel free, if they leave something out, to come back in when the other speakers have contributed. I will take Mr. Doyle and then Mr. Baird before reverting to Deputy McLoughlin.

Mr. Eoin Doyle: I will make two very brief points. First, I want to impress upon everyone the strength of the collaborative offering here today. There are local authorities North and South that are very familiar with one another and have an excellent track record of delivery and a desire to work together. This is evident not only through ICBAN, but also through our regional assembly and offerings such as the European social entrepreneurship funds, EuSEF, partnership, which was piloted by my colleagues in Leitrim County Council. There are local authorities that are ignoring county boundaries, looking at the regional whole and delivering where they are given the opportunity. As my colleague stated, we are only looking for the opportunity to play on the same field.

I will make just one other point, which I think the members would want me to make. We have had for many years a PEACE investment programme in the Border counties. It is different from the way in which local authorities work in other parts of the country but is an integral part of the way we work. It involves soft workings between communities in conflict areas, communities that have not met one another in generations and that are now working on community and enterprise projects. It is a hugely important part of the success story since the Good

Friday Agreement, and we strongly encourage Members of the Oireachtas to emphasise the importance of peace work and the PEACE programme to local authorities in the years to come.

Mr. Alex Baird: Fair fa' ye, and I hope the Vice Chairman accepts that Ulster Scots greeting in the spirit it is given. Ms Gildernew mentioned the Border roads. I will offer just a point of information. Lately, only two roads have reopened. Before I went into politics, I was a civil servant working for the Northern Ireland Office and my title was "civil representative". In the words of Michael Caine, not a lot of people know this, but my role at the stage after the Good Friday Agreement was to work with the roads service to ensure all the Border roads were reopened, so I am only too well aware of the difficulties that were caused by the closure of the Border roads, and none of us wants to go back to that situation again. I am surprised that the two to which Michelle referred took so long but I think there was a bridge involved. I just wanted to get that information in.

Deputy Tony McLoughlin: All our guests and representatives from the nine areas we are talking about are very welcome. As a Deputy representing the constituency of Sligo-Leitrim and a former councillor in that area, I am very well familiar with and very aware of the deficiencies we have had in the area. Our guests are highlighting issues in both the North and the South. It is wonderful to have them here because it is an opportunity to engage with them and their colleagues on the local authorities and talk about issues, particularly infrastructure. I see the divide between the east and the west, particularly the north-west, the investment and what has taken place in recent years. I have always said we do not have any such investment in our area, unfortunately. A very fine announcement was made to me last week on the N4, that is, the road between Sligo and Carrick-on-Shannon. There is to be an upgrade costing €121 million which will start very shortly. There are, however, many other areas within our constituencies that lack funding and the initiative to get moving. Infrastructural investment other than roads and so on was mentioned. Our guests have been before the committee before and members have listened to their concerns, and there are major concerns in the areas raised. Not only road infrastructure, but also broadband was highlighted. Broadband is a major issue for businesses and indeed everyone living in the areas affected. This must be dealt with. Greenways offer huge tourism potential. Reference was made to the Sligo-Enniskillen road through Manorhamilton, the greenway in my area and cycling and walking. These are the ways forward. Mr. McCreesh is right that we need not only investment, but also clarity as to where this funding can be made available, particularly with a no-deal Brexit. We have spoken about the lack of INTERREG funding at some of our recent meetings. That is an issue. I refer also to the economic development of our area. We are talking about the Border areas. They are vitally important. I speak to haulage contractors who are very concerned, and have been for many years, but are more concerned now with the possible prospect of a no-deal Brexit happening very shortly. I would appreciate if our guests could comment on some of these issues.

Vice Chairman: I will take Deputy Brendan Smith and then Senator Craughwell before going back to our guests.

Deputy Brendan Smith: Like others, I welcome the delegation. I compliment Mr. Campbell on the quality of his contribution. It covered a broad sweep of the various activities in the Border region. It was very comprehensive and welcome. I also compliment him on the publications he has produced in recent years in conjunction with Katy Hayward of Queen's University. Deputies Breathnach and McLoughlin and I, as members of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly, had Dr. Hayward giving evidence to us at the assembly's committee meetings. As Chairman of the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade, and Defence - Mr. Doyle

and Mr. Traynor would be aware of this - I brought parliamentary delegations from abroad to Cavan and Monaghan, including the Foreign Affairs Committee of the House of Commons. In the presentations that were made to Monaghan County Council and Cavan County Council, we drew widely on ICBAN's publications. I compliment ICBAN on them. At the time, I passed on our thanks to Councillor Paddy O'Rourke, who chaired ICBAN, for the quality of the publications. Mention was made of the delivery of health services and Deputy Breathnach, as then chairman of the North Eastern Health Board, was instrumental in bringing about Cooperation and Working Together, CAWT, when an agreement was signed in Ballyconnell in July 1992. That initiative has worked well and we would like to see it expanded.

With regard to waterways, the potential of the Ulster Canal was quite rightly mentioned. I would also like to see the Erne system made navigable from Belturbet, Killykeen and Killeshandra, building on the Shannon-Erne Waterway, formerly known as the Ballinamore and Ballyconnell Canal, as Mr. O'Rourke knows so well. We both live adjacent to the area. It has been phenomenally successful. Waterways Ireland came before the committee, as did the Loughs Agency. Obviously they have limited budgets and do not have a budget for the capital investment required never mind rolling out new products or enhancing products for maintenance due to the usage of the waterways. There is huge pressure on the capital budgets. We must keep pointing out the potential of the waterways system in our area to grow considerably. I know very well that in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the restoration of the Ballinamore and Ballyconnell Canal was mooted, many cynics in many political parties and organisations said it would never work. It proved to be phenomenally successful, as will be the Ulster Canal when it is restored.

With regard to the A5 and N2, prior to Brexit, Transport Infrastructure Ireland and officials from the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport came before the committee on a number of occasions. The committee was very concerned that the project was not moving along and that a commitment had not been given on the necessary preparatory planning and design work, particularly on the N2 in County Monaghan. It has moved on somewhat but it was disappointing to learn this week that the particular funding allocation may not be available. We sincerely hope it will be because it is so important for the north west of the country.

The witnesses quite rightly pointed out an issue we have been raising with regard to Brexit. Individual committee members have been raising here and in discussions in the Dáil the very high dependence of the local economies, especially in Cavan, Monaghan, Fermanagh, Tyrone and Leitrim, on the agrifood sector, construction products and engineering. They are the three sectors that are more highly dependent on the British market than elsewhere. Some of the sectors have been impacted already by Brexit. Any fluctuation in sterling or any weakness could cause immediate difficulty. Our key sectors are those that are most vulnerable to the adverse impacts of Brexit, and this must be a source of concern. Other colleagues and I have argued with the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport in particular that if we are trying to help industry and business in the region remain competitive, we must invest in infrastructure. Upgrading infrastructure can reduce costs somewhat, but if we do not have modern infrastructure, it will be an extra impediment and cost to business. It is a message we would heartily endorse with regard to the presentation that has been made.

Island-wide territorial cohesion policy has been mentioned. As we all know, European funding such as the Common Agricultural Policy, CAP, is for post 2020, but the overall budget for the European Union is in multi-annual cycles. Perhaps the witnesses will draw up proposals we could use to help advocate for specific Cohesion Fund payments. We remember the

debate in the State about Objective 1 status. The huge growth in the economy in the 1990s and the early 2000s changed the status of some of our regions. We should be making a very strong demand for the Border region, North and South, getting specific cohesion funding because of the challenges it will face as a result of Brexit. It is a very important area. Perhaps more work can be undertaken by the witnesses on how we can push the Governments here and elsewhere to support specific proposals to draw down Cohesion funding. Some of the countries that acceded to the European Union in the mid-2000s and subsequently had significant infrastructure upgrades through Cohesion funding. We should argue that we are a special case. It is very important in this respect.

I compliment the witnesses, whom I know have done very good work on broadband infrastructure and mobile telephony in the area. All of us can readily agree with and support the witnesses on what they have told us today. I thank all of the witnesses who have contributed to the meeting.

Senator Frances Black: I thank the witnesses for their presentation. It is refreshing to hear that local authorities are working together across the Border. It is wonderful to hear. They have touched on many issues. Local services were mentioned. The areas in which I am specifically interested with regard to the impending doom and gloom of Brexit are mental health and addiction services. From the perspective of the witnesses, what is it like with regard to mental health? Are mental health services and addiction services being impacted upon? How do the local authorities see this opening up? I am sure the INTERREG funding will impact on this also.

Are the witnesses concerned about the Good Friday Agreement? From our perspective, how do the witnesses feel the committee can support them? What I would like to see happening today is the committee supporting the witnesses in the great work they are all doing. The fact they are all working together is powerful.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: As a member of the Committee on European Union Affairs, I have been most impressed by the feedback we get from Europe and Members of the European Parliament who have visited the Border area and who have been briefed, in some cases, by local authority members. No matter how far east I have gone, I have found nobody in Europe who is not aware of the Irish Border and the issues surrounding it. The witnesses are to be complimented on this.

Cross-Border development has been mentioned and, I am afraid, this is where I come with a rather negative view of the world. My fear is that Brexit, whether it is a crash out or negotiated, will change forever the relationships that exist in the Border region. If we were to look for a solution to the Irish problem, perhaps we should step out of London and Brussels and come back to the witnesses and let them find a solution because they would have one in jig time.

Some time ago, Senator Black brought us to Cushendall where we met a haulier who will relocate to the Republic if there is a negative impact from Brexit on his business. What fears do the witnesses have with regard to businesses relocating out of Northern Ireland into the Republic or elsewhere in Europe to maintain their businesses?

The mismatch of funding bothers me. After Brexit, European funding will be guaranteed to the southern side and the Irish Government will continue to push for financial support for various projects along the Border. There is a possibility the UK will not provide equal funding. We will finish up with a mismatch and a poor relation on the other side of the Border. Years

ago, one knew one was in Northern Ireland because one would be driving on the best roads in the country. Now one knows one is in Northern Ireland because one is obliged to drive on the worst roads in the country. Somebody mentioned the central area of the Border region. I would drive to Sligo rather than try to cut across the Border. The mismatch of funding concerns me greatly. Have our guests considered local authorities on the other side of the Border? If they lose businesses, they will lose rates, funding, taxation, etc. That is a concern.

Have our guests had an opportunity to make a similar presentation to Members of the Westminster Parliament? I know the House of Lords has been fairly active, but have they had an opportunity to speak to MPs apart from those present at this meeting? I will leave it at that.

Deputy Maureen O’Sullivan: I wish to apologise. I had to leave to go to the Chamber. I read the papers our guests submitted beforehand, but I will not ask a question for fear it has been asked already. I will listen to the replies here.

Mr. Adrian McCreesh: The committee will understand if I stay away from the political side of Brexit and leave that to my colleagues. I wish to make two comments in reply to Deputy McLoughlin and to some of the issues that Deputy Brendan Smith touched on regarding the economic impact, what we can do to shape the economic future and the role European investment can play in that.

I do not want to be negative. I, too, have been involved in developing, acquiring and securing European funding and trying to get it invested in economic regeneration activity through local government, in both an urban and a rural setting. I have been extremely grateful for that opportunity and that experience. It has had a wonderful impact on my part of the world in east Tyrone and south Derry. That being said, there is a big difference between cross-Border activity and Border-specific activity. I want this to be as positive as I can make it but I am going to be critical here. It grates when people talk about cross-Border activity and investment such as INTERREG funds and so on. In 2015, elected members of my local authority and I spent a lot of time preparing a very comprehensive response to the previous INTERREG programme and the forthcoming INTERREG programme running from 2015 to 2019. While we welcomed the investment and the hundreds of millions of pounds that came through the INTERREG programme, we warned the European Commission that in no way, shape or form does it attempt to address urban plight, urban deprivation or urban or rural dilapidation. Innovation and research and development at academic level are wonderful for universities and academic institutions, which have availed fantastically of INTERREG programmes. However, I would make a very simple point. I invite anyone to go to the Border and walk through Newtownbutler, Lisnaskea, Emyvale, Carrick-on-Shannon or Aughnacloy and show me the benefit of the millions of pounds of INTERREG funding. I invite anyone to look at the empty shops, the empty buildings, the dilapidation and the dereliction. There is a raft of work to be done in Border towns and villages, in both urban and rural areas. We are probably only going to get a few chances to get it right in our entire careers. I am here to say that I welcome cross-Border co-operation and I also welcome everything Deputies Brendan Smith and McLoughlin just stated. However, I remind the committee that INTERREG funds going into academic institutions in Belfast do not address rural and urban deprivation, decline and emigration in the multiple Border towns where, quite frankly, communities will say when asked that they saw no discernible benefit.

Our ask is very simple. A regional and spatial strategy is being developed. If we are talking about cross-Border issues, let us make them Border-specific, not exclusively but inclusively. Let us really go into Monaghan, Cavan, Leitrim, Tyrone and Fermanagh. Let us get down and dirty in Border regions and towns and ask what the issues are, what the problems are and what

needs to be done to deal with them. If we do that, I might be here with a more positive demeanour in seven years.

Mr. Pat Treanor: I wish to respond to Senator Black's comments on mental health services. Like every other region, ours suffers from a lack of investment. Through the public participation networks at local councils and social inclusion policies, we are starting to deal with people who have been excluded for all kinds of different reasons. There is a particular understanding that some of them are not involved in citizenship in everyday life because of mental issues. Again, there is not nearly enough focus on it.

That brings me to the questions about relationships under the Good Friday Agreement and people's concerns. There are other aspects of the Good Friday Agreement, particularly those relating to the implementation bodies. There are other articles and sections of it that deal with civic participation, the civic forum and the feed-in from community groups. After the Good Friday Agreement there was a great rush of community groups on both sides of the Border meeting to deal with common issues. However, two things happened very quickly. First, they ran into jurisdictional legal differences. Second, funding for their involvement was cut by about 40%. There is frustration there, but also a willingness to get engaged again and stay involved.

There is another aspect of the Good Friday Agreement. When we talk about all the economic developments and progress that has been made, the other aspect around reconciliation and peace-building that is not as measurable is the fact that we as councils are working together on the issues that affect us. Trying to address the problems helps to create trust, respect and appreciation for where other people are coming from. That feeds into the outcome of the Good Friday Agreement. Confidence is low at times, because we are 20 years on and the Good Friday Agreement really raised people's hopes and expectations. We need to do more work. Confidence does drop at times. The work the committee is doing is vitally important for all of us and for the country, particularly for building relationships.

We are here to represent ICBAN. It is notable that Mr. Baird of the Ulster Unionist Party, Mr. Robinson of the Democratic Unionist Party and I, a representative of Sinn Féin, work together on all of these issues. Sometimes, watching the TV news at night, one would not think that is possible, but it is. We have grown to know, respect and appreciate each other's point of view.

Mr. Eoin Doyle: I wish to make three brief points. I emphasise how proactive this partnership is being in getting the message out to Westminster and to the decision makers. In recent times, primarily through the offices of Deputy Brendan Smith, as Chairman of the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade, and Defence, very high-level delegations from Westminster have visited the Cavan-Monaghan region. They have stayed in Cavan and they have met with people and businesses on the ground. Likewise, we have had very high delegations from the French Parliament and the German ambassador. Next week, the Maltese Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade Promotion and the Maltese ambassador will be visiting the region. The message we want to send is that we are being pro-active in selling the needs of the region beyond these Houses, wherever we feel it would be productive.

In regard to relocation, there is very strong evidence that businesses are not in a position to expand or to radically change their business models. Our principal worry is that the withdrawal of markets or the creation of obstacles to markets may pull the rug from under businesses that are currently very strong.

Finally, I emphasise again the strength of the relations within the local authorities and communities at present. That is a testament to the Good Friday Agreement and what it has achieved for the country. It behoves us all to ensure that is not undermined in the future. In terms of broadband and its importance, the announcement by Eir this week of investment into those towns and areas with more than 1,000 homes is to be welcomed. It is great to see that happening; it will impact on our region. However, the hard to reach areas are still missing out. I am referring to rural areas not covered by this delegation. We await with interest the delivery of the national broadband plan and the results of that tendering process. We hope that can be linked into mobile connectivity proposals, as we have spoken about previously. That must be delivered across a region such as ours because one roams into areas of inadvertent roaming. When one crosses the Border one experiences a drop in signal. That is not good for businesses, people or homeowners living on the Border whose homes are constantly moving in and out of roaming charges. If Brexit comes to pass and the UK leaves the EU Digital Single Market we are back to a charging regime which puts the region at a competitive disadvantage. That must be engineered out through licences, and I believe it is possible to do that.

The Ulster Canal could be a fantastic project, and has been long advocated for in our region. We have no doubt that if it achieved the required investment it could be a huge success. We only have to point to the example of the Geopark between Cavan and Fermanagh and Omagh, which is something we should shout about a bit more. It is the largest single visitor attraction in the Border region, with some 400,000 visitors. I appreciate that Fermanagh, Omagh and Cavan might never have thought to aspire to that level of success originally. The growth potential and the ability to deliver good projects is there in our region. The agrifood, engineering and manufacturing sectors in our area are interlinked; that is what has happened since the Good Friday Agreement and the opening of relations, and the work of groups such as this committee have done have brought people together. We have a concern that Border relations might be affected because of the wider discourse around these issues. What the Irish Central Border Area Network, ICBAN, proves is that Sinn Féin, the UUP, the DUP, Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, the SDLP and others to work together on a common agenda. Politics is essentially left outside the room, and we work, where we can, on the common issues of the time.

Mental health is a big issue in our region, as we found out through the research we carried out on Brexit in conjunction with Queens University Belfast. Community planning officials from the region meet regularly; the next meeting, next month, is all about mental health and the issues affecting the region. We will really dig into it. This initiative is being led by the local authorities, the local community development committees, LCDCs, and the community planning partnerships respectively in each jurisdiction.

We are not here to complain that our region has always been left out. We are here to say that when investment has been made in this region we deliver. The facts are there. This region is as busy as the other Border regions. It is great to see that they are so busy and to see that they are in receipt of support. We should fill in the missing link, which is the central Border region. We have the key centres of production. Mr. McCreesh spoke about the enterprise focus and the enterprise centre. Mid-Ulster, to pick one area, is the single biggest single contributor in Northern Ireland to gross value added to those indicators, in terms of manufacturing outputs. We look at the industries right across our area, down into Monaghan and Cavan, and west into Leitrim and Sligo, which has a thriving small business economy. It covers an area of approximately 750,000 people, and is the biggest cross-Border area, and the area with the most crossings. We work with its complexity and richness. We also offer an alternative to the traffic congestion in Dublin. There were reports yesterday that Dublin is the third most congested city in the world

after Bogotá and Rome. We are only an hour up the road, and can offer fantastic quality of life. If the final investments we need in roads, in connectivity and broadband are delivered it would mean that people would not have to commute so much and allow us to deliver on creative economy solutions.

We ask for the committee's help in profiling the importance and the value of the central Border region. The members are Deputies for these areas, and we ask them, within their political parties, to remember to profile the central Border region as being important. It should be raised as regularly as possible with the Irish Government, and indeed with the Northern Irish Government. We want it to be raised in Westminster as often as possible too. Mr. McCreesh mentioned the work we have been doing on regional spatial strategy. The presentation we gave today is based on a collective response to the regional strategy, because we feel the national planning framework has ignored our region to a large degree. If we could have some support or assistance from Government, either by way of funding or help or assistance to develop and build upon our spatial plan, our economic policy resolution and our ideas on how these areas could be more effectively knitted together, we could turn an area with untapped potential into a major economic driver. It is holding its own with other areas at the same time as being the area that is most neglected in terms of investment.

Vice Chairman: As well as the central Border region there are also the north-west and east Border regions, we will hear a presentation on the latter, which is part of my area, later. Mr. McCreesh mentioned the issue of being fully recognised as a region and as a collective unit. Do the witnesses see merit in the co-ordination and facilitation of efforts between the three groupings working together? They could identify the various sectors that are important to one region but which are totally different from another region. One simple example of this is the education sector. Letterkenny and Derry work on specifics that are required for programmes in that region, whereas Dundalk Institute of Technology and Dublin City University would have different requirements. If we want to get additional moneys from Europe in a post-Brexit situation or otherwise, is there merit in facilitation? The Centre for Cross-Border Studies and others are offering guidance in this area, and Deputy Brendan Smith referred to help from the universities as well. We have to make sure that we maximise the spend and the investment to ensure that all the regions survive.

Mr. Shane Campbell: I absolutely agree. There has been co-operation between the three Border areas and there could be more. It would be good to probe and ask that question of the other Border regions. The central Border region has always been open to engagement, and has backed the idea, developed by the Centre for Cross-Border Studies, of a Border development zone. There are many examples where issues can be tackled Border region-wide, and there are examples which we have mentioned today that have to be tackled. We would be very keen to engage.

Mr. Paul Robinson: I thank the committee for having us here today. I believe we need to find a bit of common ground, when it comes to tackling Brexit, between North and South and the UK. We have to keep trading as we have been, without tariffs or things like that. We need to negotiate with each other and arrive at that conclusion.

Vice Chairman: I am particularly impressed by the visitors who have travelled with the witnesses today. It shows the importance of collegiality and of people having a voice. In my time in this House this is the biggest delegation to come into the Gallery. I reassure them that this will not be the end of our engagement; the secretariat, in the planning programme, will note that we intend to have an outreach visit to the central Border region shortly. I cannot indicate

exactly when that engagement will occur - Brexit is taking precedence at the moment - but we are in the process of planning that visit. We hope to spend much more time with the witnesses and to see the issues first hand, in the same way that European parliamentarians visited the Border region to find out how the Border operates, as Senator Craughwell and Deputy Brendan Smith pointed out. I can assure the witnesses of that, as someone who has worked in and lived around the Border. If one were to close one's eyes when meeting a group and if one did not know who the group were, what their faith was or what region they came from, one would see the problems are the same whether in the north west, ICBAN or the north east. It is a question of identifying issues and working collaboratively; that collegiality was referred to by many here today. Mr. Baird spoke about Ulster Scots; I developed Ulster Scots in Dundalk. I thank the witnesses for their time today.

We will suspend briefly before our next guests come in.

Sitting suspended at 3.41 p.m. and resumed at 3.50 p.m.

East Border Region

Vice Chairman: Before we begin, I remind members, witnesses and people who may come into the Gallery to turn off their mobile phones. Members are requested to ensure that for the duration of the meeting mobile phones are turned off completely and switched to aeroplane, safe or flight mode, depending on the device. It is not sufficient for members to just place their phones in silent mode as this will maintain the level of interference with the broadcasting system.

We are meeting this afternoon with the representatives from East Border Region, EBR, to hear about their work and the challenges they face. In particular, I welcome Ms Pamela Arthurs, CEO, Alderman Arnold Hatch, vice chairman, Ms Dette Hughes, Councillor P.J. O'Hanlon, Councillor Terry Andrews, Councillor Sharon Keogan and Alderman Alan McDowell. We have apologies from Councillor Damien O'Reilly. The format of the meeting is that we will hear opening statements before going into a question and answer session with the members of the committee.

By virtue of section 17(2)(l) of the Defamation Act 2009, witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of their evidence to the committee. However, if they are directed by the 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. 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 by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable. I invite Ms Arthurs to make her opening statement.

Ms Pamela Arthurs: If the Vice Chairman allows, Councillor O'Hanlon will go first, followed by Alderman Hatch and then myself.

Vice Chairman: That is fine. I call Councillor O'Hanlon.

Mr. P.J. O’Hanlon: I thank the Chair and members for inviting me to make a presentation on the work of EBR. The Ireland-Northern Ireland Border area is the focal point of Brexit negotiations. Much mention has been made of the peace process and the need to protect the Good Friday Agreement in all its parts. This is in no small part due to the proactive approach taken by local authorities along the Border in the wake of the June 2016 referendum on Brexit. EBR is a genuine cross-Border organisation. It includes three local authorities in the Republic of Ireland and three in Northern Ireland and comprises elected members from all political parties, North and South, chief executives and senior officials from the six member councils. The post of chairman rotates annually across the Border. EBR was the first cross-Border group to elect a chair from the Democratic Unionist Party, DUP. Apart from the institutions set up under the Good Friday Agreement, there are very few other genuine cross-Border organisations on the island of Ireland. Examples include the North West Region, ICBAN, the Centre for Cross Border Studies and Co-Operation and Working Together, CAWT, which operates between the health boards.

Cross-Border co-operation on the island of Ireland is relatively young. The impetus came in the 1970s from local elected representatives, North and South, who recognised the value of cross-Border co-operation. The North West Region in 1995 and EBR in 1996 were the first cross-Border organisations on the island. It is important to note also that cross-Border co-operation was not then fashionable. The policy of both Governments was “back-to-back” development.

One of the founding members of EBR, Councillor Jim McCart, who lived in Warrenpoint, County Down, stated:

Back in the early 1970’s there was literally no cooperation at any level, political or otherwise, between Local Authorities adjacent to the border. I didn’t know any of the councillors in Omeath despite the fact that I could look out my front door and see Omeath. It simply wasn’t the done thing.

Councillors and officials who were members of EBR worked under the shadow of the wider political situation. The political climate made it difficult to attend meetings across the Border but local representatives persevered because they quickly realised that back-to-back development was not working. They also realised that there were areas of common concern across the Border, that there was a strength in working together and that the Border region, North and South, was disadvantaged. Working on a cross-Border basis was extremely difficult throughout the 1970s and 1980s. There was no funding from the authorities in Dublin or Belfast because cross-Border co-operation was not fashionable.

EBR, however, has always worked against the backdrop of the European Union. Indeed, it was the European Union in the early 1990s which first provided financial assistance for cross-Border development in the form of the INTERREG programme and the subsequent PEACE programme. While there are more than 70 INTERREG programmes across Europe, the PEACE programme is unique to the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland and demonstrates the commitment of other EU member states to peace in Northern Ireland. Substantial EU INTERREG and PEACE funding from the 1990s enabled the transformation of the Ireland-Northern Ireland Border region economically and socially. It also ensured that local authorities were at the forefront of cross-Border economic development. EU funding enabled EBR to be more outward looking, to share and learn from counterparts in other areas across Europe and to realise that the Ireland-Northern Ireland Border area suffers similar problems to other border regions in Europe.

While the Good Friday Agreement was a catalyst for further cross-Border co-operation, it is important to note that such co-operation has never been easy and must not be taken lightly. Over the past 40 years, the members of EBR have believed that cross-Border co-operation makes sense. It still makes sense in the face of Brexit. Capacity and trust have developed between elected members and officials and EBR has built up an excellent track record in the management of EU funding. EBR has always adopted a bottom up and needs-based approach to cross-Border co-operation, where the views of local authorities and key stakeholders in the region are paramount. This strategy has been extremely successful as Alderman Hatch will now outline. I thank the committee for its time.

Vice Chairman: I call Alderman Hatch.

Mr. Arnold Hatch: Good afternoon. It is nice to see what I will not term old faces but faces I have known for some time. EBR is financially managing eight large strategic INTERREG VA projects to the value of €91 million. An application for a further €9.2 million is being assessed by the Special European Union Programmes Body, SEUPB. All of these projects are highly innovative and EBR is delighted to play a pivotal role in them. I have circulated a copy of our most recent annual report, which will provide members with some detail on each of these INTERREG VA projects. I hope members will find that interesting reading.

EBR has been involved in all of the INTERREG programmes to date, drawing down millions of euro for a host of projects which have benefited communities along the entire Border corridor. This money has contributed significantly to the modernisation of the Ireland-Northern Ireland Border corridor. I will outline a few examples to give members a flavour of the type of projects EBR is currently implementing. We are involved in two greenway projects. One is from Newry to Carlingford, and links in to the existing greenway from Carlingford to Omeath, and the other runs from Smithborough in County Monaghan to Middletown in County Armagh. These are two genuinely cross-Border greenways and they will have a significantly positive impact on the Border region.

The current application, for €9.2 million, is to install a necklace of 73 rapid electric vehicle chargers along the Ireland-Northern Border and to include the western coast of Scotland. This is a highly strategic project involving organisations such as the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, Ulster University, Dundalk Institute of Technology and the local authorities along the Border corridor. It seeks to raise public awareness and increase the use of electric vehicles.

As well as working with our local authorities, EBR has entered into strategic partnerships with a wide range of key stakeholders that are implementing INTERREG VA projects. This includes organisations such as Irish Water, Northern Ireland Water, InterTradeIreland, and the Ulster Wildlife Trust, in addition to a number of universities in Ireland, Northern Ireland and Scotland. EBR provides a unique service to these projects in respect of the financial management of EU funding, thus ensuring all expenditure is in line with the programme rules.

The Co-Innovate programme led by InterTradeIreland will assist 1,409 businesses within the INTERREG VA eligible area and is particularly useful in the current context of Brexit. As a result of this collaborative approach and the expertise that has been developed over the years of managing EU funding, EBR has built up strong networks locally, nationally and internationally.

We remain an active member of the Association of European Border Regions, AEBR, which is a network of cross-border regions across Europe. EBR is respected by government departments in Ireland, Northern Ireland and Brussels, and it has developed good working relation-

ships with the special EU programmes body, Deputies, Senators, MPs, MLAs and MEPs. The former secretary general of AEBR, Mr. Jens Gabbe, said EBR is an indispensable link in the Europe-wide network of AEBR. He also stated this cross-Border co-operation has contributed to remarkable positive economic and social development in Ireland and Northern Ireland and created verifiable added value. While there is no doubt that the myriad EU-funded projects that have been drawn down over the past 25 years have significantly contributed to the growth of the Border economy, there is no room for complacency.

Over the past 40 years, EBR has displayed an astute ability to adapt to the many challenges that have faced the organisation at both local and national levels. This flexible approach and the pragmatism displayed by local elected politicians and local authority senior officials have ensured that EBR has survived while similar organisations have come and gone. In the face of the Brexit challenge, it is essential that we adhere to our core principle, that is, to promote sustainable, cross-Border economic development that benefits the citizens of the region. Brexit, however, will be a game changer. I will now hand over to our chief executive of many years, Ms Pamela Arthurs, to discuss this further.

Ms Pamela Arthurs: The Ireland-Northern Ireland Border corridor will be most impacted by Brexit, irrespective of what type of Brexit we end up with. Even if there were no Brexit, there would still be an impact. The impact will be on economic, political and social levels. Economists agree that despite the supports the Border region has received to date, it still lags behind the rest of Ireland and Northern Ireland. Economists also agree that Brexit will exacerbate this. Business in the region is less confident and more reluctant to expand as the future is so uncertain. Current developments at Westminster have compounded the problem. This has already been evidenced. Mr. Dan O'Brien, chief economist of the Institute of International and European Affairs, stated at a Brexit event in Dublin on 4 December 2018 that while employment growth overall in Ireland is good, employment in the Border region has faltered since 2016. While Brexit has highlighted many needs that already exist, it has also highlighted future requirements.

What has been the local authority response to Brexit? In the immediate aftermath of the referendum, once we all picked ourselves up off the seats, local authorities began a sustained lobby to highlight the needs of the people of the east Border region. It quickly became clear, however, that we needed to work with our colleagues along the Border because it is a Border issue, affecting the North and South. Especially with the absence of a government in Northern Ireland, local authorities along the Border felt it necessary to articulate and lobby for the needs of the 1 million constituents of the Border region. I hope members are all familiar with the report, *Brexit and the Border Corridor on the Island of Ireland: Risks, Opportunities and Issues to Consider*. It was commissioned by the 11 local authorities which make up the Border corridor. Facilitated by EBR, this report brought together the chief executives of the councils and clearly identified that the economy of the Border region lags behind the economies of both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. It also outlines that the Border will be most detrimentally affected by Brexit.

What were the recommendations of the report? We need to address the structural weaknesses in the Border region. Also required are the upgrading of transport and broadband infrastructure, which would assist with connectivity in the region, and ongoing business support measures to assist businesses in preparing for and dealing with the impact of Brexit. The majority of businesses in the Border corridor are small. Many are microbusinesses, with fewer than ten employees. They do not have either the money or time to prepare for what they believe

might happen as a result of Brexit. The uncertainty will see many of them go to the wall.

Also important are a focus on relevant skill levels in the region and some kind of Brexit transition programme along the lines of a territorial co-operation programme to assist the Border region to adapt to the challenges of Brexit. This needs to be broadly based because Brexit will affect every sector. I do not believe we care who provides funding, but the continuation of the EU-type funding programmes, or alternative funding programmes, is required. I refer to the broad range. We are most familiar with INTERREG, the cross-Border group, the PEACE programme, Horizon 2020, the rural development programme and Erasmus. We will lose a raft of programmes in Northern Ireland.

We believe in the east Border region. Members will have heard Mr. Hatch say we have always been ready to adapt to the particular challenges of the Border. We need new policy, new thinking and new methods of co-operation and partnership between local authorities in conjunction with central government in both the Republic of Ireland and Belfast. That is important. It is essential for Border management to work in the wake of Brexit.

To date, the majority of the funding that has come to the Border region through cross-Border initiatives has been from Europe, not the Government. There has been some funding from the South but nothing really from Northern Ireland. The money that has come in through the INTERREG and PEACE programmes, which are cross-Border programmes, has come from the European Union. Both Governments could argue they match funding but the impetus and drive have been from the European Union to date.

The 11 Border local authorities now want to work with both Governments to develop and propose creative solutions for Border management. Local authorities along the Border wish to develop a bottom-up, needs-based strategy for the Border corridor to offset the challenges and identify any opportunities associated with Brexit. One should bear in mind that there are members in the Northern Border council areas who believe there are opportunities. We must take the mandate of all those elected representatives. As local authorities, that is what we will do. This fresh strategic approach should be endorsed by both Governments to support the Border region practically. This is not about airy-fairy considerations. This is about what we require practically. The strategic work will build on the report. Tomorrow we will meet chief executives from along the Border and officials from the Department of the Taoiseach and the Northern Ireland Executive to drive this forward. We want to use this to establish priorities for action. We need to engage with local stakeholders, social partners and business. It is needs based and must take account of the people of the area.

Implementation structures and sources of funding are very important. While local authority staff and elected members have the knowledge and commitment at local level, some aspects of the work may require a more regional approach. Issues may be identified that can best be tackled at Border corridor level. There may also be issues that are particularly pertinent to the east, central Border or north-west region. The strategy we are commissioning as we speak will identify these. We will have requirements along the Border corridor and at high level, and within these we will have priorities in each region.

High level support and commitment from both Governments is essential if this approach is to be successful. Existing local authority cross-Border groups, including ICBAN, ourselves and the North West Region Cross Border Group, are well placed. We have a proven track record in co-ordinating, facilitating and managing dedicated interventions in respect of this approach. To be carried out, it also needs to be led at top level, as this approach is, by the chief

executives of the 11 local authorities but they require the resources to do this. In my view, the solution suggested by the Border corridor local authorities, which is bottom-up, needs based and driven and delivered locally has the best opportunity for success.

Vice Chairman: I thank the witnesses for their presentations.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: I thank the witnesses for coming before the committee. When Mr. O’Hanlon began his presentation he reminded me of how local authorities can overcome all sorts of issues by working together. Sometimes things are driven locally that nationally we could not dream of doing. I am mindful of the fact that the day after the referendum Ms Keogan was on the phone to me demanding resources for local authorities for the Border region. There is serious drive at local level and I am delighted to have heard the presentation.

Not one of the witnesses presented anything negative. They have created an air of co-operation that feeds through what I have heard from various ambassadors. I am a member of the European affairs committee. All of the ambassadors speak in glowing terms about how they were treated on the Border and how they were briefed on it. This is the same as all of the parliamentary delegations that have come to Ireland. They have gone away in no doubt. Michel Barnier himself speaks about the Border with a level of passion one would not expect from a foreigner. This is down to the work being done by local authorities in the area. However, the day after the referendum I wrote a piece on the Border and, I am afraid, it was negative. It had anything but the positivity I have heard from the witnesses. Whether it is a hard or soft Brexit, I fear it will change our relationships forever but, after listening to Mr. O’Hanlon and Mr. Hatch, I am not so convinced that the change will be detrimental because I believe they will find ways of working around issues and this is important.

As we heard from the previous witnesses, much of the money that has gone into Northern Ireland since 1998 has gone in at a high level, such as into academia, and not much money is going down to the ordinary level. Infrastructure has been mentioned and my fear is that in a mismatch of funding post-Brexit the infrastructure on the Northern side will change to the detriment of the development of the economy or sustaining the economy as it is now. I am interested to know the view of Ms Arthurs specifically on how she sees the UK matching funding from the EU. I do not see EU money going North of the Border.

With regard to the flight of industry, I am sure the councillors from the South will accept it would be so easy for a company that wants to remain in the European Union but, post-Brexit, is on the wrong side of the Border - for the want of a definition - to slip across the Border and set up offices in Dundalk, Drogheda or County Meath. We have met businesses in Northern Ireland that have said they will do this if the business is interfered with.

The group of Independent Senators of which I am a member went to Belfast prior to Christmas to meet members of the business community. They told us the only thing they want is certainty. They do not care whether it is a hard, soft any other type of Brexit, they just want certainty so they can start to make plans. Has Ms Arthurs had any negative feedback from businesses in the area? Clearly this shows there is a huge commitment to the area. Have the businesses come to her and said they are in trouble?

Ms Pamela Arthurs: I would not be very hopeful about money coming from Westminster for cross-Border co-operation. An example I can give is that when a group of MPs in Westminster were looking into the UK prosperity fund that will replace EU funding a number of cross-Border groups were asked to comment on it and we did so. We delivered a strong response on

the need for cross-Border co-operation. When the report was published it made little or no reference to cross-Border co-operation. We must bear in mind the Northern Ireland Border region will be competing with England, Scotland, Wales, the rest of Northern Ireland and Belfast. We have always been on the periphery and we are still on the periphery in this respect. I do not see money coming to replace the moneys from Europe that we along the Border enjoy, and bear in mind we punch above our weight with regard to the money we have received to date.

Europe is committed to cross-Border co-operation. The British and Irish Governments have committed to seeing out the current programmes and the PEACE PLUS programme, which will comprise INTERREG and PEACE as we know them today. The EU has committed it will fund this programme to the value of €600 million. We know we have this, irrespective of a no-deal Brexit. This shows the commitment of Europe and the other 27 member states to peace in Northern Ireland. There will be no funding from Westminster, unless, perhaps, we engage in sustained lobbying to try to raise the profile, but we must bear in mind that Brexit will cost money and there are many priorities that will come above cross-Border co-operation. I do not think enough money will be left to look seriously at cross-Border co-operation and the work we have done to date.

I am speaking about economic development and we can see INTERREG on the ground, which is good, but there will be a hard economic impact on members working together and this could possibly be lost. I hope an organisation such as ours, with 40 years of history, will be able to keep it going. We will be able to keep that going, but without money, there is always a need for a carrot. As Councillor O'Hanlon said, cross-Border co-operation is never easy. One is constantly walking a tightrope, particularly in Northern Ireland with all of our history. It is something that is not easy and could be impacted despite the best intentions of everybody, not just here but on the boards of the groups along the Border.

Vice Chairman: Would Mr. O'Hanlon or Mr. Hatch like to say anything on that?

Mr. Arnold Hatch: On the question about industry slipping across the Border, I do not think it is as simple as that because it really depends on the type of industry. If a company slips across the Border and sets up headquarters in this country, 90% of the companies are probably getting their goods from somewhere in the UK, whether it is Northern Ireland or elsewhere. There will be difficulties if there is a hard Brexit and I think we all accept that. Some transport companies we know have set up on both sides of the Border, on both sides of the river, to get the best of both worlds.

In terms of infrastructure, we would see it as being very important to get the A5 started, as it has been on the go for so many years. Jim Nicholson, MEP, asked a question in the European Parliament this week about PEACE PLUS because it is not clear how that will be delivered in co-operation with the UK Government. We have to keep lobbying. One of the fortes of the East Border Region is that we can lobby right across Europe if we have to.

Mr. P.J. O'Hanlon: Following on from the points that have been made and what Mr. Hatch said about the A5, it is very sad that the first project that was knocked off the board when €100 million had to be found was the A5. I have lived along the Border and spent two years in Donegal. The people of Tyrone, Fermanagh and Donegal, without putting a tooth in it, have been forgotten about. The project has been talked about for 30 to 40 years. It is grand coming down here and having meetings and making presentations but it is disheartening for those living in those areas to see what is happening. One asks oneself what it is all about. How serious are we about Brexit? Unless we have a proper infrastructure in place, we are not sending a very

good message out to the people in Border regions. Anyone who has travelled from Emyvale to Letterkenny knows it is a four to five hour round trip. It is nearly easier to travel from Emyvale to Cork than it is to go to the top end of Donegal. Nothing is being done about it. If we are genuinely serious about this, we need to invest and put infrastructure in place. Without being political, I accept there are challenges such as Brexit but to leave part of the island of Ireland without proper infrastructure, is extremely disappointing.

Mr. Francie Molloy: I thank the previous group for the presentations. It is enlightening to hear the work that is going on and the commitment to delivering it. Reference was made to the Border corridor. I have always thought we could have an economic zone the full length of the Border. Would Ms Arthurs envisage the three or four groups along the Border linking up to try to create that in the future? It may not be necessary to maintain all of the groups in order to create such an economic corridor right across the Border on both sides. Have the witnesses found any possible sources of funding? The European Union provides cross-border funding to countries that border it in order to alleviate problems. It would be useful to see the examples of that.

In the past, the Assembly's finance committee approached the British Government on the possibility of funding from the European bank. The UK, as a net contributor to the European Union at that stage, was reluctant to fund too many projects in the North because it would have to co-fund them as well. That is one of the problems we have in that situation. If we could create an economic corridor along the Border, rather than being a Border of disadvantage it could become an advantage in the future.

Ms Pamela Arthurs: I think that is what is needed if we are to properly tackle the disadvantage along the Border. Many people say one is better off on the east but there are still pockets of deprivation, for example, in Dundalk. We talk about the road infrastructure, which is important, but the B roads are not particularly good. There is a range of needs right along the Border.

We are currently talking to the 11 chief executives along the Border. We do not know what to call it. Sometimes there can be sensitivities around the name and whether it is an economic development zone or whatever else. It does not really matter what it is called, what is important is identifying the priorities and needs and getting them funded. That is essential and if we speak as one voice, we will be stronger.

We do have history in that regard. Twenty years ago the three groups – the East Border Region, ICBAN and the North West Region Cross Border Group – worked really closely because our members wanted local people to make decisions on the then INTERREG III programme. Some of those present might have been involved at that time. Civil servants in Belfast and Dublin did not want to let go of the control so what happened is that decisions for the Border were made in Dublin and Belfast by officials. We had a concerted lobby. The three groups worked together, which was a challenge. We had a Border corridor strategy at that time and we ended up with €53.9 million out of an €180 million programme which the Vice Chairman will remember. The programme was delivered locally by elected members and social partners. That was a high point of cross-Border co-operation. Unfortunately, what has happened since that time is the two programmes have become centralised again and sometimes one finds that the pure local cross-Border groups are not being funded to their detriment, depending on the priorities of the Government.

Even with the PEACE PLUS programme we need to have elements of that strategy for a Border corridor. We can develop that quickly and elements of it require funding, going into the consultation for PEACE PLUS. My view is that the genuine cross-Border needs should be

funded by a cross-Border programme. I entirely agree with what was said about the strength and the impact being in working together. Many years ago when it was only the East Border Region and the North West Region Cross Border Group, they competed all the time and there was always this idea in the east that John Hume got everything for the north west. Perhaps that was not true but perception is reality. When we worked together 20 years ago we became a bit subsumed in INTERREG and managing the money and perhaps the higher strategic aims were lost at that stage because we have a small staff. In the face of Brexit there is an opportunity to turn something which is a big disadvantage into an opportunity moving forward. Again, the key point is that we need the Governments to work with us. We need them to recognise the need in the Border corridor as well. The good thing about the meeting tomorrow is that we have the Departments here and we also have the officials from the Northern Ireland Executive who will be around the table with us. Hopefully they will buy into the approach we are taking.

Vice Chairman: Just before I bring in Ms Gildernew, I wish to ask the same question as I asked of the previous group about the need for facilitation to ensure there is joined-up thinking on the economic approach to the entire Border region. Does Ms Arthurs see that as important? As I stated, many areas have the same issues but many of them also have strengths that can be used to attract funding. Does she see merit in that type of approach? Do the three groups here - North West, ICBAN and the East Border Region - need to be facilitated in order to return to the position of 20 years ago?

Ms Pamela Arthurs: That is the situation now. It is probably the point at where it started 20 years ago where the chief executive and council level worked together. It is important that they do that. We have been facilitating that since the referendum. It is difficult to get a date that suits 11 chief executives in order to get them around the table but they have been doing that. I think that they will agree the approach and if they decide there are three groups, then we will develop that for them. There is a need to work in a cross-Border manner and the current structure is cross-Border groups. I do not anticipate that they will propose a new structure; there are already enough structures there, but it is about making the best use of them. In the East Border Region, we have continually adapted to whatever the need is and will continue to do so. It is best that it is currently led by the top level in the 11 local authorities. That is the message that the Governments here and in Northern Ireland have been given.

Mr. P.J. O'Hanlon: In my county of Monaghan, 80% to 90% of people employed are in small to medium enterprises. Brexit is a challenge to the whole island of Ireland, there is no question, but for counties such as Fermanagh, Tyrone, Armagh, Cavan, Monaghan and Donegal, it will have a massive impact compared with Cork and Kerry. The amount of business, and their interaction, that I have seen in recent years that crosses the Border has developed Monaghan as a county. So much good work has been done by East Border Region. Mr. Molloy is 100% correct. Something must be put in place. I am very concerned that the amount of business that is done on the Border between those counties would be significantly harmed compared with the rest of Ireland. We cannot allow that to happen. It has been so beneficial. For people who have lived along the Border, such as Deputy Breathnach, it has been fantastic to see how these counties have developed in recent years. If something is not put in place, whether it is bringing all the groups together as an entity and working together, I am fearful for what will happen along the Border. I do not want to contemplate that, we just cannot go back there.

Ms Pamela Arthurs: I wish to return to the matter of business along the Border. Members maybe familiar with Flurrybridge Enterprise Centre. It is across the road from the Carrickdale Hotel. Some years ago, people working in the Newry co-operative identified that site and said

they wanted to build a business park there. At the time most people asked who in their right mind would build a business park there but it currently employs 300 people. It has taken small businesses - only small businesses - from barns and so on in the area - some of them may not have been as legal as they should have been - and brought them out there. Again, it was the EU which funded it, based on the local people identifying a need there. None of the units in the centre is empty. If one is leaving the business park and turns left, one is in Ireland and if one turns right, one is in Northern Ireland. Many groups have visited. One group of MPs from Westminster asked a businessman who is based there for many years why he would not just move across the Border or go to Dundalk. He told them that it suited him to be there and asked why he would do that. He said that he has leased property in Dundalk, which was costing him a lot of money, although he hoped he would never have to move to it, but that many others in the centre did not have the finances to start leasing in the South. That is the reality. I think many businesses would say that the worst thing is the uncertainty. When one knows what one is dealing with, one can start to deal with it but instead there is ongoing uncertainty which is costing people money. It was pointed out earlier in the week that businesses are not expanding because they do not know what will happen. They want some answers but they are not forthcoming.

Mr. Arnold Hatch: In Northern Ireland and the UK we have city and growth deals going on. Most of the councils in Northern Ireland are in some sort of a city deal, such as Belfast which includes Newry, Mourne and Down, while the consortium in the north west of Derry, Strabane and Fermanagh and Omagh, then Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Council etc., are involved in discussing a growth deal. Is there something similar for the regional assemblies or the Dáil that might buy into that concept of a structure along the Border which could focus on those Border counties?

Vice Chairman: We are here to discuss how we can improve the situation, which is not a reflection on the great work that the three organisations are doing. As I said at the earlier session, one could close one's eyes and listen to either group, or even people of different persuasions North or South; if one did not know their names and where they came from their problems are exactly the same.

To respond to Mr. Hatch's question, I agree that there is need for a co-ordinated strategy, accepting that the East Border group is working on one with the 11 managers. Someone at intergovernmental level needs to listen and recognise that as Mr. O'Hanlon and others have noted, in the vacuum that is there, and regardless of what happens, whether there is a soft Brexit or no Brexit, there needs to be an impetus for the region which needs reinvestment. The peace is fragile - that is not a throwaway phrase - and the area needs economic injection collaboratively and collectively. There was a clear message from the previous session that there is a need to identify the strengths of the different areas and work as a unit in relation to the various funding streams, regardless of Brexit. As Mr. Molloy noted, the Special EU Programmes Body, SE-UPB, was before the committee over 12 months ago. It said there were opportunities for other programmes that were trans-territorial that may not necessarily involve parties' membership of the EU. We will have to wait and see about that. However, there is a real need for joined-up thinking, although I hate that phrase, in getting Europe and others to recognise the need for investment.

Ms Michelle Gildernew: Everyone is very welcome. Their contribution today has been very insightful and I am delighted to see them all in Dublin for this.

Ms Arthurs put it that if businesses know, they can plan. I have been saying that for the past two years. There is now more meat on the bones of what will most likely happen post Brexit.

Businesses are finding that it is impossible to implement a plan.

This week Seamus Leheny from the Freight Transport Association tweeted that he had been contacted by a company that had applied for 37 licences and been given two. The agrifood industry is deeply integrated and the supply chain is across the island. One of the businesses in the ICBAN region, which is part of my constituency, has primary processing on one side of the Border and secondary processing on the other, and it has been told it cannot import or export. There are all kinds of queries. What is being heard in the east Border region about the difficulties businesses are being forced to contemplate and how would the witnesses expect them to be addressed?

Ms Pamela Arthurs: I agree with Ms Gildernew. Initially, when the referendum happened, the mushroom industry was lost almost overnight, particularly in County Monaghan. Councillor O'Hanlon may want to speak on that.

Mr. P.J. O'Hanlon: To take the example of the mushroom industry, it is only innovation that has kept those businesses alive. Unfortunately, as a result of the currency situation, some companies and businesses will go to the wall. It is a sad state of affairs. Ms Gildernew spoke about the Fermanagh area but it applies throughout the region. The food industry is very important for the cross-Border region because of the agricultural background. What the Government needs to do is make it easier for these people. Somebody with a freight company making an application in regard to processed food, for example, has to deal with far too much red tape.

We are telling the committee what we feel are the issues on the ground, but it is the Government that needs to make decisions. I listened to a presentation two weeks ago by a gentleman from Customs and Excise on the issues and challenges. While I do not want to be dramatic, if we do not have anything in place for this, there is no doubt there will be serious consequences. All the good work that is being done economically in regard to jobs and so on will be seriously negatively impacted. Whether it is done by civil servants from Northern Ireland or the Republic, solutions need to be found to make life easier. It is difficult enough to run a business and make it successful and viable in the current economic climate without adding challenges. My deep concern is that, two months out from Brexit, and we all know the can will probably be kicked down the road-----

Ms Michelle Gildernew: It is 43 days.

Mr. P.J. O'Hanlon: It is 43 days and we are sitting here, talking about this. Where are the solutions? Who is sitting down with these business people and helping them out? I know different groups such as InterTradeIreland are giving grants. However, the public representatives from the North and South need to make life easier for these people and come up with solutions for them, and that is not happening. It is the uncertainty that is the problem at present and it is making people very afraid.

Ms Pamela Arthurs: It is fair to say there has been an awful lot more support here than in Northern Ireland, where there has been very little support for businesses. Councillor O'Hanlon referred to InterTradeIreland, but Northern Ireland businesses have not had much support for something that is so dramatic. Change is always difficult, but there has not been that support on the northern side of the Border. We heard about Brexit fatigue a year ago from people here. We have not had it in Northern Ireland, apart from my children saying they are sick listening to it on the news, and asking why, if it is all that bad, people are continuing with it. There has not been that support or that leadership in Northern Ireland that there has been here, where the

local enterprise offices, LEOs, have been working consistently with businesses and there have been a number of workshops. We have not had the same degree of support when there is the same need in Northern Ireland.

Mr. Arnold Hatch: There really has not been that support and, given there is no Assembly, there is no focal point to go to. The chambers of commerce are going to Westminster and Theresa May is coming over here and getting different stories on different visits. Many small businesses are just sitting waiting until somebody tells them what the decision is so they can get the paperwork ready if they have to or do no paperwork if they do not have to. That is the point they are at. However, there is no Government-led support in Northern Ireland. We are a remote north-west corner of the UK, so we are not a big player in the total scheme of things.

Vice Chairman: Before I bring in Senator Black, others have referred to the difficulty with regard to the electricity interconnector and the impact for the east Border region in that respect. Others have mentioned issues of broadband and mobile coverage, especially in the cross-Border context, and the need for people to recognise those issues need to be addressed. Mr. Hatch mentioned the absence of the Executive. Clearly, we are being told that the postponement of the A5 is based on the fact arrangements cannot be made in that respect, and we were told the same in regard to what is happening with the interconnector. Does anybody care to comment on those issues around broadband and the need for us all to realise we have to start to work together to deliver for our region?

Mr. P.J. O'Hanlon: In regard to broadband, whatever about working together, we have had a plan here for many years and I do not know where it is going. There are parts of Monaghan which do not have broadband and the way things are going, without being disrespectful, the can is being kicked down the road with regard to the introduction of broadband. It is an issue for Government when it is going to deliver on that. From the perspective of local councillors in the east Border region who are trying to help the situation, there are people in these Houses dealing with this issue and we have had resignations and people coming and going in this context. The Government needs to get its act sorted out in regard to broadband. That is why it is here. While I do not mean to be disrespectful, I do not think it has been very successful.

With regard to the interconnector, nobody in County Monaghan is stopping the interconnector. Let us be clear about that. There is this perception that we are holding it up. Instead, we are looking for the interconnector to go underground. We were told, when this came out a number of years ago, that it was going to cost 40 times more to put it underground than overground, when I have been told it will cost twice as much. As a group in Monaghan County Council, we are 18 councillors from all political persuasions and groups. We do not always agree but we steadfastly stand together in regard to the interconnector. We are not stopping development and we are not saying we do not want an interconnector. However, the people of County Monaghan, including the landowners, deserve better and they have not been given the respect they deserve on this issue. We, as political groupings, stand together with those people, not because it is political but because it is the right thing to do for our county. There is not a word about Grid West. It is gone by the wayside and I wonder why. We all know why. What I am saying is that the group of 18 councillors have no issue with an interconnector but we want it underground. The people who are looking to do this, and I might as well say it while I am here, made a planning application 12 to 18 months ago that cost the taxpayer €7 million and had to be withdrawn. There is no accountability. Nobody is talking or dealing with the people on the ground.

Let us think about it. This unites Sinn Féin, Independent, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael council-

lors. It does not happen too often and it certainly does not happen in this building, but we are united in regard to defending our own county, and we will always do that. Let us be clear. We have no issue with the interconnector but we have an issue with overground. That is what the people of County Monaghan want and that is what we are elected to do. While we are there, we will continue to do that.

Mr. Arnold Hatch: In regard to the interconnector, I come from the hub of the north, Portadown. There is an industrial estate there, the Carn industrial estate, where Moy Park, Irwin's and many food companies are located. If we do not get a better electricity supply we will not be able to expand. Development in Craigavon is held up because of the lack of the interconnector. I cannot comment on whether it should go over ground or underground. As the planning application may well come to the planning committee of Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council, I have to keep an open mind on the subject. Regardless of from what source it comes, be that Scotland or Dublin, it is needed now for Northern Ireland to grow, never mind the Border corridor. We are only 20 miles from the Border and we are affected.

In terms of broadband, I was living in cuckoo land because I thought that the programme in the South would roll out a minimum of 80 Mbps of fibre to every household over the next for or five years. I presumed that was going ahead and we were sitting jealously watching from the North. One our of councillors who lives in the Banbridge area cannot get broadband. There are two contracts floating about, one of which is a local contract with BT which will take fibre to hubs which will then circulate it to businesses. The second contract is a BT contract which allows the company to decide where the work starts, which is usually the highest area, working outwards into the country because there is more money in the central areas than there is in the peripheral areas. We are trying to get a contract which is the opposite. We want BT to service the worst areas first and work inwards. Regardless of what way it is done, we need it done now.

Senator Frances Black: I thank the witnesses for their presentations. As I listened to them I realised the nightmare they are going through. I live in Dublin. I sometimes feel that even in Leinster House we are in a cocoon. Mr. O'Hanlon nailed it when he said that what is happening to the people in the Border regions is really sad. It is scary. Until I heard the presentations today from both groups I was not aware of the anxiety among people in the Border region. I get the impression from what the witnesses said that they feel the Border counties have been forgotten. It must be scary that businesses are anxious and constantly worried about job losses. All of this must be having a huge impact on people's lives.

Earlier, I spoke about mental health and the impact of anxiety on people. I know from my charitable work that the number of inquiries from the Monaghan, Castleblayney and Dundalk areas has increased. We have a service in Dundalk but there is a demand for our service in the Monaghan area, which seems to have arisen out of the referendum. My point is that but for the witnesses being here today talking about the fears, anxiety, stress and worry among people in the Border area, I would not have been aware of it. It is wonderful that they are unified in trying to address the issues. There is no doubt but that there is strength in unity. Ms Arthurs mentioned how the three organisations came to work together. There is no doubt that when people work together they are heard. The delegates are fighting for the people in their communities and that is important.

I do a lot of work in the mental health and addiction areas. These are areas I know a lot about and at every opportunity I raise them. The mental health of people is what I would be most concerned about. I cannot imagine what it must be like to live in a community that is anxious all of the time. I will put the same question to this group that I put to the group we

met earlier. What would the delegations like the Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement to do? Do they have a specific ask of us as a committee? This is a good committee. We are all very passionate about the Good Friday Agreement and the issues raised today. What do the groups need from us?

Ms Pamela Arthurs: I have been working for over 20 years in cross-Border co-operation. We can want to do various things along the Border and demonstrate the need for same but if central Government can work with us that endorses the work we are doing. We also know then that Government recognises that work. We have outlined the disadvantages for the Border area, North and South. We are working to put meat on the bones in terms of what needs to be done. As I said earlier, the Taoiseach's office and the Northern Ireland Executive have asked us to set out our requirements. It is important we can move forward together to develop the Border corridor. We have key asks and priorities in respect of which we need Government to support us. For example, earlier we mentioned the €600 million for the PEACE PLUS programme. We would like to see that money, and a large part of the INTERREG funding, focused on the Border area. We are grateful for the current INTERREG programme under which we are financially managing eight large strategic projects. However, I think this programme is very centralised. We are about local delivery that suits the needs of local people along the Border. The two member states can influence that programme to ensure it delivers on the identified needs of the Border corridor. We would like funding from this programme ring-fenced for the Border corridor. The EU definition of a border region is any region within 250 miles of a border. We can demonstrate that the areas closest to the Border are the most deprived and have the most need. Therefore, we suggest that these areas should receive a chunk of cross-Border economic development funding to assist them. The cross-Border organisations that work on a daily basis in these areas should also be supported. We need central Government to recognise and value the work we are doing and to put its money where its mouth is by supporting us. These programmes require buy-in from Northern Ireland as well. That is what would make a difference to us moving forward. The PEACE programme is there to be consulted on. We have taken part in consultations in the past and we have sometimes wondered if anybody listened. It is key that the areas that are most deprived and most in need of funding benefit from cross-Border moneys.

Senator Gerard P. Craughwell: From what I have heard today it strikes me that the witnesses are the meat the sandwich and that sandwich is made up of three parts over which they have no control, namely, Brussels, London and Dublin. Belfast clearly has very little say on what is going on. I have heard and understand the witnesses' frustration. It strikes me that nobody is going to blink until everybody blinks and we are 43 days away from Brexit. Going back to Senator Black's point on mental health, if I was a businessman in the North I would be screaming to the high heavens today. They told us that on 20 December when we visited Belfast. They wanted politicians to just tell them. Hard, soft, they did not care. We need to push for that.

Mr. Arnold Hatch: This may come as a surprise to Senator Black. I thought she came from north of Ballycastle. It is the same family.

Senator Frances Black: My father comes from Rathlin Island, near there.

Mr. Arnold Hatch: Mental health is a big issue in Northern Ireland because there are more problems per head of population there than anywhere else in the UK. Mental health is high on the agenda. Ms Linda Barnes, a former BBC reporter, emphasised that. It may surprise the committee, but I can provide a specific ask. The Good Friday Agreement we have now is not what was agreed in 1998. Whether it is politically possible or not, we need to go back to the

principle of designation as opposed to privileging the largest party. As long as the two largest parties nominate the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, there will always be division. That can be seen clearly since the agreement was changed to operating on the basis of the largest party rather than designation. That is my big ask. If we are ever going to get Northern Ireland up and running properly so that there is proper co-ordination between all the parties, it must be shared fairly and equally among all of them.

I support Ms Arthurs on how to get this structure together, but we need to keep talking. There must be an easy structure that would not make it too bureaucratic, which both Governments can feel comfortable feeding into. The east Border region has the longest record of delivering cross-Border programmes so we are in pole position in terms of delivery if the Governments can just give us the funds to do it.

Mr. P.J. O'Hanlon: First, I compliment Senator Black on the good work she does. She referred to forgotten people. I must be quite blunt and frank. We have an awful lot more in common with the counties north of the Border than we do with the counties in Munster and so on. That is the reality. Socially and culturally we have an awful lot more in common with them. For the past several years, the majority of people who have created employment in the counties along the Border and the county I live in come from Monaghan or Cavan. We now realise as counties that we are the ones who will solve our problems. Members asked if there was one thing the Government could do. The one thing we need is hope. I mean hope in respect of how we are going to develop. I am in Omagh an awful lot more often than I am in Killarney or Cork. That is not being disrespectful. Those are the places that interact with where I live.

I will go back to this point, though people say it will not have any effect. The A5 was the first project to go when there was an overspend of €1 billion on a hospital. The first message that was sent to the people, with Brexit 43 days away, was that it was off the agenda. What message does that send to the people along the Border? I ask the committee members to use whatever influence they have to change that decision. Brexit is coming down the line. I ask members to recognise that these people are going to be living and working with the challenges of that and commit to helping them as best they can. That type of understanding and that message to the people along the Border would mean an awful lot.

Vice Chairman: I thank Mr. O'Hanlon. I will make a couple of comments to conclude. Having heard representations from two groups and having met representatives of the north-west region on the ground, it is important for the day that is in it to pay tribute to all of the committees working along the border. Reference was made to the local authorities, the various committees and their executives, particularly the elected representatives from both sides who sit on them. Equally I note the communities that have benefitted from them. There have been many such communities over many years. I commend all those groups for their work.

On a personal basis, as someone who has lived along the Border and who, like the witnesses, is passionate about the issues, the full and frank discussions with them and the previous group speak for themselves. We could be negative but we have to be positive and ask what solutions can be found. This committee looks forward to working with them. We have heard what they have said. The secretariat has taken note of what has been said and, hopefully, we can find solutions to work together. Reference was made to the importance of getting the Executive up and running. Co-operation, both North-South and east-west, is the order of the day in our efforts to move and progress.

Without any further ado I want to particularly thank Alderman Hatch, Councillor P.J.

14 FEBRUARY 2019

O'Hanlon and Ms Arthurs. It would be remiss if I did not make reference to Ms Dette Hughes, Councillors Keoghan and Andrews from Newry, Mourne and Down District Council. Hopefully, we can have further interaction with them. This will not be the end of the discussion. Our next visit will be to the ICBAN area. It is in the planning stages, but we intend to undertake a visit to the region that would take a day or perhaps a little more, visiting projects and talking to communities. This will, hopefully, lend weight to what the witnesses have said.

On behalf of the committee, I thank the witnesses for providing that briefing. In adjourning the meeting, we are looking forward to having the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Simon Coveney, here at our next meeting. We will meet again on 21 February, when the Tánaiste will hear not just our views but also those that have been expressed here. We will raise the concerns on Brexit and, equally important, the Border region's need for new and enhanced PEACE programmes and INTERREG initiatives to be put in place. We also recognise that an economic zone needs to be catered to, including my own constituency, from Carlingford Lough to Lough Foyle and beyond. I thank the witnesses for their attendance.

The joint committee adjourned at 5.10 p.m. until 2.15 p.m. on Thursday, 21 February 2019.