

# DÁIL ÉIREANN

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## AN COMHCHOISTE UM

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### FEIDHMIÚ CHOMHAONTÚ AOINE AN CHÉASTA

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

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*Déardaoin, 4 Aibreán 2019*

*Thursday, 4 April 2019*

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The Joint Committee met at 2.10 p.m.

#### MEMBERS PRESENT:

Deputy Fergus O'Dowd,	Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile.
Deputy Maureen O'Sullivan,	
Deputy Brendan Smith,	

In attendance: Deputy Pat the Cope Gallagher and Senator John Dolan.

DEPUTY DECLAN BREATHNACH IN THE CHAIR.

*The joint committee met in private session until 2.30 p.m.*

### **Challenges Facing Cross-Border Authorities: Discussion**

**Vice Chairman:** I remind members, witnesses and those in the Public Gallery to turn off their mobile phones completely or switch them to safety or flight mode for the duration of the meeting. It is not sufficient for members to place their phones on silent mode because they may still interfere with the broadcasting system.

I welcome to the meeting Mr. John Kelpie, chief executive of Derry City and Strabane District Council; Mr. Seamus Neely, chief executive, Donegal County Council; Councillor Seamus Ó Domhnaill, cathaoirleach of Donegal County Council and chairman of the North West Strategic Growth Partnership group; Councillor Gus Hastings, member of Derry City and Strabane District Council and chairman of the North West Regional Development Group; and, last but not least, Councillor Bernard McGuinness, member of Donegal County Council and vice-chairman of the North West Regional Development Group. Cuirim fáilte anseo rompu. The witnesses are most welcome.

Before we commence, I remind witnesses of the notice relating to privilege. By virtue of section 17(2)(l) of the Defamation Act 2009, witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of the evidence they are to give 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 asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against any person or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable. Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the Houses or an official, either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable.

The format will be that we will first have opening statements from witnesses, after which we will have a question and answer session with members. I invite Mr. Ó Domhnaill to make his opening statement.

**Mr. Seamus Ó Domhnaill:** Tá lúchair orainn a bheith anseo inniu chun an cur i láthair seo a dhéanamh don choiste. Tá lúchair orainn a bheith anseo leis an Chathaoirleach agus le baill an choiste. We are delighted to have the opportunity, on behalf of the north west, to make a presentation to this committee. We met members of the committee when they visited Derry city recently and we found that meeting very worthwhile and useful. We commend the committee on the work it does and the positive change it wants to effect for the entire island.

As the Chairman outlined, I am the chairman of Donegal County Council and joint chairman of the North West Strategic Growth Partnership. I am joined by Councillor Gus Hastings of Derry City and Strabane District Council, who is also the chairman of the North West Regional Development Group; Councillor Bernard McGuinness from Donegal County Council, the vice-chairman of the North West Regional Development Group; Mr. John Kelpie, chief executive of Derry City and Strabane District Council; and Mr. Seamus Neely, chief executive, Donegal County Council. I apologise on behalf of the Mayor of Derry who is otherwise engaged today but wanted his apologies to be acknowledged.

The brief we received for today's meeting was to make a presentation on the limitations of the committee, the way in which Brexit will affect us, the work we are doing in our counties and region to propel the areas we represent forward and the ways in which the committee can assist us in that work. To provide some perspective on these issues, we will each cover a specific topic as part of a coherent presentation and in an effort to avoid duplication.

Derry is the fourth largest city on this island, as has been recognised by the Government in the national development plan. The cross-Border region served by Donegal County Council and Derry City and Strabane District Council has a population of approximately 350,000. We expect this to be recognised and we want the region to be treated as a major centre and city region on this island. It is important for the growth and prosperity of the people and counties we represent that this is realised and understood, as it has been in the national development plan. A memorandum of understanding has been signed by me, as chairman of Donegal County Council, John Boyle, as Mayor of Derry City and Strabane District Council, and the chairman of the Northern and Western Regional Assembly. We pay tribute to the Northern and Western Regional Assembly for holding a meeting in the chambers of Derry City and Strabane District Council. It was a momentous occasion because it was the first time a regional assembly held an official meeting outside its jurisdiction. The meeting was a beneficial exercise as members of the assembly acquired first-hand experience of the co-operation, partnership and symbiotic relationship between Donegal County Council and Derry City and Strabane District Council, and were able to see that we in the region are one people.

As a Donegal person, Derry is the city I recognise as my city. Everybody on my side will recognise that also. The people of Derry recognise that Donegal is very much part of their extended boundary limits and region. Derry and Donegal people share the same surnames and there has been great interaction between them for generations. It is most unfortunate that political decisions were taken that did not reflect the will of people living in the region and did not benefit them. The result was that the symbiosis and partnership of many years broke down to some degree. We restarted that partnership in the mid-1990s and we are now working with each other.

Donegal County Council and Derry City and Strabane District Council are working on a cross-Border basis like no other jurisdiction in Europe. We are working for the benefit of both areas, rather than competing with each other. If we can get a company, an economic driver or an educational driver - anything that benefits any part of the region - to locate in the region, it does not matter to people in Donegal if it locates Derry and *vice versa*. We realise that the benefits will be to the north west and we will work together, collaborate and co-operate to assist in any way we can.

Approximately 35% of the population in the north west are aged 25 years or younger. We have the youngest population in Europe. We are very proud of this and want to build on it. We have to work harder than other parts of the island, however, to retain the young population in the region we represent. We will ask for assistance in doing this. The region has some 40,000 third-level students at the Magee campus of Ulster University in Derry, the North West Regional College and the Letterkenny Institute of Technology.

We have two major hospitals, namely, Letterkenny University Hospital and Altnagelvin Area Hospital on the outskirts of Derry. We must remember that the Government pumps a significant amount of money into the services available at Altnagelvin because it is funded on a cross-Border basis. It is also important to recognise that the services available at Altnagelvin, such as cancer and cardiac services, are dependent on the critical mass of the population of

Donegal. The cash injection by the Irish and British Governments was made because a critical mass was established such that it could be argued that those services were sustainable. Effectively, things such as hard or other borders or changes to the cross-jurisdictional code that is currently in place would create difficulties not only in terms of movement, but also on a human level and in terms of making arguments to sustain services that serve the people of the region.

We are a subregional economic driver North and South. Our symbiotic relationship incorporates our critical mass and the economic drive and delivery in the region. We are very proud to be able to entice businesses or investment into our region by reason of the critical mass that is established throughout the Border region, including areas such as Donegal, Derry city, Strabane, Tyrone, Omagh and Limavady. The population level of our region means that we should have services equal to or better than those in most of the rest of the island. We have worked hard together to establish those services. There is a perception in the Border counties from which we come that those services may be in danger because of decisions that might be taken. It is a somewhat frustrating time. Equally, it is a time of great thought with very little foresight. There is substantial fear among people in our region that the consequences of decisions that may be made in Westminster will impact more on our region than on any other in Europe.

On my way to this meeting, I crossed the Border from Lifford into Strabane. If one is travelling from Donegal to Dublin, our capital city, one must cross the Border twice. On the geography of Donegal, its longest land border is with the North. Only 3% of its land border is with the Republic of Ireland, totalling fewer than 10 km of border with County Leitrim. We are connected to the Republic of Ireland by an umbilical cord. It is important that the Border between Donegal and the Six Counties be strengthened, cherished and worked on. We must ensure that it is not weakened and that nothing is allowed to stop progress or collaboration.

The infrastructural need of our region is the greatest challenge we face apart from Brexit. Donegal is the county furthest from Dublin, but there is very poor road infrastructure to the county and its towns. Services taken for granted in many other counties are absent in Donegal. We have no rail line. There is an airport, which is located very much to the north west of the county. We are almost totally dependent on road links to our county. The promised upgrade of the A5-N2 road network has been on the cards since the Good Friday Agreement was signed in the late 1990s. However, there has been little or no impact on the ground in that regard and that has held the region back. When representatives of the committee were in Derry, we asked that the progression of the A5-N2 be fast-tracked and made a major Government priority. We repeat that request and ask that every effort be made by the committee and all Members of the Oireachtas to further its progression. If one looks at a map of this island, the north west is the only area not connected by a major motorway or dual carriageway. It is an area in which we will fall further behind if the A5-N2 is not progressed. In the context of the impending decisions on Brexit, the lack of that road infrastructure puts our region at a serious disadvantage. Were it not for the great relationship built by the executive members of both councils and copper-fastened by the elected representatives of all political persuasions of the councils, we would really be struggling. We have stepped up to the plate in terms of putting Donegal, Derry and Tyrone on the map. We want to continue in that vein and see support from the Westminster Government, the Stormont Assembly and the Irish Government. It is important that the A5-N2 be progressed and not shelved or put on ice. We need progress, not buzzwords. We want to see shovels in the ground because the project is of such importance to our area. We ask that that message be taken back to the Government. The road would allow us to realise our economic potential, retain people within our counties and regions and be more connected with the rest of the island of which we are all part. It is incumbent on all Members of the Oireachtas to understand that we

are as deserving of such infrastructure as any other part of the island.

Derry city is the only city region in the UK and Ireland on a jurisdictional border. Up to 20% of the employees of Donegal County Council cross the Border daily. Similarly, many thousands of people leave Donegal daily to work in areas such as Strabane, Omagh and Derry city. The free movement of people is of great importance in the area. It must be recognised that we are a special case because of the cross-Border jurisdictional nature of Derry city, the environs of which spill over well into Donegal. We must not allow anything to impact negatively on free movement in the area.

For many years, planning on each side of the Border was done on a back-to-back basis. However, since the fabulous news of the Good Friday Agreement and the work done by committees and Members of the relevant Parliaments in regard to its implementation, Derry City and Strabane District Council and Donegal County Council have started working face to face. We are talking to each other, working together, finding out what can be good for the region and understanding its needs as a whole rather than those of each individual county. County boundaries in the Republic of Ireland are important but, where necessary, must be overlooked. Equally, the Border between Donegal and Derry city and Strabane must be overlooked for the benefit of all the people of the area. That has been done. We must ensure that nothing is done to curb the good work that has been completed or undermine the relationship that exists between the two councils.

The final point I wish to address is Brexit. We should not talk too much about Brexit today but it is important to stress that, no matter what happens, the situation under any deal that is reached will be less favourable than what is currently in place between our counties. No matter how good we are told a deal is, it will not be as good as the current situation. There has been reference to green cards and people being worried about insurance. Those are concerns of a very practical nature. However, delving into it more deeply, the potential impact in terms of healthcare, education, the free movement of people and goods and tariffs is frightening for people in Donegal and Derry. The potential impact of Brexit on normal day-to-day lives is flabbergasting. We wish for the current situation to be maintained. The Government has been doing very good work on behalf of all the citizens of this island in being constructive with the EU and the UK regarding what will come after the date on which a decision is made, whether that be 12 April or a later date. It is important that the real and negative impacts on the people of our region be taken into consideration in any negotiations, discussions or talks on Brexit. The people who are making those decisions must know their decisions will change lives for the people from our region. It is important that point is emphasised. I will now ask Mr. John Kelpie, chief executive of Derry City and Strabane District Council, to continue from where I left off.

**Mr. John Kelpie:** To pick up on what Mr. Ó Domhnaill said, all cities in Ireland and Europe face significant challenges these days in terms of sustainable economic growth, social issues, cohesion and so on. It is probably true that those cities that are attaining some degree of success in tackling these issues are doing so because they are collaborating on a wider regional level. They understand the concept of a wider city region. Local authorities around cities are beginning to pool their efforts to act as a more coherent subregion of the state in which the city is located. With the success of other city regions in mind, Derry City and Strabane District Council and Donegal County Council have begun this new collaboration. For decades, as Mr. Ó Domhnaill said, the two councils have collaborated on many projects and have been very successful. However, many of these projects have been single-issue focused and there has not

been a wider strategic collaboration at a city region level to tackle the big macro issues at a strategic level. That is what is new. That is what has changed in the north west over the past three or four years.

A new integrated strategic approach is being taken at four levels. Each of the councils re-structured in 2014 and 2015 with the reform of local government in both jurisdictions. That acted as a catalyst for both councils to look at economic development in a new way using new powers allocated to councils. Each council has done that with reference to the other. At north west level, while collaboration always existed, these new structures have emerged. We will say a little about that later on. At national level, we understand now, as a city region, that we cannot drive forward the north west city region on our own but must collaborate with both Governments. The degree of collaboration with both Governments has accelerated tremendously in recent years and our attendance at this meeting is evidence of this. We have been here before and this relationship is maturing and developing. At international level, we now collectively market the city region as one place. We hold joint investment visits and we are looking at a joint tourism strategy. We are looking at the benefits of both places overlapping in the highly competitive world market in which other city regions are competing. It is very important that we do this.

The ultimate aim is to drive forward the city region. What we are doing is place based leadership, the place being the cross-Border jurisdiction in which the city region sits. We have completely shared objectives and work completely in partnership. Very importantly, we are outcomes focused. There is no point in doing any of this unless we change some of the fundamental indicators that have held the city region back over the years. It is a very inclusive approach. In the slides, members will see the partnership model. It is very simple. All of the complicated models that existed in past, of which there were very many in the crowded cross-border jurisdictional space, have been simplified down to the model in the slides. The north west strategic growth partnership, which we represent, comprises six elected representatives from both councils who have been given delegated authority to take key decisions in respect of economic development, environmental regeneration and community cohesion. This is coupled with input from senior representatives from all of the Government Departments in both jurisdictions. Working with that strategic partnership, shown in the blue box on the slide, is the development group, shown in the green box. Within the development group are all of our regional partners, the educational establishments, the chambers of commerce, our communities, the health sector and all of the various sectors. It is a very simple model. We believe it is the only model in the European Union, on the border of the European Union or across two jurisdictions that has cross-community, cross-council and national government participation and the authority and power to take key decisions in respect of that city region jurisdiction.

**Mr. Seamus Neely:** Mr. Kelpie describes the model we have developed in recent years. We wanted to ensure this partnership provides a single platform to voice the needs of the region and, more important, to speak for the potential of the region and drive that potential. We have done this. On the approach in general, we view the work of the partnership with the two councils and all the other partners as being a concerted effort to develop the whole of the region. Essentially, we are about ensuring that things continue to happen in a way that better underpins the functioning of our local communities.

As we heard from the previous two speakers, the integral connections between the communities across both council areas are particularly important. There is also a very strong focus on alignment of resources and effort around the development of the place, and on the development

of policy that underpins the development of place and the functioning of communities generally. We do that across three broad regionally agreed objectives, namely, economic growth and investment; physical and environmental development; and social and community cohesion and well-being. It is a whole-of-place, whole-of-people, whole-of-communities approach. We are now able to plug into a structure that brings in local and business perspectives and includes all the partners at local level as well as the councils. Very importantly, it forges an opportunity to connect with the programmes of Government North and South to create an alignment that ensures maximum efficiency in the deployment of resources. Essentially, we wanted to avoid duplication of effort and the deployment of competition where collaboration brings better outcomes. At the end of the day, it is about realising the full potential of our place, which includes the fourth largest city on the island of Ireland. It is, therefore, a very significant place.

Mr. Kelpie referred to the wider partnership. It involves education, business, community, councils and government. Under the education and skills heading, our partners at local level are Ulster University at Magee, Letterkenny Institute of Technology, the North-West Regional College and Donegal Education and Training Board. They are working on an aligned basis with the co-ordinated policies of both councils and the partners generally around those broad headings. That has, for example, led to the signing of a memorandum of understanding between the four institutions which is now supported by a resource to develop it. It is about ensuring there is continued capacity for our educational facilities to understand as quickly as possible the current and emerging skills and educational needs of our communities and businesses, so that there is capacity to respond on a real-time basis. Bespoke classes are being put in place across all four institutions and 100% of the students that go through those courses go straight into employment at local level. That is because there has been a joined-up approach. Education is not being provided just because of the numbers but has been aligned with need. That would not have happened to the same extent before and the approach is working very well.

We have developed international partnerships, particularly in the US but also in China. The skills development piece has been across that as well. In addition, and we do not always say this because we expect that people know, we have our joint north west promotion on marketing investment. We would never now look at developing something in isolation without ensuring a collaborative approach is not the best option. That is now second nature to us. One of the things we are doing now is developing a city region dashboard so that can be there on an iterative basis where all of our citizens and business partners across the board, internal and external, and indeed beyond the region can come in and have a look at what is there, what the opportunities are and what the local statistics are to ensure there is real-time information around what are the opportunities and requirements of our region. We have had a particular emphasis on supporting our SMEs in the north east of the US. We have in-market support in the US. One of them focuses on developing opportunities for our SME sector and more recently we have collectively deployed a resource to help us establish opportunities, particularly on the FDI side, in support of both the IDA, INI and Enterprise Ireland.

We have done a lot of work on Brexit analysis. We were the first two councils to commission collectively a detailed piece of work, working with Queen's University Belfast, the University of Ulster and Trinity College Dublin, that began immediately after the referendum and provided an opportunity to understand at local level what the issues were, to engage with all of our communities around that and to capture the energy and concerns that have been developed at local level and see how they might be constructively managed in a way we could articulate to both Governments but also to the EU. That has been successful. That work has continued. More recently, we have worked with the other nine councils that are at or near the Border to

develop a whole-of-Border approach to that.

Some of the specific examples we have done together supporting the economy and tourism at local level involve things like the Dubai Duty Free Irish Open and a feasibility study for the deep water cruise ship berthing at Lough Foyle in partnership with Foyle Port. Things we are working on currently include the development of our north-west joint tourism strategy. What we have done is ensure that our work together enables us to focus on the practicalities of what needs to be done to support communities. Some of the examples I mentioned do that. We have also ensured that while this is ongoing, that effort and energy is deployed in a manner that is consistent with and feeding from both regional and national policies so there has been a significant focus on ensuring that we articulate what our needs are in the national process, feed into and respect it and develop our own policies from that. I will hand back to my colleague, Mr. John Kelpie.

**Mr. John Kelpie:** With regard to spatial planning, probably one of the largest pieces of work we originally did was working with Government to establish the Derry-Letterkenny cross-Border city region prominently in the national planning framework and the national development plan. Very importantly, as the fourth largest city region, the primary objective of the city region is to become a positive contributor economically to the economy on both sides of the Border. To do so, it is really important that it is strategically recognised as such so we are very pleased with the prominence the city region has been given in both those documents. We hope to use that prominence to advance many of the outcomes of the city region and deliver for both Governments on many of the objectives of the respective programmes for government so that is a very important piece of work for us.

We are looking at the whole spatial planning piece in the north west. Both planning departments are looking at infrastructure and physical development. We are beginning to look, not on a back-to-back basis as happened previously, but with a co-joined approach. We mentioned Brexit, which is the topic of the day. While the debate continues to rage, particularly in Westminster, as to what Brexit might look like at some point in the future, as the city region that will probably be most impacted by whatever type of Brexit emerges, we are already beginning to look at a post-Brexit landscape. What might the landscape of the north-west city region look like and what are those opportunities? We focused a great deal on the challenges in recent years but how might we move beyond this into a new era regardless of how Brexit falls in the coming months? We recently commissioned a very exciting piece of work with Harvard University in Massachusetts working in collaboration with the University of Ulster, Maynooth University and Letterkenny Institute of Technology to engage our communities to take that piece of work forward. We are about half way through that and hope to finish that piece of work in the next number of months. That is a really exciting opportunity for any city region to be undertaking not least one at this time.

**Mr. Bernard McGuinness:** I thank the committee for the work it is doing and for inviting us. I have been a member of the cross-Border committee for many years. We have worked and progressed and the cross-Border committee has developed to where we are today. It is very exciting. We start off from a position of peripherality in terms of both Governments. The most peripheral area is Donegal when viewed from Dublin while Derry-Strabane is the most peripheral area when viewed from Belfast or London. If one starts off from that position with a border down the centre of it, one knows that affects economic development. That is where we came from. We are working to try to bridge that.

I am dealing with the environment, infrastructure and regeneration. The Department for

Infrastructure, DFI, is the utmost importance to us. In respect of that connection to Dublin and the A6 to Belfast, the development of roads in the north west is crucial to the further development of the city region. Having a city region is tremendous but not being able to travel to or from there is not. Much work has been done on the N13 and N14 economic corridor, the TEN-T routes, the A6 to Belfast and N2 to Dublin. That is the most important thing for us at the moment.

The multi-modal transport hub in the Waterside is a €30 million development. I have reservations about the frequency of the trains. If someone cannot leave Derry city and get a connecting train through to Dublin via Belfast, that must be dealt with. We met Transport Infrastructure Ireland and I made that point to it.

We have done other major developments that are within our remit. The Strabane-Lifford project is at an advanced funding stage. The north-west greenway will cost €18 million and will cover 46 km from Derry to Muff. Those things are in progress and tremendous funding has been provided. The regional greenways technical feasibility study is underway.

There are two airports in the region, City of Derry Airport and Donegal Airport in Carrickfinn. Information sharing and collaboration on the operation of route development are taking place. That is very important for us. It is very important that people can get to the region. The development of a regional energy strategy and climate adaptation strategy relates to general policy on climate change and monitoring the same. I started on this committee many years ago. It goes back to having a proper road structure. We are doing all this and have demonstrated this to Governments. I salute both our chief executives and their councils for the work they do but we need infrastructure. We need roads. We do not have a train service into the area other than Derry city. One cannot get that connection from Derry to Dublin. That should be insisted upon. I believe that with all of this, we would have a much better area.

**Mr. Gus Hastings:** I thank the Chairman for inviting us. This is my second time here. Last time I came was for the north-west rural development INTERREG programme. We raised many of the issues that we are raising today. Some have been resolved. The first time we talked about Altnagelvin was with regard to the cancer unit which is now up and running. It has pride of place and it helps people from both sides of the Border. We run many projects together for Donegal, Derry and Strabane. The relationship has blossomed over the last four years. Prior to that, we had a good relationship but we tended to be in silos because in the past, we had as many as six councils working together and now we have two major councils in the north west. One of the most important things for us is that the relationships that are built up now continue even after Brexit. We do not know what it will look like but it is definitely on its way. We do not know exactly how soft or how hard it will be but this should not affect the Derry, Donegal and Strabane partnership.

Over the years, there has been a lack of investment, to say the least, in the north west. It does not take a rocket scientist to know that. The Chairman is well aware of it. I want to talk about health and well-being. The projects we have done include the cross-Border one on greenways and environmental development. Inch and Ballykelly are good examples of what can be done when people get together and start to think as a unit. I launched this particular project two weeks ago on behalf of north-west sporting pathways. This is for all sports in the north west, especially the big four: rugby, ladies' rugby, cricket, football, Gaelic sports etc. They have come together and the training will have a cross-Border emphasis. It will not just look at individuals but at the whole. That is good for all of Ireland because when people come together and work at those lower levels, it evolves very quickly. Where friendships are cemented and built

upon, they remain. They are not imposed. They are there because people want to be in them.

I am glad that everybody recognises that we are a region. For a while, one would have thought that we were a small area. The population of the north west is approximately 330,000. In Derry and Strabane, there are 149,000. There is a significant number to cover and a question of how to pay for them, which is where the real problem comes in. When we set out our stall, we and our officials sit down together, look at the strategy and what is the best and most economic way to fulfil it. If one looks at the most recent trip to Boston, one can see how beneficial it was to us. Very few of the groups that went there are not doing business now with Boston and the north east of America.

We want to evolve the grassroots' organisations, such as sporting organisations. That is only one of many. Where one goes to next is the important matter. Regardless of whether Brexit comes or not, the city deal needs to go ahead. It is not that we want it to go ahead: it needs to go ahead. We need to send a message to the rest of Europe and the rest of the world that we are open for business. I hope the committee continues to support us on those issues.

When people talk about the Good Friday Agreement, they tend not to look at the detail. We need to be very aware of that. We would not have it without partnership and development and relationships being built on a solid foundation. Otherwise it would have fallen apart. There are those in the North of Ireland who want to see it dismantled. We are well aware of that but we are not here to support that premise because some of what needs to be done has to happen immediately.

**Mr. Seamus Ó Domhnaill:** We have heard a lot about what we are doing. It is important that we lay out what we want our next steps to be and where we want assistance from this committee and other committees within these Houses. Looking at the current projects and initiatives that have been approved by the EU and both Governments, it is essential that they are continued to fruition and completion. We know, with the impending decisions that could be made, that there may be a premise that funding from different sectors could be stopped for projects on either side of the Border. We would strongly request the committee to do everything in its power to ensure that any projects or initiatives that have been approved or commenced are finished to fruition and seen out for the betterment of the whole region. We also see much discussion with regard to Derry city receiving a city deal from the British Government. Talks are at a very advanced stage. They are of a sensitive nature. We have taken an initiative at a political and executive level where we have signed a letter and asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Deputy Simon Coveney, that if a city deal is given for one part of the region, the Donegal side of the Border should receive similar funding to realise its full potential. We need that to happen and we are looking forward to that.

We see inward investment coming into Ireland daily. We as councils are working hard to get inward investment into our own area and region. I commend the councils for doing that. Perhaps if the bodies that are charged at a national level to take inward investment to all parts of this island were doing their job, there would not be as much of an onus on our councils to work as hard as they are to try to attract inward investment to a region in the north west of this island that can sometimes be forgotten about. We want to ensure that we are at the table and that when we are at the table we are taken seriously. That is why we are delighted to have the invitation today.

There is the potential of future territorial co-operation funding. We look forward to that commencing and continuing in the future. In that regard, on behalf of the group and the north-

west strategic growth partnership, I thank the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the Tánaiste, Deputy Coveney, and the Northern Ireland Executive Office for their commitment, collaboration, buy-in, the vision that they have for what we are doing and their continued support for us. We ask them to have faith in us and to continue to support us because we are doing this for the betterment of our region, our council, our people, our education, our health, our infrastructure and every facet of what is needed in those areas, not in Donegal or Derry but in the whole area. A tranche of north-west partnership funding has been put into what the two councils are doing and we ask the committee to ensure that funding is continued and renewed, irrespective of what happens in Westminster or what decisions are taken at EU level, so that what we are doing can be strengthened and built upon into the future and the full potential of our region can be realised. We ask the Vice Chairman and Deputy Crowe to use their good offices to ensure that happens.

I heartily congratulate the committee on the work it has done. We are very aware of the good, hard and diligent work it undertakes on behalf of all the people, North and South, in regard to the Good Friday Agreement. We want to work with the committee in the future and if we can do anything, either politically or on the executive side, we are more than willing to help. The things the committee is trying to achieve will be beneficial to all of Ireland. We ask for its continued help, support and co-operation and we look forward to seeing the results of that.

**Vice Chairman:** I can testify to the success, to date, of the north-west strategic partnerships group. A number of committee members were in Washington in connection with the Good Friday Agreement and its strapline was on every office we went into. It was great to see it being promoted in the US and I commend its representatives on the “Gateway for Growth” strapline. I empathise with the areas they cover and I wish them well in the future.

**Deputy Brendan Smith:** I thank the delegation for the excellence of its presentations. They were detailed, well presented and positive but they also outlined the challenges that face the region. As our Vice Chairman said, this meeting follows on from the detailed briefing we had with the witnesses at the Guild Hall some months ago. In my earliest days in the Oireachtas, I recall that the late Donegal Senator, Paddy McGowan, was a powerful advocate for the needs of Donegal and neighbouring counties in the north west. He always spoke about the potential for cross-Border development, even in the early 1990s when things were rather dark on this island. Listening to the witnesses today, one gets a sense of the results of the huge co-operation between Derry and Donegal and the benefits of the different initiatives that were painstakingly put in place for all the people of the region. A big step forward has been achieved. It was not achieved without people on all political sides stepping out of a comfort zone and pushing the boundaries in the best interests of all the people.

I am delighted that Mr. Ó Domhnaill mentioned the memorandum of understanding being signed with the north and west regional assembly. I was speaking to some of the members of that assembly on the day we were in the Guild Hall and they were very glad about it. The counties in the north and west regional assembly are Cavan, Monaghan, Leitrim, Sligo, Roscommon, Mayo and Galway and it is very important that the group works with its neighbours, namely, Derry and the part of Tyrone that is in the Donegal catchment area. There are many similar needs in the area and there are similar opportunities for development. When we think of the western part of the country, we have a tendency to think of an older age cohort but it is heartening that 35% of the 350,000 population are under the age of 25. It is very encouraging information and it bodes very well for the future. As Mr. Ó Domhnaill and Mr. Kelpie said, there need to be huge efforts to ensure the retention of people in the area through third level

and further education, because keeping talent in the region is very important. We had the opportunity to meet with people at some of the colleges in Derry and we had met people from the Letterkenny Institute of Technology on a previous visit. It is great to see such co-operation and collaboration because it makes the best use of limited resources.

In the last Dáil and at my request, this committee met Donegal and Omagh district councils regarding the development of the N2/A5. I had requested representations to this committee as it was not really moving forward and we wanted to keep the project on the agenda. Every one of today's witnesses spoke of the importance of that project and it is important in my constituency too, on the Monaghan side. Anybody who travels from Dublin to Letterkenny and on to Derry will know of this yawning gap in infrastructure that needs to be reversed. We have consistently supported the project over the years and we want it to move forward as it is absolutely essential.

We do not know what the outcome of Brexit will be but we all know that it will be negative and adverse for all of our island, regardless of what form of Brexit comes about. As I have said in the Dáil Chamber and at this committee, there are decisions on investment and infrastructure that are within the competence of our own Government, even if there are other areas where the Government or the Oireachtas will not get their way because the decisions on them will be taken in other fora. We appeal to the Government to identify the infrastructural needs of, and to prioritise, the Border region in this regard, because that region will be impacted first and most adversely by Brexit. If we do not have a modern infrastructure to assist businesses in remaining competitive and to make our region easier to get to, we will be in difficulty. The N2/A5 upgrade is essential in this regard, as are other road links throughout the Derry-Donegal region and in the north and west region. All of us in the Oireachtas, as I am sure is the case in other parliamentary assemblies, have asked the Government to prioritise the infrastructural needs of the Border region, which is at the frontier of Brexit.

It is heartening to listen to the witnesses today and to hear what has been achieved. In my earliest days in the Oireachtas, I listened to colleagues from Donegal and I heard councillors from the north west too. While it is good to hear what has been achieved, the challenge is to realise the potential in the best interests of our people. The Irish central Border area network, ICBAN, and the eastern Border region to which the Vice Chairman was closely associated in the past, came to this committee some weeks ago and made excellent presentations. There is a determination within each of these regional groupings to deal with the challenges we have. I will continue to support their important and valuable work.

**Ms Elisha McCallion:** It is great to see the committee members today. We had a presentation from the partnership a number of months ago in the region but it is great for them to be here in Dublin to make a presentation. As the members know, I am a major advocate of the work of the partnership. I am extremely supportive and very proud to be somewhat associated with the work that has been carried out to date with the partnership. Everyone spoke of the uniqueness of the co-operation and collaboration and it is true. It is fair to say there is nothing of the like elsewhere. There have been various attempts at cross-Border initiatives over the past number of years but I have no doubt that what is happening in the north west is unique. All our Border constituencies should be looking at this as a potential model for future development.

With the next steps outlined in the presentation, there are a number of requests. It is important as a committee that we go through them and perhaps make some suggestions. With regard to the continued partnership funding, a question was posed to An Taoiseach by our party leader a number of weeks ago about the commitment from the Irish Government for financial assistance. I am glad to say An Taoiseach spoke very favourably on it but as a committee perhaps we

could seek clarity on the current status of that assistance to ensure there is no confusion coming to the stage of the finalised current budget?

With respect to potential territorial co-operation, in Brussels a few weeks ago I met the vice chairman of the European Committee on Regional Development, Mr. Joachim Zeller, MEP, to speak about the uniqueness of the cross-Border areas. The Irish Government is in conversation with the European Commission on potential post-Brexit funding. My understanding to date is that it will not come into the Northern constituencies, although this is entirely inappropriate. There needs to be a conversation with the Irish Government about a plea that any post-Brexit funding should come into the Six Counties of the North and a particular focus of that funding should be in the Border constituencies. It has already been referenced here and there is absolutely no doubt as report after report indicates that the Border constituencies will be the worst affected areas in a good, bad or any type of Brexit. I saw a report very recently indicating that the constituency I represent is at the bottom of two leagues and is 650th from the Westminster constituencies with respect to the cost of food and living standards in any potential Brexit. That is not even unique to the north west and as members can imagine, all the Border constituencies will have problems. There must be conversations involving the Irish Government on the post-Brexit territorial funding that could potentially come from Europe.

With regard to inward investment and economic development, Sinn Féin regularly meets officials and the Government in the South, as well as the British Government and officials in the Northern Ireland Civil Service, NICS, to ensure there is collaborative funding. There is no point in funding the north-west region solely from either a Westminster perspective or the Northern Executive end and forgetting about the Irish Government. It is fair to say the Irish Government has again spoken very favourably, standing up to the mark and potentially putting in additional funding at a stage when it thinks it might be appropriate. I am a little concerned as to when that will be and who will make that request. I am familiar with the letter that has gone from the partnership to the Government here in the South on potential funding. As a committee, we could perhaps flesh that out a bit and see where the conversations are with the Departments down here. It may be particularly useful if a request is sent from this committee to the Minister for Education and Skills, Deputy Joe McHugh, about the cross-Border education initiatives we are discussing. I know there is the potential for investment into the university in the city region but again I am not sure how far those conversations have developed. They need to move on from where they are currently.

Everybody has spoken about the A5 and of course we are all supportive of that project. My party colleague was last month at this meeting and An Tánaiste, Deputy Simon Coveney, was here to discuss the absolute necessity for the completion of the A5. I giggled to myself yesterday as I was quite excited to see a notification in the *Derry Journal* about the A5. I thought it was extremely sad for me to be excited about an environment impact process but all the same there is movement on the A5, so we must ensure that it does not stop in the way that it has in the past. Again, we have heard a commitment from the Irish Government at various levels that the funding will be available but we need to ensure the department in the North moves this as quickly as possible. Again, I have some faith that is moving in the right direction. It is a flagship project and I take Deputy Brendan Smith's point on the need for projects such as the A5 to be ring-fenced in some way because of the changes in the Government. In the North, we deemed it a flagship project, so regardless of the Minister, the Government must ensure it continues. Perhaps that could be considered from this end.

I congratulate everybody on the work they have undertaken. I suggest a follow-up from the

delegation's end from the vice chairperson of the regional development committee. Perhaps there could be a reflection on the conversations with respect to bringing the potential post-Brexit funding into the north west and all the Border constituencies. I congratulate the witnesses on the large volume of work they have all undertaken. I have no doubt, Brexit or no Brexit, that this relationship will continue to flourish and it is must do and we have no choice. We are on the periphery and work undertaken to date can only grow in the years and months ahead. We will do anything that we as a committee or our parties can do to help.

**Mr. Mickey Brady:** I thank the witnesses for the presentation and commend them on the work they have been doing and continue to do. I represent a Border constituency and a city, Newry, and although it may not be as important as Derry in the eyes of the witnesses, it is just as important in our eyes. Newry, Mourne and Down District Council has been tied with Belfast so our bonus will be the southern relief road when the money comes through and also regeneration of the city. We are very aware of the same problems in terms of cross-Border workers and the impact on them. My background is in dealing with benefits and there are complex cases with respect to tax credits, for example, that will become ten times more complex. These matters will affect people's daily lives, which is important to note. Whatever Brexit happens, it will have an adverse effect on the witnesses and the area and constituency I represent. I commend the witnesses on their work and it was a very interesting presentation. We have much in common. Newry, Mourne and Down District Council and Louth County Council have a memorandum of understanding that has been signed for many years and its effects are continuing. There is very good cross-Border co-operation. We are allied to Dundalk and Drogheda and all that work is ongoing. I congratulate the witnesses again and thank them for the presentation.

**Mr. Francie Molloy:** I thank the delegation for the presentation, which was very positive and it is good to see such co-operation across councils eroding the Border and the effects of that Border in the surrounding council areas. I travel back and forth to Donegal quite regularly. When travelling between Dungannon and Donegal, its importance for the development of Donegal and the entire north-west region can be seen at every stage of the way. We have to keep it on the agenda and not allow it to become a political football, because there is a danger that it could be used in that way. We should try to encourage those along the way to allow it to proceed and to be in place as quickly as possible.

Another important area is co-operation and working together, CAWT, and cross-border health and well-being. Altnagelvin Hospital's new wing, and the affect it has had for cancer patients in particular, has opened a new healthcare dimension for Donegal. Good work was done by the Assembly a number of years ago on the hospital and the tie-in with CAWT and cross-border development. I hope that continues.

Training and employment is another issue. In my area, mid-Ulster and Tyrone, there are many trained engineers, but one of the big problems the area faces is the availability of labour. We have to find ways of training new people, but also to attract new men and women into the engineering sector. If that does not happen, the sector will move somewhere else, and there is a danger that those jobs will be lost. We should look at training and employment as a means of keeping people in the area, but retraining should also be considered. People who have been in different types of jobs could, for various reasons, consider retraining in the engineering sector. People I met last week were considering the idea of robots which would carry out the engineering and welding. It would be awful if young people from the area had to move away.

I thank the committee for the work it is doing. It is very important. I thank the witnesses for their presentation.

**Vice Chairman:** Before we invite the witnesses to speak again, it should be noted that any proposals made today will be put to the next meeting of this committee, next week, for approval.

**Mr. Seamus Ó Domhnaill:** We very much appreciate the support, empathy and above all understanding that was shown today. Our region is operating under a very particular set of circumstances. Ms McCallion is most familiar with those issues because she represents the area and works closely with Donegal County Council and within the grouping. It is heartening to hear a group of people with influence say that they are here to support us and to work with us, because we feel we are doing great work and making a difference, not just in the region we represent but, as the Vice Chairman said, overseas and beyond by showing people what we have to offer, how we can offer it and what is available if they decide to return. We also give opportunities to businesses and economic drivers in our own region. We have worked hard at that in recent years. It would not have come about if not for the fact that both chief executives were comfortable with each other and confident enough in themselves to realise that this was not about their own jurisdictions and their own jobs but the people in the entire region. The political representatives followed, based on the confidence shown by the chief executives, and we commend them very highly for that.

We now find ourselves in a position where decisions which have not been taken by anyone anywhere on this island may impact more on the region we represent than any other region in all of Europe. As Deputy Brendan Smith said, we are going to champion the region. We are resilient and we believe in what we have to offer. Indeed, we believe what we have to offer is as good as anywhere else in Europe. Broadband speeds, for example, in Donegal and Derry are on par with the broadband speeds in Europe, thanks to Project Kelvin. People do not necessarily understand that about the region; Donegal is seen as rural. Derry, of course, is a city. We have things we can celebrate, sell and champion, and we will do that irrespective of the decisions taken and the impacts they have on us. All we are seeking from this committee and the rest of the Oireachtas is a little support, co-operation and funding to allow us to realise our full potential. This is not for us but for the people in that area.

I thank the members of the committee for their input and their kind, supportive words. We look forward to a good, bright, forward-thinking future for all of the people in our area. We look at things such as rail connections between Derry and Letterkenny and transport hubs in Letterkenny. We have considered the need for the Waterside transport hub and how it will benefit all of the people of the region. As Deputy Brendan Smith, Ms McCallion and others have said, the A5 is integral to anything we will do and anything we will be able to achieve. We want to stress that point. I thank the members for the time they have taken and for the invitation to be here, and I thank my colleagues for their co-operation and their concise and precise presentations.

**Vice Chairman:** I acknowledge other Members of the Oireachtas from Donegal, including Deputy Gallagher, who was here for a short period. They are co-operating and working with Donegal County Council and its councillors, and in Derry and the north west generally. Gabhaim buíochas libh as ucht an díospóireacht agus an taispeántas. Bhí sé ar fheabhas agus tá sé soiléir go bhfuil an réigiún ag obair go dlúth le chéile i dTír Chonaill agus i nDoire. Tá sé soiléir fosta go bhfuil sibh ar aon ghuth. Mar a deireann an seanfhocail is fearr liomsa, tá sé soiléir go bhfuil sé ag obair sa réigiún sin agus ní neart go cur le chéile. Beidh an bua agaibh sa deireadh.

**Mr. Seamus Ó Domhnaill:** I can assure Mr. Molloy and others that old rivalries will re-emerge in May when the ball is thrown in in the Ulster Championship.

JIGFA

**Ms Elisha McCallion:** That's another thing; at least we have a decent football team in one city.

The joint committee adjourned at 3.47 p.m. until 2.10 p.m. on Thursday, 11 April 2019