

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM FEIDHMIÚ CHOMHAONTÚ AOINE AN CHÉASTA

JOINT COMMITTEE ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE GOOD FRIDAY AGREEMENT

Dé Máirt, 28 Meán Fómhair 2021

Tuesday, 28 September 2021

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 9.30 a.m.

The Joint Committee met at 9.30 a.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies	Seanadóirí / Senators
Rose Conway-Walsh.	Frances Black,
	Niall Blaney,
	Emer Currie.

I láthair / In attendance: Senator Mark Daly.

Teachta / Deputy James Lawless sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

Engagement with Ad-Hoc Group for North-South and East-West Cooperation

Vice Chairman: Good morning, welcome to the meeting. Apologies have been received from the Chair, Deputy O’Dowd, from Deputies MacLochlainn and Carroll MacNeill and from Senators McGahon and Hoey. If there are any other apologies, I ask members to put them forward.

Senator Niall Blaney: There are apologies from Deputy Brendan Smith. He is running late but hopes to join the meeting at some point.

Vice Chairman: Members attending remotely should do so from within the Leinster House campus to fully benefit from privilege and the usual rules apply in respect of it. Unfortunately, remote participation from outside Leinster House is not possible for members. Thankfully, we are beginning to emerge from under the dark shadow of Covid-19. However, there are still risks and members and all in attendance are asked to exercise personal responsibility in protecting themselves and others from the risk of Covid-19. They are strongly advised to practise good hand hygiene and every second seat has been removed or is spaced to facilitate social distancing. I ask members to note that, to observe those positions, to try to maintain social distancing when entering and leaving the meeting and to use masks at all times, except when speaking. I ask for full co-operation, which I am sure we will have. We are all aware of how it works.

We have a rota. Going by the apologies we have received and the attendance at the meeting, we will allow 15 minutes per group. We will go round the table in the usual fashion. We will start with Fine Gael and then move to Sinn Féin, Fianna Fáil, SDLP, Alliance, Independents, Sinn Féin again, Labour and the Green Party, in that order. Some parties or groups may or may not be represented at the meeting. That is fine. We will move on if they are not. Is that agreed? Agreed.

The witnesses are welcome. It is a pleasure to have them with us and I thank them for joining us. We have an engagement with the Ad-Hoc Group for North-South and East-West Cooperation. We are pleased to welcome: Dr. Anthony Soares, convener, Ad-Hoc Group for North-South and East-West Cooperation; Ms Tara Farrell, CEO, Longford Women’s Link; Ms Aoife Ní Lochlainn, Brexit policy officer, Irish Environmental Network; and Mr. Chris Quinn, director, Northern Ireland Youth Forum. Mr. Quinn is under time pressure. We will try to take any questions for him at the start. I ask members to be conscious of that. I am delighted to welcome our guests on behalf of the committee.

Those who are accustomed to presenting at Oireachtas committees will be aware of the note on privilege, but I will recap. The evidence of witnesses physically present or who give evidence from within the parliamentary precincts of the Leinster House campus is protected, pursuant to both the Constitution and statute, by absolute privilege. However, witnesses and participants who are to give evidence from a location outside of the parliamentary precincts are asked to note that they may not benefit from the same level of immunity from legal proceedings as a witness giving evidence from within the parliamentary precincts. The witnesses may consider it appropriate to take legal advice on this matter, should they wish, for further guidance. Witnesses are also asked to note that only evidence connected with the subject matter of the proceedings should be given. If I need to give directions to any member or witness on parliamentary practice, I ask that they abide by that direction. They should neither criticise nor make charges against any person or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable, or otherwise engage in speech that might be regarded as damaging to the good

name of the person or entity.

The group will open with Dr. Soares, whom I invite to make his opening statement. After we have heard from all the witnesses, we will take questions from the members in the agreed order. I call on Dr. Soares to make his opening statement. He is welcome and I thank him for being with us today.

Dr. Anthony Soares: On behalf of the Ad-Hoc Group for North-South and East-West Co-operation, I thank the Chair and the members of this committee for the invitation to meet with them to discuss the ongoing work of the *ad hoc* group, its overarching purposes, and to set out some key issues in regard to engagement with organisations on the island of Ireland involved in North-South and-or east-west co-operation with regards to the implementation of the protocol on Ireland-Northern Ireland. I am the director of the Centre for Cross Border Studies and convener of the *ad hoc* group and, as the Chair pointed out, I am joined by representatives from three of the other organisations involved in the group's work: Dr. Aoife Ní Lochlainn, Brexit policy officer of the Irish Environmental Network; Ms Tara Farrell, CEO of Longford Women's Link; and Mr. Chris Quinn, director of the Northern Ireland Youth Forum.

Joining together a range of organisations from Northern Ireland and Ireland, the *ad hoc* group was established in May 2020 to act as a prime contact for purposes of meaningful consultation between cross-Border civil society and regional, national and EU bodies, on matters relevant to co-operation between Northern Ireland and Ireland, and between the island of Ireland and Great Britain. Organisations participating in the *ad hoc* group are on the front line of the study, promotion, support and delivery of North-South and-or east-west co-operation initiatives across a broad spectrum of areas of interest and have decades of accumulated experience. They are organisations that see North-South and east-west co-operation, as well as wider international co-operation, as being essential to the ongoing peace and reconciliation process on the island of Ireland and to equitable and sustainable socio-economic development.

The primary objective of the *ad hoc* group is to secure the continued means to co-operate within and between these islands thereby ensuring that agreements, policies or legislation developed or enacted by relevant regional, devolved and national governments and the European Union, are conducive to the maintenance of the conditions necessary for co-operation within and between the island of Ireland and Great Britain. In the first instance, in light of the protocol on Ireland-Northern Ireland, the *ad hoc* group and organisations involved in its work have been engaging with relevant decision makers, including the European Commission's task force for relations with the United Kingdom, the withdrawal agreement joint committee, representatives of the Governments of the United Kingdom and Ireland, the Northern Ireland Executive and the specialised committee on the protocol on Ireland-Northern Ireland. The *ad hoc* group is committed to working with others to safeguard co-operation and good relations within and between these islands, and looks forward to doing so with those who are currently making decisions that will affect the future landscape for co-operation and the maintenance of relations between our peoples. The *ad hoc* group believes that in order for all interested parties, including the Irish Government, to properly monitor the impact of the implementation of the protocol on the conditions from North-South co-operation, there needs to be sustained and effective engagement with those who are intimately involved in such cooperation.

The Ad-Hoc Group for North-South and East-West Cooperation, which brings together a range of organisations with decades of accumulated experience in North-South and east-west co-operation and relations, represents an invaluable asset in this regard, and calls on all parties to continue and deepen their engagement with the *ad hoc* group, including through the bod-

ies established under the protocol. Such engagement with the *ad hoc* group will ensure that organisations from the Republic of Ireland can offer their own perspectives on the extent to which they are able to engage in co-operation. It is our belief that no serious monitoring of the impact of the implementation of the protocol on the conditions for North-South co-operation or on their east-west relations, can take place without hearing directly from those involved in such co-operation who are based in the Republic of Ireland. We would be pleased to answer any of the committee's questions.

Vice Chairman: I thank Dr. Soares for his opening remarks. We will now take questions from the members by going around the table in the agreed order. The first slot is for Fine Gael. Perhaps Senator Currie would like to take up the mantle and lead out.

Senator Emer Currie: It is nice to meet the witnesses. I was reading their opening statement and position paper. They stated that there are organisations which see North-South and east-west co-operation, as well as wider international co-operation, as essential to the ongoing peace and reconciliation process on the island of Ireland and to equitable and sustainable socio-economic development. That is music to my ears. I welcome that, particularly since there are aspects of the Good Friday Agreement that have not been implemented, including the North-South consultative forum and the civic forum in the North. Do the witnesses feel that they fill that gap? The most important question I have for the witnesses is about what they want us to do. As already stated, I read their position paper. They outlined the best environment in which co-operation takes place. I would like to hear from the groups about how they make that co-operation happen and what we can do to help. I know there are people present who can bring to life some of the points they have made and I would be interested in hearing them do so.

Vice Chairman: Would the Senator like to direct that to anyone in particular or is it across the board?

Senator Emer Currie: It is for the representatives who are here.

Dr. Anthony Soares: I will make a few introductory comments and then hand over to Ms Farrell, Ms Ní Lochlainn and Mr. Quinn if they want to add anything else. We could not agree more about aspects of the Good Friday Agreement that have not been implemented. In recent years, because of the UK's withdrawal from the EU, the lead-up to that and during the negotiations, a light has been shone on the absence of structures for engagement with civic society. The Senator mentioned the Civic Forum for Northern Ireland. That was replaced by a six-member advisory group, which was mentioned again in the New Decade, New Approach agreement. We still have to see what exactly is happening with that. I suggest that a six-person advisory panel is not a substitute for the Civic Forum for Northern Ireland.

I agree about shining a light on the absence of an all-Ireland consultative forum, which was suggested in the Good Friday Agreement and reiterated in the St. Andrews Agreement. There was a call on the Northern Ireland Executive to ensure that it came about. We have yet to see that happen. The Senator asked whether the our group fills some of those gaps. I would not necessarily say that we would fill it. We cannot presume to speak for other groups but we are organisations that are intimately involved in North-South co-operation and in conversations on a North-South basis between a whole range of organisations with all sorts of areas of interest. We are having those conversations in the absence of any structured mechanism to facilitate them. We also engage with other civic society groups. We have a meeting this afternoon with another group of civic society organisations in Northern Ireland to discuss some proposals relating to structured mechanisms for engagement with civic society. We are coming together and

those proposals have been developed Katy Hayward of Queen's University.

Regarding what we would like the committee to do, for my part, one thing that we are really conscious of, as mentioned in my introductory statement, is the implementation of the protocol. Article 11 states that the protocol should ensure "the necessary conditions for North-South cooperation". I urge the committee to assist and support us in our cause in any of those conversations about whether those conditions are being maintained. Organisations based in the Republic of Ireland need to be seated around the table. You cannot talk about North-South co-operation and whether conditions are being maintained by simply speaking to organisations at one end of that, which would be Northern Ireland groups in that case. It has to be all of us together involved in that co-operation. I would urge the committee to support us in ensuring those conversations involve both sides of North-South co-operation.

Ms Tara Farrell: I am the chief executive of Longford Women's Link, which is a social enterprise. We provide services to approximately 1,200 women and children annually in a wide range of areas. We also engage in widespread regional and national advocacy. I am a member of the board of Irish Rural Link and the chair of AONTAS, the national adult learning organisation. We have been engaged in cross-Border all-island work primarily through the Centre for Cross Border Studies but we also have other projects in recent years. We believe that working at a grassroots level is absolutely critical if we are to see meaningful co-operation and community development alongside an empowered civic society on these islands. Initiatives we have been involved in include the Ad-Hoc Group for North-South and East-West Cooperation since last year and previously the New Common Charter initiative which is driven by the Centre for Cross Border Studies. That is an initiative to empower civic society across these islands, North-South and east-west. We have individual projects, including one on pushing boundaries with women's tech in Belfast which examines the role of women in non-traditional spaces. We have a pilot project with the Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network supported through the reconciliation fund called From Grassroots to Government which is about advocacy and women finding their voices. AONTAS, of which I am chair, has a new initiative called the Network for Adult Learning Across Borders, NALAB, which is an umbrella partnership of leading organisations in the field of adult and community education. That gives a flavour of the kind of work we have been involved in.

As Dr. Soares says, what we really need is the committee's support around the implementation of the protocol in Article 11 and for us, amidst all the work we are doing, it is critical that there are proper functioning mechanisms and structures for engagement that include organisations from the South like ourselves as well as the North. Otherwise we are not going to see meaningful engagement or the true spirit of the Belfast Good Friday Agreement replicated. The questions we ask of our elected representatives is why those structures are not either functioning or in place. We also have to look at the long-term outcomes and impacts on communities. Looking at the last 18 months, civil society organisations have been to the fore of the Covid crisis. Most of our services were designated as essential. The question we ask is if we are deemed as essential during the Covid crisis and were relied upon to ensure that supports were delivered to communities, surely we are also essential in this context.

We are engaging in this work with our counterparts in the North because we believe in it. We believe in the value of the work and we believe in the need to uphold the spirit of the Good Friday Agreement in its totality. Obviously there are funding supports in place, such as the reconciliation fund, and they are very welcome but it is not just about the financial resources, it is about the impact that our work has and the energy that is required to maintain it without the

proper structures that we can then feed into when we are looking at the impact of what it is we are doing. Obviously, dialogue is very important, that is what we are engaged in, but what is the longer term impact of our work? We cannot maintain this on our own. We need the structures. I am concerned that many civil society organisations will not be in a position to continue working in isolation on their own initiative. I hope that the committee might also share some of these concerns.

Dr. Aoife Ní Lochlainn: I am the Brexit policy officer with the Irish Environmental Network, the environmental pillar. As a sector, we work very closely with our colleagues in Northern Ireland to advocate for an all-island environmental solution -----

Vice Chairman: Sorry, Dr. Ní Lochlainn's camera is not showing. I do not know if that is deliberate and she would prefer to proceed without it. There is no need to turn it on, but just to let her know.

Dr. Aoife Ní Lochlainn: No, the camera is definitely on. Apologies about that. I do not know how to fix it.

Vice Chairman: We can hear you loud and clear if that is any consolation. Certainly your comments are being carried across. You can proceed without the camera being on. I just mentioned it for your own convenience if you want to address it.

Dr. Aoife Ní Lochlainn: Okay. The computer has indicated the camera has stopped working. I am very sorry about that.

Vice Chairman: Not to worry.

Dr. Aoife Ní Lochlainn: We have been working with our colleagues in Northern Ireland on what are shared problems. Obviously, Ireland is a single biogeographic unit. We have the same issues and challenges around climate change and biodiversity on both sides of the Border. In 2019, we co-operated to produce a report on identifying the main risks to environmental integrity on the island of Ireland posed by the withdrawal of the UK from the EU. Obviously, the main risks identified were regulatory divergence. Now since the finalisation of the trade and co-operation agreement between the EU and the UK and the protocol on Ireland and Northern Ireland some of these risks have been partially mitigated. However, we are in the very early days of post-agreement to address our shared environmental issues such as climate and biodiversity. We need to co-operate cross-Border but for that co-operation to be effective and practical we need shared policies, standards, aims and objectives. It is not clear how strong the protection against divergence on environmental standards in the trade and co-operation agreement will be into the future and the strength of protection afforded by non-regression of standards and rebalancing mechanisms on future divergence has been criticised and critiqued by quite a number of UK environmental and social policy advocacy organisations.

What we see with the trade and co-operation agreement and the protocol is the extent to which what is agreed is focused on trade. Obviously, environmental impacts go beyond trade. Therefore, what are the solutions? Our report in 2019 highlighted the potential for the Good Friday bodies, in particular the North-South Ministerial Council, to work on advancing environmental shared policy and practical co-operation and also to provide a forum for discussion on policy and regulation. However, even at the best of times it has to be said that these Good Friday bodies are quite impenetrable to most of civil society. They are essentially engaged in highly diplomatic processes and NGOs such as ourselves have very few routes for engagement

on the matters under discussion. Dr. Soares has spoken about the need for engagement with civic society on both sides of the Border to ensure co-operation can not only be maintained but also thrive. Currently, on the environment, it is very hard to see where the avenues for engagement with NGOs are, particularly, as Ms Farrell mentioned, those NGOs south of the Border. We need structures for engagement. The question on the all-island consultative forum is a very good example. A consultation forum which would provide an opportunity for citizens and NGOs to discuss environmental co-operation across the island is the sort of undertaking we need in order to see any real all-island change or progress on the environment.

I thank the committee. Apologies again for my camera not working.

Vice Chairman: Not to worry at all. That was great. You certainly got your points across. There is one minute remaining in the timeslot. Does Mr. Quinn want to comment, as he has not had a chance to speak yet?

Mr. Chris Quinn: Yes. Briefly, I represent the Northern Ireland Youth Forum which is a youth-led regional body in the North of Ireland. Without repeating what many of my colleagues have said, I would echo their sentiments. The question asked was what do we want members of this committee to do and how can we make more safe co-operation happen. I can inform the committee that the youth forum has just received some funding from the Department of Foreign Affairs to set up a North-South youth forum. This is something for which we have worked for 13 years. It was very much based on the architecture of the Good Friday Agreement. Part of that lobby involved a lobby for a Northern Ireland youth assembly, which has just been established this year under the speaker of the house in Northern Ireland. We are very much pushing towards making that a sustainable and a very youth-led body. The North-South youth forum is a big project of ours at the moment. In terms of what can the committee do, essentially, there are four asks. We have a survey open at the moment in which we are asking young people North and South what their issues are and if they would like to be involved in a North-South youth forum. To date, they have spoken about having an interest in mental health, human rights, environmental issues, education and discrimination. We want to push that, particularly with young people in the Twenty-six Counties, over the next two or three months. It would be amazing if the committee could help us with that. We also want to-----

Vice Chairman: I apologise for interrupting Mr. Quinn. The bell we are hearing indicates the time has expired. Mr. Quinn will have ample opportunity to contribute in the next rounds. The next block is Sinn Féin and we will have Deputy Conway-Walsh and Mr. Maskey.

Mr. Paul Maskey: I welcome all four witnesses to the meeting. It is great to hear from them and for them to hear our views and questions. Moving on from Mr. Quinn's point on the North-South youth forum which was, I believe, set up in July, this is a good development and I hope the panel shares that view. We see the leadership coming from young people across the island. This is very important as young people have to be listened to. They often lead by example and have the best views. We can all learn from our youth. I have met Mr. Quinn over the years and visited his office at one point. It is important that we build on all of this.

Brexit has been a significant issue for many people in different sectors across these islands and we must look at its impact on young people. What impact have Brexit and the protocol had on young people? What are their views and thoughts on Brexit? Do they believe the protocol protects them in any shape or form? I would be interested in hearing some of their views on that issue.

The youth assembly has been set up and a citizens' assembly is now of the utmost importance because that is where we will all learn. I would like to hear the panel's views on those assemblies. If we have these assemblies up and running and working well, how important will they be in helping this island and these islands to move together?

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: Mr. Quinn discussed one of his four asks and I would like to give him an opportunity to outline the other three asks.

My questions are specifically for Mr. Quinn and Ms Farrell. Mr. Quinn's move on the NI Youth Assembly is a very positive one. Incidentally, I am the rapporteur for a cross-Border education initiative looking at student mobility and opportunities across the island. The Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science would be extremely interested in talking to Mr. Quinn's group and having its input on some of the barriers facing further and higher education.

In my portfolio, an issue that always comes up with me is the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement, in particular in respect of the future of our island and how young people can be involved in shaping our constitutional future. They tell me they need a citizens' assembly specifically on that issue. Is that being discussed in Mr. Quinn's group? If so, how might young people have an input?

I ask Ms Farrell the same question. I am familiar with Longford Women's Link and the brilliant work it does. I know the challenges arising from the pilot project and other projects on which the group does great work. We must work collectively to try to get those projects mainstreamed in a better way in order that we have an improved interface between what Longford Women's Link is doing and the political system. Women are saying to me that they want to look at the constitutional future of the island but they want to have an architecture in place. We have seen from experience the positive results of a citizens' assembly. Is that issue being discussed by women's groups? How does Ms Farrell see this developing in the future in terms of women's groups across the island being involved in setting up a citizens' assembly?

Vice Chairman: There are 11 minutes for the witnesses to respond. There might be an opportunity for further questions if the time allows. I will indicate when we are at five minutes so people will have the chance to gather their thoughts. Mr. Quinn was cut off the last time but he will have ample opportunity to respond in this round.

Mr. Chris Quinn: I thank the Deputy Conway-Walsh and Mr. Maskey. The questions they asked are right up our street as a youth forum. Young people have been talking about North-South co-operation for quite some time. As I said, our lobby has been going on for 13 years. The other ask I was going to come to was about young people having an opportunity to engage directly with decision makers like this committee. In the North, we have a political champions group that meets young people regularly and is part of the architecture of the North-South Youth Forum. We would like to set up something similar and perhaps have the opportunity to bring young people to this committee. That would be a solid ask.

There are two pieces of research I can refer to in the context of the protocol. One took place in May, as we approached the centenary of partition and the establishment of Northern Ireland, and the other is our Looking Beyond Borders research which asks young people's views on legacy matters, Covid-19 and contemporary issues. Perhaps unsurprisingly, young people are talking to us about the big societal issues. They are talking about Covid-19, poverty, housing, educational underachievement and discrimination. That is not to say that the constitutional

question is not important. It still is important. However, young people are very focused on overcoming these big issues that we are facing across the island of Ireland. They are talking a lot about having a space to talk about legacy matters. They want to have a part in a conversation about a potential Border poll and they have expressed their frustration about not having a say on Brexit.

With regard to the protocol, our latest survey suggests, according to the statistics that I am seeing in front of me, that the big issues for young people are around human rights and climate change. Some 42% of respondents to our latest survey talked about human rights being the number one issue. Only 7% of young people who responded talked about Brexit being the big issue for them. This survey is live at the moment. Many young people are saying that they do not really understand the protocol or care too much for it. The bigger issues for young people are discussions relating to identity, culture and their role in society, particularly Protestant or unionist working class young males and where their role is in society right now. The latter are a group we very seldom hear from. My hope is that forums like ours, the North-South Youth Forum, or a civic forum, can very much help to engage people who feel disenfranchised. I am conscious of time so I will pause and allow other colleagues to come in.

Ms Tara Farrell: I will not take up too much time. I thank Deputy Conway-Walsh for her kind remarks about Longford Women's Link. She has been a great supporter of our work over the years, particularly on women in political life. Her question is quite timely because we recently contributed to a piece of work with Dr. Joanna McMinn from Ulster University, funded through the reconciliation fund, around women's views on the constitutional future of Northern Ireland and Ireland. We have had some very interesting conversations. I brought together two groups of women from Longford and Roscommon and the conversations we wish to have are on the things that matter to all of us, namely, health, housing, education and well-being, and the future for our young people on these islands. That is what took up the main conversation. We have seen some very good outcomes from the citizens' assemblies here regarding a number of different issues. It would be a fantastic start to have those structures, in order to have somewhere to feed these reports into. There are a lot of conversations happening in women's groups around, for example, the impact of Covid, the impact of Brexit, the protocol and people looking for clear and accurate information but the communication flows are not always great. The media has its own angle on various aspects of this. We have seen Covid be predominant in the headlines over the last 18 months, with not as much about the impact of Brexit, protocol implementation and so on. A citizens' assembly would be helpful. The conversations that we are hearing are about the issues that are impacting women and their families across communities. These include health, education and domestic violence, which has exploded in the last 18 months and is a real concern for many families and communities. Having a platform or forum where those issues could be brought to the fore, North and South, with the mechanisms to be fed into future policy and future discussions, would be helpful.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I have a follow-up question for Ms Farrell. That is invaluable information about her gatherings and consultations with women's groups. Has she had any specific, formal communications with the Taoiseach, Government or the Minister about that?

Ms Tara Farrell: We have not had any formal communication but we are feeding in. There is a new All-Island Women's Forum, which the Deputy is probably aware of. It is being chaired by the National Women's Council and I am part of it. We are part of some less formal structures but we have not had any formal engagement. We are participating in all of the shared island dialogues and there is another on education on Friday. Where there are opportunities, we are

taking them.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: Perhaps Ms Farrell will furnish the committee with some of the documents that she has mentioned. They would be of interest to us.

Vice Chairman: Does anyone want to respond to Mr. Maskey's earlier questions?

Dr. Anthony Soares: The value of the conversation is enormous. It is essential that people have dialogue about co-operation. One thing that I would stress is that we as community organisations, both North and South, are involved in trying to engage with all sorts of bodies and with decision makers within the Commission, the UK Government, a specialised committee, a joint committee, the Northern Ireland Executive, the Irish Government, particularly through the Department of Foreign Affairs, and the North-South Ministerial Council. We at the Centre for Cross Border Studies are fortunate because we can use some of our core funding to undertake all of these numerous engagements. They are engagements to ensure that we maintain the necessary conditions for North-South co-operation and also east-west co-operation and relations. Many other organisations are not resourced to do that. They are involved in numerous engagements. There is a question of resources. They are engaging in these conversations, which are taking them away from what they are funded to do, which is normally delivery of essential services and essential work.

I stress that conversations are great and we must keep dialogue going continually as part of the peace and reconciliation process, but there is significant frustration. The conversation must lead to action and we must see joint action, with us working as a civic society group with political leaders and representatives, so that we can see these issues being progressed. If we cannot see concrete action being undertaken and progress being made, then it leads to frustration and community organisations starting to withdraw. That is a significant risk to North-South co-operation. We are starting to see some indications from organisations of pressure they face and the changing circumstances they see in the political landscape of both North-South and east-west co-operation. They are starting to feel the pressures to focus on the work within their own jurisdiction due to the enormous amount of energy that is needed for it and the lack of resources. If the political conditions are not conducive to or encouraging of co-operation or if community organisations are not asked to be involved in these types of co-operations, there will be a risk of people going back to those days when we turned our backs on one another. Conversations that just lead to further conversations and not to concrete action, in addition to the pressures on resources, are issues which we need to be concerned about and need to address together.

Vice Chairman: There are 30 seconds remaining if anyone would like to make a final point in this round.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I will make a point about what Dr. Soares said. People will find that on this committee, what we need and want is a sustainable architecture to get the interface between politics and civil society right and to make it count in order that we do not have a whole industry around the protocol and other things. We need focused action that will help implementation. The implementation deficit, be that in the Stormont House Agreement, the St Andrews Agreement or the Good Friday Agreement, is where the challenge lies for us all. Everything we do should go towards addressing that implementation deficit because we have seen what can happen when there are vacuums. It is a curse on all our Houses that there has not been implementation. It should be done wherever it can be. The Irish Government has a major role to play in this, as do the British Government and committees like this. I hope we will have an opportunity to engage with the *ad hoc* group, or even individually, as was done

with the Longford Women's Link and the youth forum, in order to further tease out the issues, in particular, around barriers that we can collectively help to break down. We are all trying to address what has come from partition and how partition has not served us across this island.

Vice Chairman: That concludes that block of questions. The next group is Fianna Fáil. Deputy Brendan Smith is on Teams and Senator Blaney is in the committee room. I call Senator Blaney first, followed by Deputy Smith. We will then return to the witnesses for their answers.

Senator Niall Blaney: I welcome Dr. Soares, Mr. Quinn, Ms Farrell and Dr. Ní Lochlainn here this morning to what is turning out to be an interesting debate, and which becomes more interesting the further we delve into these issues. I would first like to establish what the impact of the protocol has been on the business interests with which the *ad hoc* group engages? Does the group see itself as an information gathering organisation and if so, what is the feedback at present in regard to it? Given some of the comments today, has the group's level of engagement diminished in any way since the introduction of the protocol? What is the current status in that regard? What is the feedback from counterparts in Northern Ireland on the protocol? What are the issues involved or do they see it as a positive? What feedback is being received?

I was interested in what Mr. Quinn said about the North-South youth forum that recently received funding from the Department of Foreign Affairs. Mr. Quinn's organisation could have a good standing in regard to that sort of work, provided it is representative of all sectors of society. As he rightly pointed out, our youth do not provide us, as policymakers, with enough input. Any avenues that enhance opportunities to meet policymakers would welcome. I would like to see the group linked more with the workings of the shared island unit. They could play a very important role in that regard. The working going on in unit is critical to the young people of this world and the generations to come. They need to have their say.

I was also delighted to hear about the work that Ms Farrell is involved in. My colleague, Deputy Joe Flaherty, from Longford is very supportive of the work that she does and has a lot of praise for it. I am delighted that she is working with the shared island unit. If we are going to get along on this island, organisations such as hers will be fundamental to that. Co-operation needs to continue at all levels, and from the bottom up in particular. If engagement does not take place at the lower echelons of organisations, our future will not be great. It has to take place across society as well. I look forward to the feedback.

Vice Chairman: Deputy Brendan Smith has joined the call. If he is not in a position to come at this point, we will return to the witnesses. Dr. Soares might like to come in first.

Dr. Anthony Soares: I will deal with the questions around the impact of the protocol and the second question on information sharing and gathering. The Centre for Cross Border Studies's third quarterly survey on conditions for North-South and east-west co-operation. The first quarterly survey was carried out in March. It focused on civic society organisations and local authorities on the island of Ireland and their views on their ability to co-operate on a North-South and-or east-west basis following the end of the transition period and the beginning of the implementation of the protocol on Ireland-Northern Ireland.

In the context of co-operation, what comes up time and again is the fact that it is about the political conditions. This brings me to a very important point. Article 11 of the protocol refers to maintaining the necessary conditions but that does not necessarily imply an understanding of what we see has been the conditions necessary for co-operation. For us, these include the political conditions, the social conditions - that is, communities themselves and their support

for North-South and-or east-west co-operation - and the material conditions, namely, the access that we have to goods and to people in order to undertake that co-operation, and the regulatory context which provide the framework. The feedback we received from the quarterly survey is that people are concerned about the deteriorating political conditions for co-operation.

On information gathering and sharing, our group is really important in terms of the conversations we are able to have as organisations that are involved in co-operation on a North-South and-or east-west basis. We are constantly exchanging information, raising issues, trying to find solutions and that is what forms our engagement with decision makers, including the joint committee, the Commission, the UK Government's Cabinet Office, etc. That is really important to us.

The Senator asked about feedback from organisations in Northern Ireland. The Centre for Cross Border Studies is based in the great city of Armagh. We are a Northern Ireland organisation, although, obviously, we work on an all-island basis. We have received a lot of feedback on the impact of the protocol on flows of trade. In the context of co-operation, however, it is about the sense organisations have regarding the kind of support they have. Do they feel as if they have the backing of politicians, the political leaders, in one or various jurisdictions in terms of them engaging in that co-operation? I will hand over to Mr. Quinn who has been very sensible and used the technology to raise his hand.

Mr. Chris Quinn: I will go through the questions as logically as possible. I sit on many groups such as this and am invited to speak to secretaries of state and with the Northern Ireland Office, NIO, and with the Department of Foreign Affairs, DFA, and the message is the same every time. Civic society groups are frustrated that we are not part of the conversation. The fact that the protocol has become a political football is very unhelpful. As seen on the news today, unionism has issued its own position on it. While we should not ignore unionist and loyalist concerns around the protocol, it is important that we work together to find a solution. I am interested in hearing, through the North-South youth forum and other such vehicles, what the issues are which affect young people in the south of Ireland. What are the issues affecting businesses across the island of Ireland? What is the solution here? How can we in civic society be engaged in the conversation to bring solutions?

In terms of risks, we saw violence on the streets in April of this year. Seeing more of that is a fear of many here. There is a real need to create safe spaces for people and from my perspective, young people, to have a conversation around the difficult issues. We should not ignore the issues relating to identity and the constitutional question of a potential border poll. We need to have those conversations, otherwise the risk of discontent and disconnection will continue to simmer.

In terms of engagement, I think my colleagues would agree this has not really changed since the protocol. I am proud to be part of a very strong and vibrant voluntary sector which works both locally and on a North-South and east-west basis. That will still be there but there is much work to be done to promote understanding and education on what the protocol is. My opinion, and this is not the opinion of the youth forum, is that we need to educate young people and people in general about the need for some kind of mechanism. I do not know that everyone understands that with Brexit, there has to be some sort of protocol or agreement. When I talk to people on the ground, and young people in particular, there is a lack of understanding on what is a very complex issue. My call is very clear, and is about creating those safe spaces and investing in things like the all island women's forum and North-South youth forum, pushing towards an all-island civic forum. It is important that members of civic society have a say in how those

structures are set up and that they are sustained.

Dr. Aoife Ní Lochlainn: In answer to the question on what is the impact of the protocol on the work of our membership on our cross-border work, quite simply, and Dr. Soares has spoken about this, but it cannot be repeated often enough, with the protocol and the trade and co-operation agreement, TCA, there are now multiple committees involved in governance of the post-Brexit regulatory environment and this has led to huge fragmentation for advocacy. It is very difficult to understand the impact, especially in the Republic of Ireland, and to follow the work of these committees let alone to engage with them. One of the major problems, as Dr. Soares has said, is that we lack any resources to deal with this, to follow the work, to exchange information and to do the much-needed advocacy that we need to do North-South. That for us is one of the major problems. We have not been able to grapple with our new post-Brexit environment because we lack the resources and we lack the forums for engagement.

Vice Chairman: Thank you. There is some extra time if Senator Blaney would like to make extra points.

Senator Niall Blaney: I thank the witnesses for the replies. I was interested in what Mr. Quinn had to say in regard to the feedback from young people and also his views on the protocol. The protocol is a conversation we could have all day. I am very interested in getting more feedback from young people and youth forums on both sides of the divide in Northern Ireland. They could teach us all a lesson or two and they could waken up some of our politicians in Northern Ireland. We need to simplify things. We need to take a step back, have a little respect for each other and learn to work with each other better. In that regard, I hope the witnesses have a fruitful future and I also hope the group gets relevant funding to broaden its wings on a North-South basis. Anything I can do in regard to helping to open that door to the shared island unit with my colleagues here, I would certainly like to do that. I again thank the witnesses for engaging today.

Vice Chairman: Thank you. We move to the SDLP group. I welcome Ms Claire Hanna.

Ms Claire Hanna: I thank the Vice Chairman and thank the witnesses for dealing with all the questions so far. It has been very interesting. They talk in their paper about the political conditions and the social conditions for full North-South and east-west engagement. Necessarily, the North-South bodies are more numerous as there are more obvious practical and logistical areas of co-operation, but particularly in the context of the sense of loss that some are feeling, that can sometimes be misinterpreted or even distorted as being an imbalance. The witnesses said they have further meetings with colleagues today. Are there any additional structures, or perhaps a refreshing or re-presentation of east-west structures, to address that perception that North-South is more adequately provided for? Although it might go beyond their remit, are there additional mechanisms that the witnesses think would be helpful for addressing that perceived democratic deficit in terms of opportunities for people politically in the North and the South, but particularly in the North, where there are no MEPs, in order to feed into decision-making at an EU level?

I was struck by Dr. Ní Lochlainn's point about the already complex architecture of governance arrangements that have sprung up from the protocol and the difficulty for organisations in navigating them. I am glad I am not the only one who is becoming a bit bothered by all of the structures that are there, without potentially creating more. Of course, there are more needs.

My last question is about engagement with the Executive, with the UK Government and

with the European Commission. The witnesses referenced at section 3.4 of their position paper a lack of detail, particularly in terms of how the UK will discharge its responsibilities. Perhaps I am picking it up incorrectly but is there a bit of a difference in interpretation? The witnesses might expand on the point that is made in section 3.4. I suppose I will begin with Dr. Soares but any of the witnesses can pick up on those points.

Vice Chairman: Thank you. Dr. Soares can take the lead and we will then go around the panel.

Dr. Anthony Soares: I thank Ms Hanna for those questions. I will combine some of them.. On the perceived imbalance between North-South and east-west structures, Ms Farrell's opening remarks mentioned an initiative which the Centre for Cross Border Studies managed but it was not our creation. It was a creation of civic society organisations North and South and involving civic society organisations in Scotland, England and Wales which developed the new common charter for co-operation within and between these islands. There is a willingness there. People already co-operate on an east-west basis between the island of Ireland and Great Britain so it is not just Northern Ireland civic organisations, it is organisations based in the South. We work with and are in constant dialogue with our counterparts in Great Britain. That new common charter was a kind of expression of that. It is almost an expression of the gap. In terms of governance and administration, there is the British-Irish Council that brings together the administrations of the devolved administrations, the Channel Islands, the Isle of Man and the Irish and UK Governments, but there is no equivalent for civic society. There is a gap there and the new common charter was pointing towards that. One challenge that has been mentioned is the trade and co-operation agreement and the mechanisms set up with the various committees and the intricate network or mechanisms under that which, as Dr. Ní Lochlainn pointed out, add another layer of complication for civic society organisations which have to track them all. If you are working on environmental concerns, you really do need to pay serious attention to all those committees and see how that is panning out. However, it also presents an opportunity. Within the trade and co-operation agreement there is a civic society forum that brings together the domestic advisory group for the UK and the European Union. There is an opportunity to redress the east-west balance within that domestic advisory group that the UK would set up to link the island of Ireland, and particularly Northern Ireland in this case, and Great Britain. However, it also points to another concern and complication. In co-operation, whether North-South or east-west, we have to avoid that the mechanisms under the Trade and Cooperation Agreement, TCA, do not speak to the mechanisms set up under the protocol because what happens under the TCA will have an impact on the operation of the protocol. The two things have to communicate with each other. There has to be a bridge there somewhere that we are channelling information across those two very important agreements.

Yes, there are challenges around the democratic deficit but there are solutions. There are mechanisms there that the existing institutions could provide us with some of those channels. The North South Ministerial Council continues to have under its remit an EU dimension. In it, the Northern Ireland Executive meets with the Irish Government and may discuss EU policy and try to influence that development of EU policy. On Northern Ireland, we continue to have an office of the Executive in Brussels. We need to really reinvigorate that. Northern Ireland has to keep an eye on what is happening in the Commission and try to be on top of the policy that is being developed. It is not necessarily about keeping an eye on the possible draw-down of EU funds, it has to be a bit more proactive looking at the development of policy. It is also about engaging with the Irish Government's representation in Brussels as well. That is another communication aspect. There is a possibility of a democratic deficit but another way to address that

is to ensure that the civic society engagement that was set up under the Good Friday Agreement is properly established in a proper Northern Ireland civic forum and an all-island consultative forum. Perhaps that could then be developed to create some all-island civic forum too. The position paper on engagement with the UK Government, the Commission and the Northern Ireland Executive, and how the UK will discharge its responsibilities, was perhaps published in 2020. I cannot recall. I recognise that both the UK Government and European Commission have been trying to engage with civic society. We had visits by Vice-President Maroš Šefčovič on his own. We also had visits by Lord Frost on his own. We have also had joint visits, as co-chairs of the joint committee, engaging with civic society organisations.

To properly address that potential democratic deficit, we have to make that engagement more structured because at present, it is the beginning of a good effort but it is *ad hoc*, like our group. We are called to a meeting, people express their views and then we do not actually know what happens, then another meeting is called three months later. A serious issue here is transparency. For this to work properly, we need to have agendas and minutes, and people knowing who is at the meetings. Even organisations that might not be at the table should at least know who will be at the table and they can communicate their views to those organisations. We need to work on a proper structure for civic engagement to properly address that potential democratic deficit. I will hand over to my colleagues now.

Ms Tara Farrell: In support of Dr. Soares's points, we have felt, having been involved in the New Common Charter process since 2015, that there has been no other space for grassroots organisations to engage in that level of dialogue on such a sustained basis. That is the theme running through this. That also speaks to the point about engagement with political leaders, the UK Government and EU institutions. The engagement is sporadic and fragmented. We need a clear roadmap with deadlines and pathways of engagement. As Dr. Soares said, we have been at various different meetings. We give our input and we are listened to but there is no definition of the who and the how afterwards, or of where we go next. We need a clear roadmap on that level of engagement.

Mr. Chris Quinn: I will not repeat what my colleagues said but I agree with everything that has been said before me. To build on Ms Farrell's point, we need action. We talk regularly to decision makers and at times, it feels like there is a lack of action and a lack of follow-up. Regarding a focus for solutions, as the committee has heard, much of our work is *ad hoc*. I am trying to keep an organisation afloat during a pandemic and a global economic downturn, when unfortunately the Department of Education in Northern Ireland has ripped an axe through the voluntary youth sector and many organisations underneath it. We are working with vulnerable young people and trying to bring them to tables like this one today, which takes much work.

On a solution focus, perhaps there is an opportunity with PEACE PLUS to bring much-needed resources to organisations such as ours. PEACE has been kind to our sector and our organisation, and to me personally. It has kept me in a job for many years. The problem with PEACE funding, as one will hear often, is the bureaucracy that comes with it. If the committee has any influence around the tables it is at, I ask it to ensure that PEACE PLUS enables us to do more for sustained North-South, east-west co-operation. If at all possible, could it look at the level of bureaucracy? The paperwork that comes with these things often takes away from doing the face-to-face work that is so important. If we get PEACE PLUS right, that might be an opportunity for civic society organisations to do sustained work on North-South and east-west co-operation.

Vice Chairman: Does Ms Hanna wish to make a follow-on remark?

Ms Claire Hanna: No. I appreciate all of the inputs and want to let somebody else come in.

Vice Chairman: I welcome Dr. Farry. I invite him to make his points and ask questions.

Dr. Stephen Farry: I will ask a few questions to which anyone can respond. To what extent do we need to return to the mapping exercise on North-South co-operation that was done by the Irish Government a couple of years ago? It identified about 140 areas of North-South co-operation. Should we conduct an audit on how things have turned out in practice in the intervening years, particularly from Brexit going live? What lessons or action plan can be derived from that piece of work?

My next group of questions are for Dr. Soares but I urge other people to feel free to respond. I want to get a sense of the different organisations that work across the Border. To what extent are EU and EEA nationals employed or engaged? How difficult are things becoming in that regard?

Does Dr. Soares want to take the opportunity to put on record some of his concerns about EEA nationals in terms of the implications of the electronic travel authorisation, ETA, scheme that the UK Government envisages in terms of its Nationality and Borders Bill and what it may be contemplating in terms of the common travel area? What are the potential risks arising from what was said by the Home Office in recent weeks and the fact that there are a few issues up in the air?

Dr. Anthony Soares: I will comment first and then I will hand over to my colleagues.

I thank Dr. Farry for his questions. The North-South mapping exercise is an issue. At the time, following its undertaking, one of the things that we noted was the following about the technical notes that were produced by both the UK Government and the European Commission, which essentially were almost the same technical note that accompanied the eventual publication of the mapping exercise on North-South co-operation. Both technical notes pointed out that the exercise may not have captured informal, local community level co-operation on a North-South basis. This is one of the reasons that the *ad hoc* group is also really important because most of the co-operation that we undertake takes place at an informal, local community level. We are very keen, as we monitor the conditions for North-South co-operation and whether they have been maintained, that we capture all of that co-operation and not necessarily just the 142 areas of North-South co-operation that were included in the mapping exercise, which essentially looked at the regulatory underpinnings and the extent to which EU regulations supported those areas of co-operation.

For many of us who are involved in the North-South and east-west co-operation it is not the technicalities and regulations that keep us alive but the vigour, heart and passion that keeps us doing what we do. However, it is important that we do not dismiss that and include, as we look at the conditions for North-South co-operation, that we pay close attention to that.

In terms of the question on whether we should have an audit and a refreshing, that is one of the purposes of the *ad hoc* group. We can provide that evidence to those who are responsible for the monitoring, and Article 11 of the protocol, and give direct evidence in terms of how our co-operation is progressing, following the implementation of the protocol as it proceeds.

On the issue of EEA nationals employed or engaged in cross-border work or activities, we knew this would arise when the UK decided to withdraw from the European Union. We talked about it and it has come about. I refer to the whole issue of uncertainty. If it happens that

someone who is not a UK citizen or an Irish citizen is involved in cross-border work, there is uncertainty as to whether that employment is secure. From the employers' perspective – we are particularly worried about this because of the various issues employers are dealing with - cross-border employers may become more reluctant to employ cross-border workers. There are various issues around that, not only in terms of citizenship but also in terms of taxation issues. In particular, as we move towards more remote working, especially for those resident in the Republic of Ireland and employed by an Northern Ireland employer, what are the implications in terms of their tax liability if they are engaged in remote working? We must be aware of that and work to ensure it does not become an obstacle to employers employing cross-border workers in the future.

Regarding the issues of electronic travel authorisation and the changes to some of the documentary requirements for intra-CTA travel for citizens who do not have Irish or UK nationality, which will come into effect on 1 October, as members are probably aware, we were fortunate in that the policy team in the Home Office responsible for the common travel area engaged with us to talk us through some of those changes and their implications. The Home Office CTA team was very clear there will be no changes to travel across the land Border here and that some of the policies were already in existence. However, we pointed out to the team that even if we are talking about the continuation of existing policies, it has to understand that the context has completely changed. Brexit has completely changed the position and created all sorts of uncertainties. Any alterations to intra-CTA travel must be handled very carefully. These issues are adding an extra dimension of uncertainty, particularly with regard to the potential implications for those who are not UK or Irish citizens with respect to their travel between the island of Ireland and Great Britain. We must be very careful in how we handle any of those changes coming into effect on 1 October.

Vice Chairman: I thank Dr. Soares. As Mr. Quinn is under time pressure, perhaps he would like to contribute at this stage.

Mr. Chris Quinn: Unfortunately, I do not have very much to add to that. My mind strayed a little bit left field when EEA nationals were discussed. There is a conversation to be had on that in addition to what we are talking about with respect to asylum seekers and young people who are refugees. There is often a strong focus on EEA nationals across the board but there is some work to be done on how we engage with young people seeking asylum on the island of Ireland, both North and South, and the impact Brexit might have on them. Linked to that is some work we are doing on a bill of rights for Northern Ireland. That conversation is important in the context of everything that we are discussing today.

Vice Chairman: Does anybody else wish to comment?

Dr. Stephen Farry: I thank the witnesses for their answers. I am happy for the Vice Chairman to move on.

Vice Chairman: Very good. Senator Black indicated earlier but may no longer be with us. We will move to a second round starting with Sinn Féin.

Ms Michelle Gildernew: It is great to see Dr. Soares, Dr. Ní Lochlainn, Ms Farrell and Mr. Quinn here today and I thank them for their insightful contribution. I also apologise for the interruption of the dog.

I represent a Border constituency and a significant number of issues have had an impact on

all of us since Brexit in particular but also since the onset of Covid. These include the furlough payments North and South and how it impacted us. I have constituents who have worked a lifetime in the South but live in the North. They pay taxes and so on but were left outside of those support payments. I also want to draw Dr. Soares on the issues of cross-border taxation and all that it involves, which he spoke about in reply to Dr. Farry's question. I am interested to hear about that. It might be useful if we, at some stage, invited the Minister, Deputy Donohoe, to speak about these issues in order to give us an insight into cross-border taxation and how this committee can have an impact on that. Has the *ad hoc* group had or requested much engagement with Government Ministers, particularly in regard to the Citizens' Assembly? I am keen to hear the group's thoughts on the engagement regarding that. While we welcome the all-Ireland women's forum and other levels of engagement, we are still facing a deficit in terms of the Good Friday Agreement. Some of the guarantees and promises made therein have still not been addressed, specifically on a bill of rights. Had that been in place, life might have been a lot less complicated for those of us who represent people on the Border. If Dr. Soares can talk about those issues, I would be keen to take his thoughts into consideration. I thank the witnesses for a valuable morning.

Vice Chairman: Perhaps Dr. Soares will response first and then we will go around the panel.

Dr. Anthony Soares: I am aware my colleague, Mr. Quinn, is leaving shortly to attend an important initiative. In case he has to disappear in the next few minutes, I will deal with some of those issues quickly. As for Covid and the supports thereon, in addition to Covid public health restrictions and how they were implemented on either side of the Border, these are common issues. We work with European partners in border regions across Europe. They face the same issues in terms of the timing of the imposition of public health restrictions on either side of a border, the lifting of public health restrictions, the different types of supports made available to their citizens and how that affects cross-border workers. These are common issues that have been felt to varying degrees across European Union borders. We have seen this at first hand with our own Border. It is highlighted to us especially through our flagship Border People project in respect of which we are grateful for the support of various stakeholders, including the North-South Ministerial Council's joint secretariat. We have seen this at first hand with citizens who live at borders or have to cross our Border for work or other purposes. They are the people who always fall between the cracks and have to deal with the differentials in timing and supports. Sometimes it is a minefield and they have to scramble around for the correct information. In that regard, our Border People project tries to signpost the correct direction.

On the taxation issue, I am sure the members are aware of the work of the Cross-Border Workers Coalition. It has been highlighting the taxation issue, which had existed previously and is not a new issue. It is simply that the onset of Covid and the changes to how we work, including the move to remote working, have focused a light on that particular issue. The Cross-Border Workers Coalition is doing great work. It has been engaging with the Minister, Deputy Donohoe, in trying to address this issue and seeing what the impacts of resolving that issue would be. We would support them in that and we would encourage all sides to find a solution. It would not be that difficult to find.

In terms of engagement with the Government Ministers, I will briefly reply and then I will hand over to my colleagues. The *ad hoc* group has had very good engagement with Ministers, but also with officials. We would like to really thank officials on the Irish Government side, particularly the officials from the Department of Foreign Affairs who have engaged with us on

various occasions, and also the shared island unit. Also, as individual organisations, to varying extents we have engagements with Ministers in Northern Ireland, and in the Republic of Ireland as well. We are really grateful for that engagement, but it is just the nature of that engagement and what it leads to that is the question. I will hand over to my colleagues.

Mr. Chris Quinn: I thank Dr. Soares. If Dr. Soares does not mind, I do have to be excused in a few moments-----

Vice Chairman: Sure.

Mr. Chris Quinn: -----with regard to the North-South Youth Forum with some colleagues, North and South. Before I leave, I wanted to add some comments around the issue of Covid. It is obviously a huge one and young people have talked a lot about how their rights have been impacted from a North-South perspective. Based on some of the conversations we have had, one of the good things is young people are becoming more accustomed to the language of rights and they have talked about human rights as a key priority area. On Covid-19, a massive number of young people felt that it impacted on their right to have a say, and that is both North and South. They felt left out of the discussion. They felt that their mental health had deteriorated significantly throughout the pandemic and that the issues around access to information were big.

In terms of cross-Border issues, young people talk a lot about healthcare, education and transport as well as economic disadvantage.

I am glad that Ms Gildernew brought up the bill of rights as well. That is a pertinent issue that young people are really engaged in at the moment. I guess there is frustration. In many ways, there is a perfect storm brewing. People are very frustrated. There is a massive disconnect. There are all these things going on at the minute, with the Brexit Protocol and Covid-19. In the North, you have universal credit and welfare reform issues and rising poverty, and across the island of Ireland we are seeing issues around housing and homelessness rocketing. People are really frustrated and I guess the theme of today is to give people a space to have a say on these issues that are really important.

If the Chairman does not mind, I will excuse myself now. I thank all the members for the opportunity to speak today and I thank Dr. Soares for bringing me in. Hopefully, I will see the committee again along with some young people. Hopefully, the young people will be doing the talking the next time.

Chairman: That is a good suggestion. I thank Mr. Quinn. I appreciate he was under time pressures today. I thank Mr. Quinn for making time in his diary to accommodate the meeting this morning and wish him the best of luck with his next engagement and, indeed, his good work.

Mr. Finucane wanted to come in. He indicated, if he wants to come in at this point.

Mr. John Finucane: I have been a little slow because there was something that I wanted to come back in on with Mr. Quinn. I am familiar with Mr. Quinn's work. He does excellent work and I was glad to see him before the committee today.

One point we may consider is that Mr. Quinn referenced the live survey he and his group was conducting. It would be very interesting when the survey is completed - I can follow-up with Mr. Quinn after this meeting to see exactly when that is due to be completed - to see the representative nature of that survey. I was quite interested in some of the feedback with the

figures and the topics that Mr. Quinn referenced in one of his earlier answers. I do not need to frame that as a question, given that Mr. Quinn is not here, but that is something that I can follow-up on.

I thank Ms Farrell, Dr. Ní Lochlainn and Dr. Soares. I cannot remember who referenced this earlier. We rightly have a lot of focus on trade and the politics as to where we are at this moment in time but it is important to particularly offer our youth and our women's network, and the environment as well, the ear of this committee. Given the nature and the composition of this committee, it is important that we hear those voices. I would welcome that.

I have one fairly specific question. There has been some reference to PEACE PLUS funding. I would be interested to know whether any of the groups the witnesses are involved with or that they represent benefit are due to benefit from this next phase of the PEACE PLUS funding? Is there a concern, given the political climate and the refusal of unionists to attend meetings of the North-South Ministerial Council, that the funding and the vital work that it facilitates would be under threat?

Vice Chairman: I thank Mr. Finucane for that question. We will take a response to that.

Dr. Anthony Soares: I might make some initial comments and maybe Dr. Ní Lochlainn, who has her hand up, which is great, could come in afterwards. In terms of PEACE PLUS, I note, speaking here as a director of the Centre for Cross Border Studies, that we responded to both public consultations around the development of PEACE PLUS and highlighted our own priorities around that, which, obviously, given the nature of our organisation, would focus on the ability of organisations to undertake cross-Border projects. We also highlighted the need for people-to-people projects. There has to be a real balance between those larger projects and the funding that goes to larger organisations, as well as funding going down to grassroots organisations to enable them to do the great cross-Border work that they do, which is both people-to-people in nature and invaluable. I am hopeful that the PEACE PLUS programme, once it hits the ground, will enable us to do that.

In terms of obstacles to finalising that in terms of signing off on the PEACE PLUS programme, I would really hope that nobody puts obstacles in front of that because it is absolutely crucial to a whole range of organisations, North and South. It is also a vehicle because of the way that this new PEACE PLUS programme has been structured. It can also bring partners outside of the immediate eligible area. It is not only for the six Border counties on the southern side. It can involve partners from as far away as Cork. It can also involve partners from Great Britain. It can involve partners from elsewhere. There is the ability to do so. I really stress that we do not need political obstacles in front of signing off something that is of immense value to civic society organisations and other organisations across the island of Ireland. I will leave it at that and maybe hand over to Dr. Ní Lochlainn, if that is okay.

Vice Chairman: I thank Dr. Soares. Dr. Ní Lochlainn, we will hear your thoughts on that then.

Dr. Aoife Ní Lochlainn: I thank Mr. Finucane for that question. We also made a submission to the consultation on PEACE PLUS and, along with our colleagues in Northern Ireland, Northern Ireland Environment Link, we wrote a letter to the Special European Union Programmes Body regarding our concerns about the level of funding for nature and biodiversity. We really welcome that environment and climate will receive quite a bit of funding in the next round. However, a large proportion of that will go on infrastructural expenditure such as trans-

port. What we are arguing is that nature and biodiversity deserves a much larger piece of the pie essentially and we would hope to see, when the programme is finally signed off, that biodiversity, nature and the marine would see a larger share of the funding. I would be very hopeful that our membership groups in the Border area will be in a position to apply for PEACE PLUS funding for cross-Border environmental projects. Certainly, we will be working with them to make sure that they have the capacity and knowledge that is required to make an application in the first place.

Vice Chairman: Excellent. I thank Dr. Ní Lochlainn. That brings us to the close of that session. We have had all groups in at this stage and we have heard from all the members who wish to come in.

That concludes our engagement with the witnesses. I thank them all for their testimony. It was an informative, educational, useful and constructive meeting. I thank all those on the call and, indeed, Mr. Quinn who had to leave earlier, which we completely understand. I thank the members as well for their engagement and questions, and discussion. The committee now stands adjourned until 7 October, when we will be meeting with the Community Foundation for Ireland and Coiste na nIarchimí. I thank members and witnesses. I hope they enjoy the rest of their day.

The joint committee adjourned at 11.10 a.m. until 1.30 p.m. on Thursday, 7 October 2021.