

# **Culture, Communications, Welsh Language, Sport and International Relations Committee**

## **Inquiry into the Wales-Ireland Relationship - Evidence Paper**

### **The Ireland Wales Relationship**

Wales and Ireland are the closest of neighbours and have built a strong and positive relationship on age-old connections and a deep cultural understanding. Our modern and vibrant relationship has grown from historic links, common heritage and culture, and close people-to-people, business, cultural and sporting connections.

A new enabling environment for Wales and Ireland came about with the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 which led to the establishment of the British-Irish Council. Recent years have seen further developments that have brought new energy to our engagement and, in 2012, the Welsh Government opened an office within the British Embassy in Dublin to capitalise on these activities.

In a business context, Wales is home to around 85 Irish-headquartered companies and counts Ireland as its second largest export market behind the United States of America. The Port of Holyhead, the second largest roll-on roll-off port in the UK after Dover, remains a vital component of the Irish Sea Trade corridor, even in the wake of post-Brexit challenges.

### **EU Programmes**

Our geography means that Ireland and Wales share a common maritime story. Since 1994, cross-border cooperation, and the building of policy networks across the Irish Sea, has been facilitated by the EU's INTERREG Programme.

The Ireland Wales 2014-2020 European Territorial Co-operation (ETC) programme is a maritime programme connecting organisations, businesses and communities on the West coast of Wales with the South-East coast of Ireland. The overall value of the programme is €100m, utilising €79m from the European Union's European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). The programme focuses on:

- Cross border innovation
- Adaptation of the Irish Sea and Coastal Communities to Climate Change
- Cultural and Natural Resources and Heritage

Officials continue to work together to ensure the successes gained through the Ireland Wales Programme are not lost and that research remains at the forefront of our collaboration with Ireland.

### **Relationship post-Brexit**

Following the UK's withdrawal from the European Union, the Ireland Wales relationship has continued to grow, building on the strong foundations laid since 1998. Key events in the ongoing story of our relationship are set out below.

In 2019, the Irish Government re-opened the Consulate General of Ireland in Cardiff. The re-establishment of the Consulate is testament to Ireland's commitment to

increasing cooperation and collaboration with Wales across the business, arts, sporting and community sectors.

The Celtic Sea Developers Alliance (a partnership between Wales, Ireland, Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly) was launched in 2019 to lay foundations for fuller cooperation within the Celtic Sea. One member of the Alliance is Simply Blue Energy, an Irish owned renewable energy developer with offices in both Cork and Pembroke Dock. The company is working in partnership with Total Energies to develop Wales' first floating offshore wind project in the Celtic Sea. Climate change is the defining challenge of our time which is why we have committed to prioritise actions that support climate adaptation and mitigation, green growth and the transition to net zero carbon, and a circular economy.

In October 2020, the Irish Government committed to deepen relations with Wales in its Programme for Government and, as a result of this and the Shared Statement and Joint Action Plan signed in 2021, Wales and Ireland now have direct cooperation at political and official level across a range of policy and cultural areas.

### **Ireland Wales Shared Statement and Joint Action Plan**

In March 2021, the Welsh and Irish Governments launched a new Shared Statement and Joint Action Plan (the Statement) which set out joint ambitions for cooperation between Wales and Ireland until 2025. Through the Statement, we have committed to facilitate and support collaborations which will deliver lasting, positive and mutually beneficial outcomes.

The Statement identifies six priority areas for cooperation:

#### **1. Political and Official Engagement**

The Statement commits Ministers and officials to convene an annual Ireland Wales Ministerial Forum, to engage political, economic and broader stakeholders and develop relationships that will deliver on the potential of current and future opportunities.

#### **2. Climate and Sustainability**

Both governments have agreed on urgency of action to respond to the defining global challenge of our time – climate change. The Statement prioritises joint working that supports sustainable development, through climate adaptation and mitigation, green growth and the transition to net zero carbon and a circular economy.

#### **3. Trade and Tourism**

Our two governments have identified trade flows as central to the strong economic links between Ireland and Wales. The land bridge connecting Ireland with other EU markets plays an important role in both of our economies. Ireland and Wales have agreed to work together to support businesses to adapt to the new context provided by the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement.

#### **4. Education and Research**

Many of the existing strong connections between academic institutions are grounded in EU programmes such as the Framework Research Programmes (Horizon 2020), Erasmus+, the Ireland Wales Programme, and UK-Ireland research cooperation programmes. Through the Statement, we have committed to supporting institutions to explore all avenues to maintain strong collaborations as we adjust to the new environment following the UK's withdrawal from the EU.

#### **5. Culture, Language and Heritage**

Ireland and Wales benefit from a rich, and often shared, cultural heritage. Both countries promote our identities through our cultural performers and use the creative industries as an economic and social tool at home. The Statement sets out how we will continue to support our national and local cultural institutions, and our artists, writers and performers to work collaboratively across Ireland and Wales.

#### **6. Communities, Diaspora and Sport**

Throughout history families and individuals have moved between Ireland and Wales. We have committed to sharing our experiences in engaging with our diasporas and learning from one another to deepen and enrich our connections to our diaspora communities overseas.

### **Delivering the Shared Statement and Joint Action Plan**

There has been progress against all six areas of cooperation set out in the Statement, with delivery being taken forward by the Welsh and Irish Governments and our partner organisations. Examples of delivery and progress against each of the six areas include, and are not limited to:

#### **1. Political and Official Engagement**

Throughout 2021 and 2022, there were six separate bilateral Ministerial meetings, in addition to the bilateral meetings held at the Ireland Wales Ministerial Forums. In January 2021, the Welsh Government Office in Ireland and the Consulate General of Ireland in Cardiff organised a joint event between the Irish and UK Missions to the UN called "Small Nations, Big Ambitions: Future Generations and Gender Equality".

In October 2022, the Irish Foreign Minister, Simon Coveney TD, formally opened the Consulate General of Ireland in Cardiff. Two Ireland Wales Ministerial Forums have taken place, one in Cardiff and one in Cork, which have included exchanges between nine different Ministers - the 2023 Ministerial Forum will take place in North Wales.

#### **2. Climate and Sustainability**

We have supported the Future Generations Commissioner to take part in a policy exchange workstream on sustainability, including organising a visit to Dublin in October 2022. As a result of this work, a member of Ireland's Green Party brought a private members bill to the Dáil on Future Generations and Ireland's 2022 UN Youth Ambassador has been selected as a Future Generations Global Ambassador.

The Greenlink Interconnector reached financial close in March 2022 and in March 2023, the Welsh Government granted consent to Irish-owned Simply Blue Energy to develop Wales' first floating windfarm. Enterprise Ireland attended the 2023 Marine Energy Wales Annual Conference to explore supply chain opportunities in the Celtic Sea.

### **3. Trade and Tourism**

In November 2021, the Taoiseach met Irish investors at Cardiff City Hall, all of whom support our Net Zero ambitions. There have been four separate trade missions to Ireland since the Statement was signed with 26 companies travelling to Ireland from sectors such as renewable energy, financial services and life sciences. Following the first Ministerial Forum in 2021, Enterprise Ireland has also supported companies to visit the Wales Life Sciences Hub to develop trade cooperation.

### **4. Education and Research**

The Welsh Government has launched two Agile Cymru research funds to support collaboration with Irish Institutions across the Irish Sea space. Following the launch of the Statement, both governments have been working together to explore future funding opportunities to ensure that the progress and partnerships made through the Ireland Wales European Territorial Cooperation programme can continue.

In 2021, the "Celtic Academies Alliance" was launched to pool expertise in common challenges. This is a partnership between the Royal Irish Academy, the Learned Society of Wales and the Royal Society of Edinburgh.

The Welsh Government launched Taith in 2022, which has been promoted across Ireland. This promotion includes during the Minister for Education and Welsh Language's visit to Dublin in March 2023, Also, during this visit, the Minister for Education and Welsh Language met key academic institutions, Irish Government Ministers, and cultural and linguistic partners to reaffirm our commitment to the Ireland Wales relationship.

### **5. Culture, Language and Heritage**

In May 2022, the Welsh Government's office in Ireland marked the UN Decade of Indigenous Languages by hosting the first St Patrick and St David lecture titled: *Dewi Padraig Dialogue*, in partnership with Wales Arts International, Arts Council Wales and Dublin City University. It was also the launch for Wales Arts International's Gwrandu campaign. Our respective Arts Councils meet regularly and share learning on common challenges. The Welsh Government team in Ireland has supported artistic showcases in the Dublin Film Festival, Dublin Fringe Festival and the St Patrick's Festival.

The relationship between our National Museums continues to grow, including participation in a 'Cultural Rights, Cultural Democracy' conference. The Welsh and Irish Governments have supported the Other Voices partnership in Dingle and Cardigan, with the First Minister attending the Cardigan event in 2022.

We have continued to support the Coláiste Lurgan and Urdd Gobaith Cymru partnership as well as the Urdd's 2023 European launch of 'Chwarae yn Gymraeg' at Gaelscoil Thaobh na Coille in Dublin, where the Minister for Education and Welsh Language visited pupils who were participating in the Urdd's workshop. The Irish Consul General in Cardiff organised monthly pop-up Gaeltacht events between April 2021 to August 2022 as well as working in collaboration with Culture Ireland to support the Hay Festival and Youth Literature Laureates. The Irish Government has supported the teaching of Irish at Aberystwyth University and Cardiff University in 2020/21 and 2021/22 and for students from these courses to spend a period of time studying in the Gaeltacht in Ireland.

## **6. Communities, Diaspora and Sport**

A Welsh Government official is seconded to the Ireland Abroad Unit in the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs to learn about how the Irish Government takes forward its diaspora engagement. This work aligns with our Diaspora Action Plan. The Irish Consulate General has promoted the Government of Ireland's Emigrant Support Programme which has seen an increase in applications.

The Welsh Government in Ireland and the Consulate General in Cardiff have hosted St David's Day, St Patrick's Day and St Brigid's day events each year to bring our respective communities together.

The Welsh Government's office in Ireland continues to support the Men's and Women's 6 Nations rugby games in Dublin and Cardiff. During the 2022 FIFA Men's Football World Cup, our office in Ireland hosted a networking reception for the Wales vs USA game as well as an in-conversation event with the FAW and former Welsh players.

## **Future Plans and Challenges**

### **Overview**

The Ireland Wales Shared Statement is regarded positively by our partners as it provides a platform on which they can develop stronger relationships and forge new collaborations and partnerships with support from both governments. The Statement has provided a focus for stakeholders to ensure the opportunities which span common areas for political, economic and cultural engagement are realised. Both governments regard the relationship between our two countries as being the strongest it has been for many years.

Many of the ambitions for the Statement have been addressed and are either complete or in progress. In recent steering group meetings, consideration has been given to revising or stretching the current goals to maximise their impact. As we reach the halfway point of the Statement, early consideration is now being given to a future or revised statement which both governments can agree and commit to delivering post-2025.

## **Educational Links**

Educational links are strong between Welsh and Irish institutions through direct exchanges, historic connections and live research programmes. There is a concern that, without a funding resolution and the completion of the current Interreg funding stream, some collaborative Ireland Wales connections will be lost.

The ongoing development of the Celtic Academies Alliance and the growing commitment from the Learned Society is positive and has the potential to forge and grow new connections and areas of joint research between Welsh and Irish universities.

The Taith programme has been well received in Ireland and, while the current round is committed, there are further opportunities to see greater uptake in Ireland and we are encouraging a proactive outreach programme to promote Taith to Irish schools, tertiary, and further education institutions.

## **Funding**

The significant and key challenge to the delivery of the Statement remains around funding. There have been strong, tangible collaborative projects and programmes delivered through Interreg funding which will be withdrawn in 2023 - most notably the Calin Life Science network and Selkie project which is delivering mapping solutions for the offshore renewable sector – with no funding alternative in place.

There are ongoing discussions between the relevant funding departments on alternatives to enable future collaborations and existing projects to continue to deliver, however, the size of the funding would be on a much-reduced scale. Through the Windsor Framework, which sets out the UK Government and European Commission's joint revisions to the Northern Ireland Protocol, there is optimism that a potential path for the UK's association to Horizon Europe can open access to new funding opportunities, although this will not be realised in the near-term.

## **Economic**

The economic ties between Wales and Ireland remain strong, with Irish Investors continuing to reinvest in Welsh operations and Welsh exporters recently undertaking a market visit to Ireland.

A future focus for economic ties will be within the renewable energy sector and the opportunities that exist in the Irish Sea. Opportunities exist for energy developers, the construction supply chain, port development and ongoing maintenance. There is strong potential for Wales and Ireland to jointly benefit from these opportunities and a future shared statement should have a focus within these common areas and this has been a central theme of the ministerial forums.

There are also ongoing discussions with Borders teams on the forthcoming changes, including the introduction of border control posts. It is economically important that trade routes between Wales and Ireland remain as frictionless as possible within the future proposed changes.

## **Political**

A strong element of the Statement has been the commitment from leaders on both sides to meet annually at a Ministerial Forum rotating between both countries. These Forums are an opportunity to mark the progress against the objectives of the Statement, showcase its central themes - including cultural links or educational ties as examples - and provide a platform to discuss future areas of joint working. The next Forum will take place in North Wales in October 2023.

Ministers on both sides will also meet at the British Irish Council throughout the year, however, the dedicated Ministerial Forum remains a significant element of the programme and visibly demonstrates the commitment of both governments to the Statement. Such meetings must continue and feature in any revised or future agreement.

## **Policy Sharing**

Collaboration, sharing best practice and policy learning are common themes and ambitions of the Statement. One direct example of this has been the secondment of a Welsh Government official into the Irish Government's Department of Foreign Affairs. This has been an opportunity for us to learn, understand and experience first-hand Ireland's approach to diaspora engagement and inform our own approach to working with the Welsh diaspora. Other government departments have also forged new relationships and shared current policy development and best practice. Moving forward, more opportunities to connect officials across policy areas are being identified to sharing learning.

There is an ongoing appetite for future collaboration between our two governments and the 2020-2025 Shared Statement and Joint Action Plan provides a strong foundation upon which we can take forward our relationship further.