

Engagement with stakeholders in Ireland

October 2023

Introduction

- 1.** On 12 December 2022, the Culture, Communications, Welsh Language, Sport, and International Relations Committee launched an inquiry on Wales-Ireland relations.
- 2.** As part of this inquiry, on 26 -28 April 2023, the Committee visited Dublin, Ireland to meet Irish representatives for the purpose of gathering evidence for the inquiry.
- 3.** During the visit, the Committee discussed a range of issues with stakeholders. These included: the impact of the United Kingdom leaving the European Union; existing approaches to Welsh-Irish relations; bilateral engagement between the Welsh and Irish governments; stakeholder priorities for 2025 and beyond; resourcing Welsh-Irish joint working; and relations between the Senedd and Houses of Oireachtas.
- 4.** This short report provides an overview of those discussions. A list of those organisations who the Committee met is outlined at the end of the report.
- 5.** The Committee is grateful to everyone it met for their time and input during the visit.



Impact of Brexit

- 6.** A number of stakeholders discussed the challenges arising from the United Kingdom (“UK”) leaving the European Union (“EU”).
- 7.** The Committee heard how, in the immediate aftermath of the UK’s exit from the EU, it was perhaps taken for granted that existing relations would continue. There had however been a renewal of relations between those the Committee spoke to and their partners in Wales and elsewhere in the UK. Those who were participating in various UK/Wales-Ireland structures were confident in their ability to build on these existing relationships given the strength and depth of the bonds between Wales and Ireland.
- 8.** However, one challenge which was identified as arising as a result of Brexit was attracting EU students to study in the UK. Whereas previously students from northern Europe would be attracted to study in the UK, they were now being encouraged to apply for foreign study in Ireland.
- 9.** The Committee also heard of the challenges facing sectors involved in NI/EU-GB trade and the UK’s future border operating model was also highlighted.

Existing approach to joint working

- 10.** The Committee heard about how special the relationship between Wales and Ireland is. On numerous engagements during the visit, emphasis was placed on the similarities between the two countries, their shared culture and history. It was felt to be important to build on this. One stakeholder said that the relationship has grown on a shared tradition between the two nations.
- 11.** The Committee heard about numerous successful joint programmes, activities and projects, some occurring directly because of the Shared Statement (and associated joint action plan). Others noted that they had built relationships and engaged in activities that were not part of the Shared Statement, and that their strength and value was such that they would survive without that intergovernmental commitment in place.
- 12.** Despite this, the importance of a formal structure for continued cooperation between governments was emphasised to the Committee to ensure continued joint working, particularly in the fields of culture, heritage, research, and language. The Shared Statement and government support in that regard was considered most welcome. The approach to international partnership working occurring as a result of the Shared Statement was described as “pushing boundaries”.
- 13.** The Committee heard that the Shared Statement provided a strong pathway for Wales-Ireland engagement and cooperation. One stakeholder noted that it provided an economic element, an environmental link, and a cultural dimension.
- 14.** The Committee heard that existing connections between Wales and Ireland meant that there was an understanding of the cultural benefits of the Shared Statement. One stakeholder noted that the cultural fabric of a nation forms an integral part of its identity.
- 15.** The strength of the existing work with cultural organisations was clear when they demonstrated the importance of sharing knowledge. Stakeholders told us that, while their individual organisations face challenges, the solutions can be found within each other’s countries.
- 16.** The work undertaken in Wales on the Welsh language is considered inspirational and is envied by some of the stakeholders we met in Ireland. The Committee heard that Wales’s achievements on bilingualism have paved the way for Ireland to take the initiative and do the same.

17. One stakeholder noted that the strength, power, and position of the Welsh language meant there was much that Ireland could learn from Wales. Given the similar challenges that exist relating to the number of Irish and Welsh speakers, sharing learning experiences was seen as important to ensure that there was duplication of successful approaches. Others noted that there was much to learn from the work of the Welsh Language Commissioner. Using existing Wales-Ireland forums and networks to explore these issues was considered important.

18. The Committee heard about existing work that was being undertaken on the Irish language. The Committee spoke to one stakeholder who said that, although they were not involved in formal partnership work on language, regular informal contact and connections with Wales continued. These provided important support to different stakeholders working on indigenous languages.

19. There was clear support for the two governments to continue working together. There were a significant number of requests for collaboration on a range of new projects, and a keen interest in working with Wales on areas of common interest, such as language policy. It was noted that both governments needed to be consistent with their stakeholder engagement on this front.

Opportunities and future ambitions

20. The Committee heard from numerous stakeholders who have an ambition to explore opportunities to strengthen Wales-Ireland relations. Many stakeholders are keen to build relations directly with Welsh organisations following the UK's departure from the EU. The Committee heard that the common ground that exists between Wales and Ireland provided a strong foundation to build upon.

21. At a parliamentary level, there was a keen interest on both sides of the Irish Sea to progress collaborative working. This included discussing common policy areas such as language and trade, and the sharing of information, such as reports on different policy areas. It was felt that this would allow both countries to consider common challenges, to improve awareness of one another's challenges, and to review the methods employed to address them.

22. Opportunities relating to trade and business were also noted. The Committee heard of ongoing work to facilitate cross-border trade between the two countries. Stakeholders advised of the importance of the food and drink trade between Wales and Ireland and that there was scope to improve this further.

23. The Committee heard about the potential to increase collaboration on wind energy generation using the natural resources of the Irish Sea for the benefit of the two countries.

24. Despite the cultural engagement between the two countries already being strong, stakeholders are driven to do more. The Committee heard that cultural organisations have and will always find ways to cooperate without the formal structure of a Shared Statement. These organisations would act as friends and confidants, sharing information and working together. One stakeholder remarked that, "...where culture leads, commerce follows."

25. As with culture stakeholders, education and research participants showed a strong willingness and desire to continue joint-working. The Committee heard that, "while some [EU-funded] projects have ended, interest in collaboration opportunities have not." In addition to numerous ongoing projects, there is also mutual interest in addressing a number of future issues. These include language, technology, and protecting coastal communities. The Committee was told that without collaboration, duplication may occur, which is in no one's interest.

26. Finally, there were a range of opportunities to expand work on language policy and research, building on previous informal conversations. Funding for such

work has often presented challenges to formalising a network of organisations to collaborate. It was seen as key to bring together the academic, linguistic and local dialect communities in this regard. The Committee were told that building such networks would greatly assist with tackling the same challenges facing the Welsh and Irish languages. Such challenges include the future of linguistic technology and artificial intelligence, as well growing the number of native language speakers. It was noted that these opportunities could also apply to joint working on other indigenous languages such as Breton, Cornish, and Scottish Gaelic.

Resources

- 27.** Some challenges arising from the resourcing of Wales-Ireland projects were also highlighted. Concerns were raised over the potential loss of EU funding, including how future Wales-Ireland relations would be funded and resourced. It was also recommended that the Welsh and Irish governments should build on their work in a way that has more impact on citizens.
- 28.** It was clear during several engagements that strong resourcing (both funding and general government support) can help partnerships push forward. But, leaving projects that were reliant on such resourcing in limbo with regards to future support would be damaging. Accessing large pots of funding was important. The Committee was told that UK association to Horizon Europe is key for the higher education and research sectors - a view which was shared by the higher education sector in Wales. . One university was in receipt of €46million from Horizon Europe programmes to date (April 2023). We were told that 85 per cent of Welsh-Irish research projects at one university were funded through European Programmes including Interreg and EU Research and Innovation Programmes and that these collaborations, built up over time, were at risk if new funding sources weren't available to sustain them into the future.
- 29.** Providing transparency on future funding for such projects was essential. This includes providing clarity on which funding mechanisms and pots could be accessed. The Committee heard that accessing even a small amount of bilateral funding can have a positive impact and can unlock funding from larger pots of money. A lack of clarity however, can lead to some missing out.
- 30.** Some noted that, whilst strong resourcing takes partnerships further, other factors are important, such as sharing information and working smarter and more efficiently.
- 31.** One stakeholder, when asked about quantifying the value of Wales-Ireland relations, said that there is, “no metric for the priceless.”

List of engagements

Date	Organisation
26 April 2023	Houses of the Oireachtas
27 April 2023	Dublin Office, Welsh Government
27 April 2023	Other Voices Festival
27 April 2023	British Embassy Dublin
27 April 2023	Department for Foreign Affairs, Irish Government
27 April 2023	Irish Maritime Development Office
28 April 2023	National Museum Ireland
28 April 2023	University College Dublin
7 June 2023	Trinity College Dublin ¹

¹ Due to timings, this meeting was rescheduled to a virtual meeting on this date.