

Shared Island Shared Opportunity: NESC Comprehensive Report

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

No.157 April 2022



NESC

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta Eacnamaíoch agus Shóisialta
National Economic & Social Council

An Oifig Náisiúnta um Fhorbairt Eacnamaíoch agus Shóisialta
National Economic & Social Development Office NESDO

1. The main tasks of the National Economic and Social Council shall be to analyse and report on strategic issues relating to the efficient development of the economy and the achievement of social justice.
2. The Council may consider such matters either on its own initiative or at the request of the Government.
3. Any reports which the Council may produce shall be submitted to the Government, and shall be laid before each House of the Oireachtas and published.
4. The membership of the Council shall comprise a Chairperson appointed by the Government in consultation with the interests represented on the Council, and
 - Three persons nominated by agricultural and farming organisations;
 - Three persons nominated by business and employers organisations;
 - Three persons nominated by the Irish Congress of Trade Unions;
 - Three persons nominated by community and voluntary organisations;
 - Three persons nominated by environment organisations;
 - Four other persons nominated by the Government, including the Secretaries General of the Department of Finance, the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation, the Department of Housing, Planning and Heritage, the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.
 - Seven people possessing knowledge, experience and skills which the Taoiseach considers relevant to the functions of the Council
5. Any other Government Department shall have the right of audience at Council meetings if warranted by the Council's agenda, subject to the right of the Chairperson to regulate the numbers attending.
6. The term of office of members shall be for three years. Casual vacancies shall be filled by the Government or by the nominating body as appropriate. Members filling casual vacancies may hold office until the expiry of the other members' current term of office.
7. The numbers, remuneration and conditions of service of staff are subject to the approval of the Taoiseach.
8. The Council shall regulate its own procedure.



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Membership

Chairperson

Mr Martin Fraser, Secretary General, Department of An Taoiseach and Secretary to the Government

Deputy Chairperson

Ms Elizabeth Canavan, Assistant Secretary, Department of An Taoiseach

Business and Employers

Ms Maeve McElwee, Ibec

Mr Tom Parlon, Construction Industry Federation

Mr Ian Talbot, Chambers Ireland

Trade Unions

Ms Patricia King, ICTU

Mr Joe Cunningham, SIPTU

Mr Kevin Callinan, Fórsa

Farming & Agricultural

Mr John Enright, ICMSA

Mr Damian McDonald, IFA

Mr TJ Flanagan, ICOS

Community & Voluntary

Fr Seán Healy, Social Justice Ireland

Ms Brid O'Brien, Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed

Vacancy

Environmental

Ms Karen Ciesielski, Environmental Pillar

Ms Caroline Whyte, Feasta

Ms Oonagh Duggan, Bird Watch Ireland

Public Service

Mr John Hogan, Department of Finance

Dr Orlaigh Quinn, Department of Business, Enterprise & Innovation

Mr Graham Doyle, Department of Housing, Planning & Heritage

Mr David Moloney, Department of Public Expenditure & Reform

Government Nominees

Mr Philip Hamell, retired civil servant

Prof Edgar Morgenroth, Dublin City University (DCU)

Dr Michelle Norris, UCD Geary Institute

Prof Eleanor Denny, Trinity College Dublin

Prof Paul Donnelly, Technological University Dublin (TU Dublin)

Prof Geraint Ellis, Queens University, Belfast

Prof Sinead O'Flanagan, formerly Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)

Secretariat to Project

Dr Larry O'Connell, Director

Dr Helen Johnston, Senior Policy Analyst

Dr Jeanne Moore, Social Policy Analyst

Dr Damian Thomas, Senior Policy Analyst

Mr Noel Cahill, Economist

Jenny Andersson, Social Policy Analyst

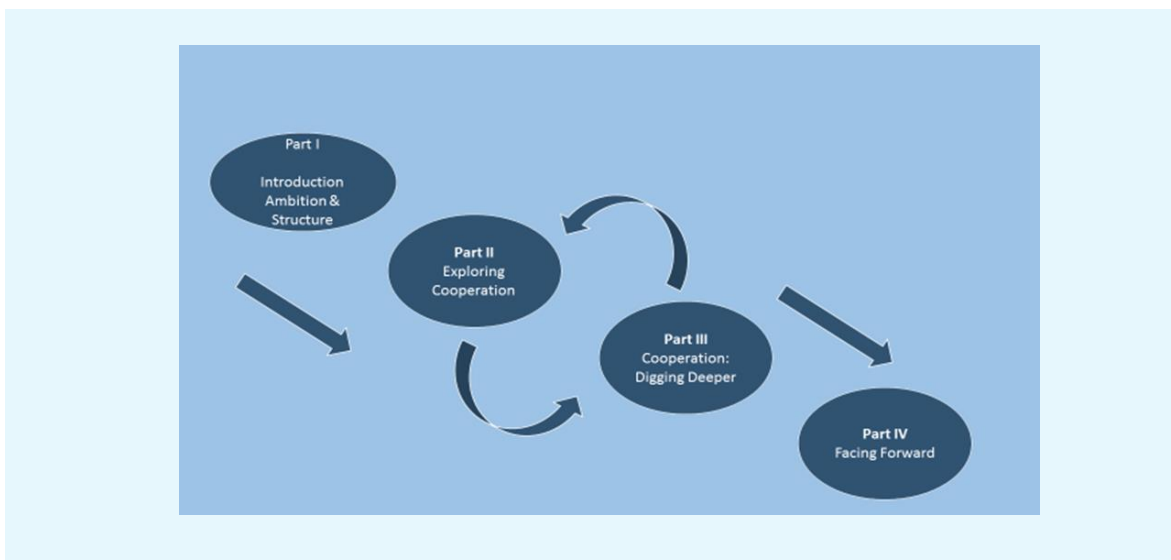
A full list of the NESC Secretariat can be found at www.nesc.ie

Executive Summary

Following the launch of the Government’s Shared Island initiative in October 2020, NESC was requested to produce a comprehensive report based on its mission of providing advice on strategic policy issues, relating to sustainable economic, social and environment development in Ireland, to the Taoiseach and the Government.

Report in Four Parts

Part I explains the ambition for and approach to this work. It is first and foremost an exercise in ‘listening and learning’. It is an analysis and synthesis of the existing knowledge, prevailing policy approaches, and understandings of key stakeholders, both north and south. Aware of the sensitivities, the work sought to understand and articulate perspectives, including concerns, on an inclusive basis. The work has been underpinned by the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) and absolute respect for the principle of consent. The research does not address the constitutional question, but focuses on sustainable economic, social and environmental development issues, in line with NESC’s strategic remit. NESC has approached the work on the basis of good neighbourliness.



Part II provides an overview of the shared context in a diverse range of areas. In the economic sphere it considers trade, income and output data, indicators of living standards, statistics on the labour market, good jobs, education, and regional variations between and within both jurisdictions. The social domain reviews poverty, mental health and social enterprise. Part II also considers the religious landscape and work on reconciliation and structured dialogue. The environment domain reviews climate and biodiversity – including water and marine issues, renewable energy, a just transition in rural farming communities, the circular economy, and regulation. The wellbeing dimension examines work on measuring progress using wellbeing frameworks, north and south. As well as these domains, information is provided on the shared institutional context.

Detailed consideration, drawing on examples, is given to the potential for further co-operation in four domains: economy, social policy, the environment and wellbeing.

Part III is a ‘digging deeper’ exploration in the North West to understand the ways in which co-operation works. The North West Region comprises the areas of Donegal County Council, and Derry City and Strabane District Council. Four online focus groups were held on: good jobs; green transformation; poverty and mental health; and mechanisms for co-operation.

Part IV draws out the conclusions and recommendations, and highlights the next steps.

Three Overarching Conclusions

First, there is very significant support, in practice, for an all-island approach to key economic, social, environmental, and wellbeing challenges. A solid foundation for the Shared Island initiative exists. This foundation is made up of working connections and relationships operating and evolving at various levels, from formal institutions to community-level networks.

Second, climate change and biodiversity loss provide a clear and urgent platform for ambitious all-island action and collaboration. The Council believes that this area is now ripe for further ambition, collaboration and action. Given the urgency and scope to protect and enhance the island's environment, and to maximise the available opportunities, the Council has made a series of recommendations to strengthen and deepen shared island collaboration on climate and biodiversity.

Third, the key factors which are shaping current and future collaboration are a shared agenda, resources, political certainty and support, legislative and regulatory coherence, and collaborative projects.

The Council found ample evidence of a shared agenda raising the profile and support for action in many areas, including on climate change, mental health services, and social enterprise supports. It also found that sustaining and deepening of resources, and legislative and regulatory coherence, is needed to strengthen co-operation.

The Council found that a conducive and certain political environment is fundamental to continuing all-island co-operation and engagement. The Council argues that in the period ahead, the main political actors – the Irish and UK Governments and the NI Executive – should seek and prepare for an opportunity to reset the context and agenda for north-south and east-west co-operation.

Finally, the Council found that, in order to deepen progress, efforts need to be focused on collaborative projects and outcomes which make a real difference to communities on the ground - on both sides of the border.

Recommendations in Five Key Areas

The Council recommends specific actions related to the economy and investment, social policy, climate and biodiversity, wellbeing measurement, and data co-ordination.

In relation to the economy the Council recommends that:

- Increased investment in infrastructure is needed to strengthen economic development, on an all-island basis and in the border areas.
- Further investment in the built infrastructure of the all-island energy network is needed, to ensure that the Eirgrid and SONI (System Operator for Northern Ireland) commitment to reach at least 70 per cent renewable electricity by 2030 can be achieved.
- A strategic working group should be established to explore the renewable energy opportunities – both economic and environmental – associated with solar, offshore wind, wave and tidal energy, and anaerobic digestion.
- The scope to mandate more strategic and collaborative working between the enterprise agencies should be considered, in order to better take-up opportunities to support enterprise growth and to attract investment on a cross-border basis.
- The work of the newly established National Clustering Policy Steering Group in Ireland should incorporate consideration of all-island opportunities, to identify the potential for interventions to achieve all-island economies of scale and scope.

- More joined-up approaches are required between the two administrations, to fully promote regional development and realise the vision for the regions set out in the Irish Government’s National Planning Framework (NPF) and the Northern Ireland Executive’s Regional Development Strategy (RDS) 2035. These would build on, for example, co-operation on spatial planning.
- Local authorities and the two administrations on the island should place a particular focus on the challenge of securing tangible benefits from co-operation.
- The two administrations and the tourism agencies should cooperate to grow local, sustainable tourism on a cross-border basis, as this would benefit both jurisdictions, particularly regions that attract lower levels of overseas visitors.
- Relevant departments or agencies north and south could be jointly mandated to develop a shared island good jobs agenda, building on their work on this issue to date.
- Further consideration should be given to the impacts of the trans-border workers’ tax relief for remote working, with engagement between the Department of Finance and other stakeholders, possibly within the Labour Employer Economic Forum (LEEF).
- Although it would require agreement by the Government and the Northern Ireland Executive, a more structured basis for consultation, co-operation and action by the two administrations on enterprise policy, and other economic development issues, should be considered.

In relation to **social policy**, the Council recommends that:

- The scope for periodic joint ministerial or joint departmental engagement with stakeholders in relevant sectors – to hear their views and expectations of what north-south co-operation needs to deliver – should be explored, to inform the development and updating of work programmes.
- The PEACE PLUS programme is an important opportunity to affirm the benefits of cross-border co-operation and interaction on a range of common social policy concerns. It provides a basis for mainstreaming and for further development over time, through north-south co-operation.
- North-south and cross-border collaborative events should be built into annual departmental and agency work programmes.
- The role of special initiatives in tackling concentrations of poverty on the island should be examined. The role of the annual summer school collaboration, between the Department of Social Protection (DSP) in Ireland and the Department for Communities in Northern Ireland, could be explored as a means of initiating this dialogue.
- Both administrations, building on the platform already put in place, could explore the potential for greater recognition, support and development of the role of social enterprise on a cross-border and all-island basis.
- The successful experience of providing specialist services on an all-island basis should be examined. This could identify where scope exists for both administrations to provide a broader range of services on a more accessible, cost-efficient or higher-standard basis, through North South co-operation.
- The Government, working with the Northern Ireland Executive (NIE) and the UK Government, should encourage and support more strategic co-operation between further and higher education and training institutions – in order to enhance access, choice and experience for students, as well as contribute to institutional development and diversification.

In relation to **climate and biodiversity** the Council recommends that:

- Both administrations should take greater cognisance of the connected nature of the climate crisis and biodiversity emergency for the island of Ireland, and reflect this in a programme of co-ordination and joint action. This should utilise the capacity of the institutions and bodies of the Good Friday Agreement, in order to realise the tangible benefits of co-operation for this most urgent and common challenge for the shared island.
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- A number of strategic working groups should be established to explore opportunities for future collaboration on key all-island climate and biodiversity concerns, including:
 - **sustainable agriculture:** to examine issues such as the further development of initiatives such as Farming for Nature;
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- **the circular economy and bio-economy:** to examine the potential of an all-island approach to support the shift to a circular economy in Ireland and Northern Ireland;
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- **renewable energy:** to explore the renewable energy opportunities – both economic and environmental – associated with solar, offshore wind, wave and tidal energy, and anaerobic digestion.
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- **networks for nature:** to explore the potential to build on the progress of the All-Ireland Pollinator Plan; and
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- **marine and coastal impacts of climate change:** to focus on how to strengthen co-operation, and expand knowledge sharing.

In relation to developing **wellbeing measures** of progress the Council recommends that:

- There is scope and potential to develop co-operation around the shared interest in developing wellbeing measures of progress, which move beyond narrow GDP-based assessments.
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- There is potential to use the wellbeing frameworks as a tool to facilitate engagement with a wide range of stakeholders across the island, to inform priorities in relation to key challenges, and to learn from each other.
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- The Central Statistics Office (CSO) and the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) could cooperate in the development and application of wellbeing indicators and other measures.
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- A north-south (and east-west) element should be built into groups that are set up to design and refine the respective wellbeing frameworks.

In relation to **data co-ordination** more generally, the Council recommends that:

- Both administrations could place a greater focus on interoperable statistical data and co-operation between the CSO and NISRA, for sectors which are important in terms of all-island co-operation or comparison, including environment, health and trade.

Next Steps

The Government's Shared Island initiative is focused on deepening mutually beneficial co-operation on the island of Ireland, by working north-south and east-west on significant shared challenges and opportunities, underpinned by the Good Friday Agreement.

This report and the potential areas for further action should now be considered by Government and the Joint Secretariat to the North South Ministerial Council, as well as by others with a role and interest in all-island co-operation and engagement – including political representatives, state agencies, all-island bodies, local authorities, civil society and community organisations.

Time will now be devoted to ensuring that this report – and its ambition to help identify scope to improve all-island ways of working, and areas where such co-operation seems likely to bear useful fruit – is widely shared.

The report will be launched in a manner that engages people across the island. It is an opportunity for NESC to engage with more stakeholders, citizens and experts in Northern Ireland. It also provides an opportunity to engage further with communities in the south on shared island possibilities.

The initial launch will be followed by a number of workshops across the island. These engagements will provide an opportunity for NESC, and by extension the Government's Shared Island Initiative, to continue to listen and learn.

They will offer an opportunity to consider, in depth, the areas where further research and work by NESC would add most value. The Council's current work programme includes a focus on agriculture and climate change, and wellbeing frameworks. These will also include an all-island focus.



NESC

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