



Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

Shared Island Dialogue Series

Environment and Climate - addressing
shared challenges on the island



Dialogue Report

Introduction

The Shared Island Dialogue series was [launched](#) by An Taoiseach Micheál Martin TD on 22 October as part of the Government's Shared Island Initiative to foster constructive and inclusive civic dialogue on all aspects of a shared future on the island underpinned by the Good Friday Agreement.

The Dialogue Series brings people together from across the island to discuss key concerns for the future, opportunities for cross learning and understanding and harnessing the full potential of cooperation through the framework of the Good Friday Agreement.

The first Dialogue of the Series took place on 26 November on the theme "[New Generations and New Voices on the Good Friday Agreement](#)". Further Roundtable Dialogues with women's representatives and representatives of ethnic minority and new communities took place in December reflecting the priority placed by the Taoiseach on engaging people traditionally under-represented in the peace process in discussions on the shared island.

The first Shared Island Dialogue of 2021 took place on 5 February on the theme "Environment and Climate - addressing shared challenges on the island". Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications, Eamon Ryan TD participated for the Government and delivered the [opening address](#) and closing remarks at the Dialogue.

The purpose of the dialogue was to inform the development of the Shared Island initiative in view of the priority placed by the Government on addressing the climate and biodiversity crises and protecting our shared environment on the island.

In the dialogue, Dr Jeanne Moore [presented a draft paper](#) by the National Economic and Social Council (NESC) Secretariat for consultation on "Shared Island Consultation: Climate and Biodiversity Challenges and Opportunities" as part of the work on Shared Island that NESC is undertaking in 2021.

Award winning author, naturalist and environmental campaigner, Dara McAnulty set the tone for discussion on the day with his specially written [poem](#) "Invisible Lines" for the event.

The Dialogue was moderated by Kevin O'Sullivan, Environment and Science Editor with the Irish Times and featured three panel discussions on the themes "[Tackling the Climate emergency - a Shared Island perspective](#)", "[Addressing the Biodiversity crisis on the island](#)", and "[Future priorities for all-island cooperation on Environment](#)".

Over 140 people participated in the online dialogue, from all parts of the island and representing a range of civil society groups, business and agriculture organisations as well as academic and research experts, local authorities, state agencies and Departments.

The Shared Island Dialogue series will continue through 2021, to foster civic engagement on important issues for the future of the island, including on health, education and economy, and on key civic aspects of the Good Friday Agreement, such as identity and equality.

The Dialogues are organised by the Shared Island unit in the Department of the Taoiseach in partnership with the Department of Foreign Affairs, working closely with Government Departments and Agencies and in consultation with civil society stakeholders on the island.

Further information on the Shared Island Dialogue series including videos of the plenary sessions from these events is available on the [gov.ie website](#).

Report¹: Environment and Climate - addressing shared challenges on the island

Summary:

Over the course of the dialogue a number of key themes emerged from the discussions that took place:

- There is a **strong desire among civil society representatives to see greater cooperation at all levels on environment and climate issues for the island**. There are comparable domestic and international commitments in both jurisdictions, and common challenges faced across the island. Deeper coordination and cooperation would assist in meeting these challenges, and there is clear potential for cross-learning and sharing of best practice and knowledge, North and South.
- There were a **range of practical suggestions for greater cooperation** in the Dialogue - on addressing climate, biodiversity and other environmental challenges - which were noted and warrant consideration.
- Reflecting the intrinsically shared nature of environment and ecology on the island, there was a **strong focus on issues of land use, biodiversity and nature-based solutions as key areas that need and are amenable to coordinated or cross-border approaches on the island**. There was emphasis also on the need for coordinated actions in **working for just transition to a carbon neutral future on the island**.
- The **importance of networks** in working to address environmental challenges was consistently noted, in respect of **research, civil society and community networks**, and also in **networked approaches to nature-based solutions**.
- There already exist **strong and vibrant networks of cross-border cooperation in civil society and by researchers on the island**, with both North/South and East-West dimensions. These networks facilitate sharing of data and knowledge, which is integral to addressing challenges on climate and biodiversity, and continued **focus on and development of these networks is essential**.
- The **island of Ireland has some distinct challenges to address and factors to take account of as compared with circumstances in other European states and regions**. For example, the island is considered a single biogeographic unit, and the importance of the Agricultural sector for economy and society in both parts of the island is distinctive. At the same time on many challenges, like energy and the climate, the links between the UK and Ireland are critical meaning that cooperation with counterparts in Britain is also highly relevant and important in a range of areas.
- Recognising the fact of different systems and rules on the island, North and South, there is **clear scope for greater cooperation and collaboration on shared environmental issues**. Climate and Biodiversity breakdown are challenges faced across the world and a global response is required, but with effective mechanisms for cross-border coordination and cooperation on the island. Also, the **transboundary nature of the environment on the island would be most effectively addressed through a shared strategic approach**. This is of increased importance post-Brexit, and opportunities should be sought for greater joint engagement on environmental issues through existing North/South and East-West frameworks.

¹ Colleagues in the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications, the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, and the Department of Foreign Affairs acted as rapporteurs for the panel sessions of the Dialogue, and their work provided the basis for the preparation of this composite report.

Panel Discussion 1

Tackling the Climate emergency - a Shared Island perspective

Key Messages:

This panel was moderated by Kevin O’Sullivan (Irish Times) and had the following panellists:

- Dr Amanda Slevin, Chair Climate Coalition NI
- Professor Brian Ó Gallachóir, Director, MaREI, the SFI Research Centre for Energy, Climate and Marine
- Dr Eimear Cotter, Director, EPA Office of Environmental Sustainability

This panel is available online and can be watched back [here](#).

Key themes that emerged from the discussion included:

- The **timing is favourable** for greater all-island cooperation on climate change. The comparable political agenda and context North and South for addressing the climate crisis with both the Dáil and Assembly having declared a Climate emergency and recognised the biodiversity crisis; the obligations and commitments of both Administrations on the island under key UN frameworks including the Paris Agreement and the Sustainable Development Goals; and the planned strengthened climate legislation in both jurisdictions, were referenced by panellists as providing a solid basis for increased co-operation at both government and civil society levels on climate issues.
- The **similar challenges** being faced both North and South in tackling climate change was a strong focus of discussion.
- **Agriculture** was highlighted as a distinct factor for the island as compared to other regions in Europe. The sector is responsible for 27% of Green House Gas emissions in Northern Ireland and 35% of emissions in the Republic compared to 10% in most EU states. This reflects the greater importance of Agriculture for the economies North and South, and the wider importance of Agriculture for food security and for rural communities on the island also needed to be taken account of. Cross-border research collaboration between Teagasc, QUB, Ulster University and the Agri-Food Biosciences Institute (AFBI) was highlighted and is well established but implementation of measures to reduce the “absolute” emissions from agriculture has been lacking. The issue of **land use** was also raised with opportunities for the sector highlighted around the use of land to sequester carbon dioxide through the planting trees and crops and also rewetting peatlands to lock in carbon.
- The comparable level of **reliance on fossil fuels** on both sides of the border was also highlighted as a common challenge.
- **Existing cross-border collaboration** was highlighted during the discussion in the context of models that could be followed in shaping future all-island responses to climate change. The effectiveness of the **Single Electricity Market** in achieving collectively the highest level of wind energy penetration on a synchronist power system in the world was specifically referenced.
- The importance of **cross-border research initiatives** such as the [CREDESCENCE](#) (Collaborative Research of Decentralisation, Electrification, Communications and Economics) Programme - jointly funded by Science Foundation Ireland (SFI), the Department for the Economy (DfE) in Northern Ireland and the US National Science Foundation (NSF) - and the [All-Island Climate](#)

[and Biodiversity Research Network \(AICBRN\)](#), which brings together leading research centres across the whole island of Ireland to tackle the climate and biodiversity emergency, were highlighted as providing a valuable research basis, which can inform policy responses to the climate and biodiversity challenges at an all-island level.

- The opportunity for **cross-jurisdictional learnings** across the areas of **community engagement, planning and investment** was also raised. It was said that while there are different rules on both sides of the border, the issues relating to community engagement are shared. All panellists felt that measures should be introduced to engage communities better to help secure better outcomes. Suggestions on how this could be achieved included through co-design of projects, developing cooperative models and through an enhanced role for local authorities on a cross-border basis. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) pointed to its already good interactions with counterparts across the islands, including with regulators in NI through the 5 Agency Networks as an existing structure for sharing learnings cross-border. EPA also spoke of good engagement with NI counterparts to support public participation on the licensing regime around water abstractions which have cross border implications.
- The need for **investment** on both sides of the border was discussed across a range of areas. Greater investment in cross-border research will help support data and knowledge sharing resulting in a stronger evidence base to design policy responses. Investment in training for farmers will be of value as the sector evolves as part of transition. There also needs to be investment in communities including through education, to foster thinking in different ways on how to protect the climate and biodiversity and bring about change. It was noted that collaborative cross-border investment could be aligned to shared goals under the Paris Agreement or common government-level ambitions.
- **Communities** on both sides of the border play an indispensable role in implementing policies on climate and environment. Communities North and South are already developing their own collective responses to the climate emergency and holding governments to account. The importance of engagement to co-create solutions with industry, communities and citizens was seen as being integral to the climate response, and the cross-border dimension of communities and of climate issues should be taken account of in approaches to community engagement. It was also emphasised that policy makers must be conscious of the impact of policy responses on communities to ensure that those at risk are supported through investment in a just transition.
- There is a **fundamental link between biodiversity and climate** change and responses to both emergencies should be looked at together.
- Given the distinct and shared challenges for the island, there is **significant opportunity for solutions and mitigation measures to be adopted on a cross-border basis** through sharing knowledge, information, data and solutions that will bring advantage and benefit the Island.

Panel Discussion 2

Addressing the Biodiversity crisis on the island

Key Messages:

This panel was also moderated by Kevin O'Sullivan (Irish Times) and had the following panellists:

- Anne-Marie McDevitt, Head of Species, RSPB NI
- Professor Yvonne Buckley, Nature +, the Trinity Centre for Biodiversity and Sustainable Nature Based Solutions
- Shirley Clerkin, Heritage Officer with Monaghan County Council

This panel is available online and can be watched back [here](#).

Key themes that emerged from the discussion included:

- The significance of the island as a **single biogeographic unit**, and with shared marine environment was emphasised. Within this context, actions protecting biodiversity are more effective when delivered on a cross-border basis. The point was also made that tackling the biodiversity crisis is a long-term endeavour that goes beyond political cycles.
- **Nature-based solutions to address both biodiversity and climate crises should be adopted on all-island level**, recognising the common commitments of both Administrations to these issues both nationally and internationally. Solutions will work better when scaled up to include areas both North and South. Ecosystems often cut across boundaries so better results can be achieved if work for instance on protected areas for habitats and species is designed and implemented on an integrated basis. All-island frameworks for agri-environment schemes, biodiversity, flood schemes, carbon storage as well as marine environment schemes were suggested.
- The **potential for divergence** on environmental regulation post-Brexit was noted as a serious concern and requires a whole of island approach that takes advantage of existing North/South and East-West structures and channels under the Good Friday Agreement, and of EU-UK engagement where relevant under the Protocol and the Trade and Cooperation Agreement. An all-island approach needs to be structured at many levels and include central government and administrations, local government, NGOs, academia and communities to deliver for nature.
- An all-island approach should be based on **the shared values for biodiversity on the island**, focusing on what is in common between jurisdictions rather than what is not. Valuable cross-border cooperation already takes place on biodiversity, with a number of examples given, and it is important to make the most of the existing linkages between NGOs, academia and the Administrations, to help develop nature-based solutions and better implement these.
- The reliance of **tourism and agri-food industries on natural capital assets** was raised. Scaling up efforts for natural capital assets i.e. peatlands, woodlands, forests, grasslands, coastal environments etc. on a cross-border basis through alignment of protected areas to provide for better functioning of these assets was recommended.
- The **role of communities** in biodiversity action was discussed. The **all-island pollinator plan** was highlighted as excellent example of local and community engagement across the island giving significant benefits for nature. The **adopt a monument scheme** of the Heritage Council

of Ireland was also noted as a possible template for community engagement. Local actions on a small scale can connect together to provide something greater for nature and better community engagement can be driven by local authorities with an expanded biodiversity officer network or Parks and Wildlife services, with increased resources needed to do so.

- The issue of **land use and farming** was also discussed in this panel with the similar challenges North and South noted. The importance of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) for biodiversity funding was raised in terms of food security, biodiversity and implementation of nature-based solutions. A coherent approach is important in the next CAP and there needs to be continued engagement with farmers and other stakeholders on agri-environment strategy on both sides of the border. Farming for Nature was highlighted as a useful framework for farmers to exchange information and promote biodiversity. Opportunity exists for rural development in the context of the new green economy that is coming down the line.
- The importance of **funding** was raised in this panel. The success of cross-border programmes such as INTERREG was highlighted in delivering large-scale projects and programmes that have had direct benefits for biodiversity, but have also supported relationship building, sharing of best practice and showing what good cooperation looks like.
- **Data sharing and establishing a co-ordinated approach to the collection of data** is essential for monitoring and tracking biodiversity changes. The collection of data is currently fragmented and significant gaps exist. Comprehensive data is essential in establishing baselines and setting targets for biodiversity and there currently exists an opportunity to create voluntary networks to collect data.
- Biodiversity should be viewed as part of our **shared heritage and cultural capital** that is crucial for environmental functionality, ecosystem services and as a cultural anchor. Landscapes that straddle the border can be utilised to introduce shared goals and actions for biodiversity and nature. Suggestions were put forward to establish a “necklace of peace lands using the peatlands along the border” through common biodiversity objectives, restoration actions and community buy-in and to introduce an all-island hedgerow project and charter.
- Suggestions for **priority action** to address the biodiversity crisis at an all island level included **building on existing networks** and extending these cross-border; **increasing communications** efforts for biodiversity at community level – there are national and all-island tourism campaigns so why not biodiversity campaigns; **developing a national or all-island conversation** on biodiversity; and establishing a **Green Jobs scheme** as part of recovery from pandemic.

Panel Discussion 3

Future priorities for all-island cooperation on Environment

Key Messages:

This panel was also moderated by Kevin O'Sullivan (Irish Times) and had the following panellists:

- Oonagh Duggan, Head of Advocacy BirdWatch Ireland, representing the Environmental Pillar
- Dr. Viviane Gravey, Lecturer in European Politics, Queen's University Belfast
- Professor Tom Collins, Chairperson, An Fóram Uisce

This panel is available online and can be watched back [here](#).

Key themes that emerged from the discussion included:

- There is a **serious environmental situation being faced by both jurisdictions** on the island, including the impact of climate change, loss of richness of biodiversity and loss of farmland. There are also many **shared challenges**, including invasive species and illegal waste dumping along the border.
- The island of Ireland is considered a **single bio-geographic unit** with substantial scope for important cooperation on a cross-border basis on restored biodiversity and climate mitigation. Action plans to save species, ecosystem restoration, environmental assessment, data sharing and spatial planning were all mentioned as areas that would benefit from a shared approach.
- As in the earlier panels, existing **civil society cross-border cooperation** on environmental issues was highlighted with the record of the Environment Pillar and NI Environment Link cited. It was suggested that a mapping exercise of this informal cooperation should be undertaken to understand challenges to, and identify opportunities for, future cooperation. This would complement the existing mapping of formal cooperation.
- The importance of **building capacity and visibility for cross border cooperation**, including at community level was also discussed. Informal cooperation has the potential to be the "richest" in terms of value for communities. Funding and supports are crucial for capacity building at all levels and PEACE PLUS funding was highlighted as being key in this context.
- **Cross-jurisdictional cooperation** is of increased importance following the UK's departure from the EU. The environment does not recognise the regulatory boundaries, and new relationships and structures for engagement are required, recognising the island of Ireland as an environmental entity with shared challenges that has therefore benefitted from overarching EU frameworks. The challenges arising in respect of the Water Framework Directive was provided as an example.
- The **structures for North South cooperation in the Good Friday Agreement (GFA)** are going to be key in the environmental context. Cross-border sectoral cooperation along different lines, including economic concerns, would also be helpful to better environmental outcomes. The example was given of the benefits that could be gained if farming sectors on both sides of the border were to work together on improving environmental outcomes in agriculture and food production.

- It was said that **high environmental ambition is quite new on the island**, North and South, and that there is a collective legacy of very low ambition and results. The importance of providing necessary funding for North/South cooperation on the environment was highlighted in the discussion. In particular, the adoption of an integrated biodiversity action plan for the island was raised acknowledging that the ambition needs to be significantly ramped up on both sides of the border and the “stepping stones” put in place. This would include funding, data sharing, mapping and sharing of expertise and coordination of spatial planning.
- The importance of **continued East-West cooperation** was also raised. On many challenges, like energy and the climate, the links between the UK and Ireland are critical. The UK’s high environmental standards and ambition was recognised with common frameworks to be designed, including on agricultural and environmental policy, a new (delayed) Environmental Bill and a new office for Environmental Protection envisaged.
- **Brexit** was described as a “shared uncertainty”, but consideration should be given to potential advantages that might result from new EU-UK arrangements. It was suggested that the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland and Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) could potentially contribute to cooperation on environment in the years ahead, complementing the institutions and frameworks that are in place under the GFA.
- In the Brexit context, it was said that **maintaining the current cooperation** would not be enough to deal with the environmental emergency. Political will is crucial and the “top down” Government-led initiatives were said to be as, if not more, important than civil society initiatives.
- Panellists agreed also that both jurisdictions face the shared challenge of trying to **elicit pro-environmental behaviour on an individual basis** among their populations. A comprehensive and coordinated set of regulations, including incentives and sanctions will be key in driving behavioural changes.

As part of the Shared Island Initiative
gov.ie/sharedisland

