



Rialtas na hÉireann  
Government of Ireland

## Shared Island Dialogue Series

### Enabling Rural and Community development on a Shared Island



Dialogue Report

## Introduction

The Shared Island Dialogue series was [launched](#) by An Taoiseach Micheál Martin TD on 22 October 2020 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 Dialogues actively seek a broad range of perspective and experiences from civil society on the island and ensures the inclusion of voices that have been under-represented in the Peace Process, including women, young people and new communities on the island.

Previous Dialogues have focused on the themes of New Generations and New Voices on the Good Friday Agreement; climate and environment; civil society cooperation; equality issues; economic recovery on the island; health cooperation; the future of education, Tourism and Sport. Reports and recordings from past Dialogues are available online [here](#).

The key points from the first year of discussions have also been captured in a composite report: *"Looking to a shared future: Report on the Shared Island Dialogue series 2020-2021"*, which can be read [here](#).

The tenth Shared Island Dialogue took place on 20 May 2022 in Drumhowen Connected hub, Co. Monaghan on the theme of ["Enabling Rural and Community development on a Shared Island"](#). Over 70 people attended the Dialogue in person and a further 130 people joined online for the second hybrid dialogue of the Shared Island Dialogue series.

These participants representing civic society, social entrepreneurs and community groups from across the island came together to examine how social enterprise can be a driver for rural community development and how connected hubs can help regenerate communities.

The Minister for Rural and Community Development, Heather Humphreys TD, participated on behalf of the Government, delivering the [opening address](#).

Awaken Hub co-founder Mary McKenna provided a [guest address](#), which emphasised opportunities for social enterprises to collaborate with state agencies to look to the future of network hubs.

The Dialogue was moderated by Farmer and Broadcaster, Darragh McCullough and featured two panel discussions which addressed the topics [Social Enterprise for Thriving Rural Communities](#) and [Transformational Potential of Rural Hubs](#).

Discussion at the Dialogue focused on deepening linkages and cooperation in rural and community development on the island of Ireland.

The Dialogue was organised by the Shared Island unit in the Department of the Taoiseach working with the Department of Rural and Community Development and Department of Foreign Affairs.

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

## Report: Enabling Rural and Community development on a Shared Island

### A number of key themes emerged from the Dialogue:

- The **important and growing role of social enterprise, North and South** on the island was a strong theme in the days' discussion, with a focus on the **distinct social, economic and environmental advantages** that social enterprises can provide, **including contribution to rural development and to equality and inclusion**.
- The significance of the **burgeoning network of connected hubs** on the island was also a major area of focus in the Dialogue. Hubs were recognised as a **way of supporting thriving rural communities and the rural economy** - giving people a choice to work within their own communities, moving out of cities and back into towns and villages. A key focus will be on expanding this network of hubs, North and South.
- The relevance and **value of North/South cooperation and interaction on both social enterprise and on developing connected hubs** was strongly borne out; there are already good networks and keen interest from stakeholders in seeing these further developed given the opportunities for learning and exchange, for scaling, and for working in coordinated ways to address common social, economic and environmental concerns for the island as a whole, and in Ireland and across the UK.
- The **critical role of government** in supporting the development of connected hubs and facilitating a thriving social enterprise ecosystem was consistently referenced. There are **opportunities for the two Administrations on the island to learn from the other's experience and approaches, and to look at beneficial linking work** for instance to develop an all-island network of connected hubs.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted and transformed the **possibilities of remote-working** right across the island, and seen an **increased demand for digital connectivity**. This is a major opportunity to foster rural development and regeneration, and taking it up will require **sustained investment** in infrastructure and connectivity in towns and villages and a policy focus on enabling remote-working, North and South.
- **Advantages of remote-working**, which can be enabled by connected hubs were recognised, including; people can now live in rural areas, and contribute more to their own community; as well as greater inclusion and advantage of a broader employment base, in particular access to wider job opportunities for women and people with disability or reduced mobility.
- The importance of working in a sustained way to build a **more equal and vibrant entrepreneurial ecosystem** on the island of Ireland and to support talent from the ground up was also emphasised. Can state **agencies work more with social enterprises and start-up businesses**, which can be major contributors to and users of connected rural hubs. The importance of raising **awareness of the supports that are available for social enterprise makers** and supplying a network of group supports was also a theme.
- There was extensive **networking and interaction** at the Dialogue, which brought together stakeholders from across the island in person and online at Drumhowen Connected hub in County Monaghan.

## Ministerial Contribution

- In her opening [address](#), Minister for Rural and Community Development, Heather Humphreys, TD spoke of the importance of supporting and protecting Rural communities, North and South, referencing both the Government's [Our Rural Future](#) Strategy and the [Rural Policy Framework](#) in Northern Ireland and the importance of remote working now in our economy and communities.
- The Minister referenced the launch of the Connected hubs platform in 2021 which has already provided workers with access to a network of more than 230 remote working hubs and this is expected to increase to at least 400 in the medium term, which allows people the choice to work within their own communities with the capacity to attract people back to live in rural Ireland revitalising towns and villages, across the island.
- Social enterprises also have significant potential to contribute to local economies through job creation and trading, and they can have a huge impact on communities, socially and environmentally.
- People, community groups and social initiatives have deep and dynamic connections across the island, and community leaders want to do more together on a shared island basis. That is why the Government wants to enhance our cooperation with the Executive in Northern Ireland so that our policy supports for community development interact with and complement each other, reflecting the composition and interests of our communities, North and South.
- The revised National Development Plan, published October in 2021, set out a commitment of €3.5 billion for all - island investment out to 2030, including €1 billion from the Shared Island Fund. The Minister set out how the Government is taking this investment cooperation forward.
- Through the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund and the Shared Island Fund the Government has provided over €13 million to move ahead with Phase 2 of the [Ulster Canal restoration project](#), with construction work due to begin soon.
- Last year the Government also launched a major new North South Research Programme - with the announcement in March of more than €37m in awards by the Higher Education Authority and in April, the Government commenced a new €5m Shared Island Local Authority funding scheme for cross-border local authority partnerships to take forward new investment projects.
- The Government is also working to bring forward other new Shared Island investment projects this year, including Electric Vehicle charging infrastructure; Enterprise development on a cross-border basis; and a Shared Island dimension to the Community Climate Action Programme.
- The Minister also acknowledged the recent Assembly election in Northern Ireland and that the political parties must now look at how they can form a new power-sharing Executive. The Government wants to see this happen as soon as possible, and will seek to support that as a co-guarantor of the Good Friday Agreement.
- The Minister also affirmed that the Government will, as co-guarantor of the Good Friday Agreement, work to support a positive and conducive political context for both North/ South and East/West cooperation as integral parts of the Agreement. The Government is working now to develop and deliver a Shared Island agenda and wants to hear directly from people across all

communities on that. This Dialogue is an opportunity to focus on fostering rural and community development on a shared island basis.

## Guest Address

The Dialogue featured a guest contribution from Mary McKenna MBE, Serial Tech Entrepreneur, Angel Investor and Awaken Hub co-founder who outlined opportunities for social enterprises.

Some of the key points of her address included:

- Mary spoke of the contribution social enterprises makes to our economy; North and South and how rural hubs could be a valuable channel to improve access too opportunities, job creation and prosperity. Her work now involves helping women to achieve success as entrepreneurs, drawing on her own success and experience in business.
- Mary pointed out that ‘talent is equally distributed but opportunity is not’. And on the island of Ireland, urban pockets in Dublin and Galway and Belfast are thriving, however rural areas like Donegal are not and have declining populations.
- Referencing the economic changes as a result of the Covid pandemic, Mary said; ‘we have learned that today, anyone can start a global company in a rural setting, many of the old measures of success that existed in a pre-pandemic world, no longer matter’. However, in order to build a successful business, you need connectivity and a strong network of relationships and connections. It is no longer a necessity to build your business in an urban setting to allow it to grow globally.
- Mary spoke about it being harder for women to access the supports they need to build scaling companies. Awaken Hub was set up to help address these challenges on an all-island basis in 2020. Women who have sought support from [Awaken hub](#) are often not aware of the resources available to them from [Invest NI](#) or [Enterprise Ireland](#), which indicates that opportunities are being missed.
- Since the pandemic, many women have reviewed their lives during the pandemic and deciding that they want something different than before. Many have reached out to AwakenHub to understand how to access supports and improve connectivity across the Island of Ireland and AwakenHub’s aim is to remove the barriers to investments, scale and success.
- AwakenHub has now launched a sister initiative called, [Awaken Angels Fund](#) which will establish a community of predominantly women investors supporting women led start-ups across Ireland.
- Mary asked how much more could be achieved in this with greater support from governments. Looking forward in a positive way her messages were:
  - Building a more equal and entrepreneurial eco-system on the island, takes decades so it needs to progress now;
  - Look to build talent across the island, everywhere and everyone, and not using resources to make a small number of people ‘super-rich’;
  - Understand that post-pandemic opportunity is so much more than digitisation. Find a way for state agencies to work more cohesively with social enterprises and to make the network of rural hubs ‘really start to hum with opportunity’;
  - Let diaspora invest and share in the success of new enterprises on this island;
  - Think more creatively about unlocking the economic power of women across the island.



## Panel Discussion 1

### Social Enterprise for Thriving Rural Communities.

#### Key Messages:

This panel was moderated by Darragh McCullough and had the following panellists:

- Jenny Irvine, ARC Healthy Living, Irvinestown
- Carla McSorley, Head of Partnerships, FoodCloud
- Ciaran Reid, Chief Executive, Louth Leader Partnership
- Janet Schofield, CEO, Compass Advocacy Network

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

- This panel featured discussion on how **social enterprise can be a driver for rural community development** and how experience and ideas can be shared to help rural communities thrive, North and South. The panel also explored **the benefits to be gained and challenges posed** by operating on a cross-border basis. Finally, the panel looked at **opportunities for improved North/South collaboration**, and how social enterprise can be supported in their endeavours on both sides of the border.
- Panellists spoke of how social enterprise often **takes ideas** from elsewhere and **tailors them to suit local or specific circumstances**. Janet Schofield described learned innovation as applying 'other people's ideas and putting a unique spin on them', and that the inspiration for a lot of what her social enterprise does comes from other organisations. She said that because she operates in a rural area, facing challenges such as transport, infrastructure and connectivity, she is happy and willing to share her experiences, and any lessons learned, to others in a similar position.
- Carla McSorley spoke of how **working across multiple jurisdictions allows Food Cloud to do more**. Working on a cross-border basis was described as a 'no-brainer', as the issues faced around food waste and climate action don't stop at any border. She suggested that we can mutually support each other to meet climate targets for the whole island. Issues caused by cost-of-living increases or Brexit are often quite common issues both North and South - in their area, FoodCloud offers one solution that **supports communities on all-island basis** and beyond. She noted that FoodCloud have been fortunate that a lot of the regulations around food safety are similar on both sides of the border, which meant a potential challenge was actually a benefit.
- Ciaran Reid described the work that the Louth Leader Partnership network of **49 Local Development Companies** does, providing a platform for community groups to be supported. Many of the funding schemes offered by Government are available at the LDCs, or the LDCs can make community groups aware of them. Ciaran acknowledged the work of the Department of Rural and Community Development in recent years to support social enterprise. The importance of the **National Social Enterprise Policy** was noted, and it provides a clear definition of what a social enterprise is. It was also noted that the policy includes commitments such as a National Social Enterprise Conference each year, and a baseline data-gathering exercise of social enterprise in Ireland, which is to take place later in 2022. Ciaran added that the data-gathering

exercise is particularly important as it will be the first attempt to see just how many social enterprises there are, where they are, and what they do and contribute in communities.

- The panel also discussed initiatives or aspects of their social enterprise that could work on the other side of the border. Ciaran Reid referenced, in Cavan and Monaghan, the development of a policy bank to support social enterprises, providing template documents (health and safety policies, GDPR policies etc.) to help establish social enterprises as businesses. Carla discussed FoodCloud's work, and its collaboration with Fair Share in Britain, who deploy the FoodCloud technology.
- **Fuel poverty** was acknowledged as an issue that is causing distress in communities across the island. Jenny Irvine described hearing stories of the choice between 'heating and eating', saying there is a huge opportunity to actually provide relevant local, rural solutions. Elaborating on this she said those in rural communities are **dependent on fuel sources they have little control over**, and when people have little money it's very hard to have 'green credentials'. Aside from wind and solar sustainable energy, she noted the opportunity to use surplus grass and slurry to produce bio-gas, a fuel source that doesn't make sense economically at a large scale, but at a small scale is perfect for small rural communities.
- Difficulties faced by communities and social enterprises in securing funding for projects were discussed. Ciaran Reid also referred to the €15m in funding that is being provided by D/RCD to enhance community centres and halls across Ireland. The Arigna Mines Visitor Centre in Roscommon was referred to as a notable social enterprise model in terms of rural and community development. The mine closed in the 1990s and **the community came together** to reimagine what could be done with the facility. Funding was secured to develop a tourist centre and to encourage coach trips a café was opened. It was said that 'with funding coming from Government what they have now is a very vibrant social enterprise that employs individuals as tour guides and also individuals in terms of the hospitality, so it's a really vibrant example of a social enterprise in a rural, isolated community'.
- A question was raised from the floor on raising awareness of the **economic contribution that social enterprise makes**, along with their **social and environmental contributions**. Janet Schofield stressed the importance of continually reminding Government and Local Authorities of the social and environmental impact social enterprises make, but also that they are **businesses first and foremost**, businesses with a social purpose. Given the right support, she said, social enterprises could contribute even more. She noted Social Enterprise Northern Ireland (SENI) as a body that raises awareness of social enterprises and the work they do.
- Overall, the panel engaged on **opportunities to collaborate**. The importance of **learning from experience**, and of **sharing those learnings** was a recurrent theme in the session. There was a clear view in the panel discussion that similarities of circumstances for social enterprises far outweigh differences, North and South and there is shared scope for social enterprise solutions on issues such as food waste, climate change and fuel poverty **delivered on a more collaborative all-island basis**. It was noted that there are social enterprise networks in Northern Ireland and in Ireland, both with good connections and supports available for social enterprise across the island.



## Panel Discussion 2:

### Transformational Potential of Rural Hubs.

#### Key Messages:

The Panel was moderated by Darragh McCullough had the following panellists:

- Kathy McKenna, Communications Manager, Grow Remote
- Nigel McKinney, Project Consultant, Rural Community Network NI
- Tomás Ó Síocháin, CEO, Western Development Commission
- David Reid, Director of Rural Affairs, Northern Ireland Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA)

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

- This panel featured a discussion on rural hubs and on how they are helping to **regenerate communities** and **reduce commutes** with a positive impact on **reducing carbon emissions** and providing a better work-life balance. While there are challenges, the panel highlighted the shift in remote working patterns since the Covid pandemic and how this can beneficially harnessed.
- Currently there are more than 250 hubs in the South on the connected hub network, and the goal is 400 ultimately. There are, on average, 10 hubs per county and these are well distributed throughout the country. Tomás Ó Síocháin noted that remote working hubs have highlighted what can be done, and ultimately in rural and regional areas what's really needed is equality of opportunities for all. Currently, not all hubs are cost-neutral and a core focus is to identify the ways that they can be.
- Nigel McKinney described that Northern Ireland is at a different stage of development with connected hubs. In Northern Ireland there is a different commuting pattern, with approximately 29% of jobs in Belfast, but up to 50% of those people commuting to the city, so remote working hubs are an appealing offer for this significant cohort of workers.
- The **Western Development Commission** was referenced as **pioneering** in the **area of remote working hubs**, developing a typology of different types of hubs, providing capital and other support for hubs, and encouraging networking between hub managers and supporting their learning. Nigel McKinney felt that this is something that could be learned from and built upon in Northern Ireland. He noted that **Community Network NI** have been developing links, including by visiting hubs in the South, and it was striking and encouraging to see the degree of community support and participation that these hubs are generating.
- David Reid described DAERA's **Village Catalyst Scheme**, a pilot scheme that engages with four different communities. They are working with historic assets in the communities to see how they can deliver services better or provide additional services via hubs that were not there previously. What they have learned through that process is that it is important to build capacity in local communities in terms of making the most of those opportunities going forward. Hubs have the capacity to be so much more than just remote working centres offering an opportunity to address service gaps.
- Kathy McKenna of Grow Remote described how life-changing her experience of remote working has been, seeing it not as just the future of working but the future of living. Remote working has

allowed her to relocate from Dublin to Donegal and ‘the difference is that my life has transformed, as I’m living now where I want to be living’.

- Kathy McKenna explained that Grow Remote is a **community development organisation**, a non-profit social enterprise, which works to make remote employment accessible to everyone. They work with a network of employers and learn from well-established and successful remote employers, to help other employers explore and adopt it as a way of scaling or running their company.
- In a contribution from the floor, Liam O'Hagan of **Grow the Glens** in Antrim, outlined their plans to convert a former RUC station to a remote working hub. A person commuting from Cushendall in North Antrim to Belfast spends on average one working week a year in their car, 50 people commuting produce 500 tons of carbon a year. Grow the Glens is working to provide a solution.
- The cost per desk at a hub in Northern Ireland is around £20-25k however, a holistic view needs to be taken on this investment, not exclusively focused on cost. The benefit to a rural community of having 50 people working in a hub means local shops, cafes also benefit, there is a reduction in carbon emissions, and improved quality of life for people who don't have to commute as much - a wider social and economic assessment of the installation cost of hubs is needed.
- It was noted that the [IGEES](#), the Irish Government's Economic Assessment service found that, on balance, remote working is contributing to the Exchequer. The panel discussed this and didn't agree with a narrative that remote working is leading to a decline of some urban centres. Rural areas are undoubtedly seeing a revival, but this is relieving pressure on services, housing and traffic in urban centres.
- Eddie McGoldrick, of Grow the Glens in Antrim, suggested a network of connected hubs on a co-op model, which would allow individual hubs to join a network to make them more attractive to large organisations with employees around the country. Tomás Ó Síocháin added that there are 400 hubs in the country with just 230 on the connected hubs platform, comprising a mix of public, private and community run hubs.
- Frank Grainy, IFA, outlined that thanks to the connected hub in Gweedore, 50-60 working people have relocated to the town, including Ukrainian refugee families. The hub has had a huge impact on a small rural community that is now being reinvigorated, reversing the trend over the last 15-20 years, which had seen a significant decline in population.
- Tomás Ó Síocháin, noted Western Development Commission research conducted in conjunction with NUI Galway, which found that 7-9% of people have already moved from urban to rural areas over the last two years, and up to a further 25% are considering such a move. He also emphasised that three or four jobs in a rural area in relative terms have a far greater impact than the reduction of three or four jobs in an urban area, and this creates less pressure on property supply, and a reduction in congestion etc.
- It was also noted that hubs are inclusive and can provide opportunities for work that previously might not have been open, in particular for people with disabilities. The example of [Ovens](#), Co. Cork was cited, as having a remit to include work spaces for people with disabilities.

As part of the Shared Island Initiative  
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