

Visit Report

Cross-Committee visit to Ireland

Between 18-20 September 2024, a delegation of members led by the Deputy Presiding Officer undertook an international visit to Dublin, Ireland. The visit focused on areas of co-operation in the Ireland-Wales Shared Statement and Joint Action Plan 2021-25¹, namely culture, language and heritage, climate and sustainability, and trade, and also covered Parliamentary Procedure and good practice. The delegation consisted of members of the Culture, Communications, Welsh Language, Sport, and International Relations (CCWLSIR) Committee, the Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs (ETRA) Committee, and the Climate Change, Environment and Infrastructure (CCEI) Committee.

Visit Delegation:

- David Rees MS, Deputy Presiding Officer
- Llyr Gruffydd MS, Chair, CCEI Committee
- Carolyn Thomas MS, CCEI Committee
- Delyth Jewell MS, Chair, CCWLSIR Committee
- Alun Davies MS, CCWLSIR Committee
- Luke Fletcher MS, ETRA Committee
- Samuel Kurtz MS, ETRA Committee

The delegation met with counterpart Committees at the Oireachtas, the Welsh Government's Dublin office team and with stakeholders. The Deputy Presiding Officer also met with the Ceann Comhairle and the Deputy Speaker of the Northern Ireland Assembly. These meetings focused on good practice and scrutiny in the areas of co-operation listed above and in parliamentary procedure, with a number of tangible outcomes that will feed into Committee and Procedural workstreams.

¹ <https://www.gov.wales/ireland-wales-shared-statement-and-joint-action-plan-2021-to-2025>

Contents

1.	DPO’s Foreword.....	3
2.	Parliamentary engagement	5
	Oireachtas	5
	Northern Ireland Assembly	7
3.	Key partners.....	9
	Department of Foreign Affairs, Irish Government.....	9
	Welsh Government’s Dublin office.....	9
	Arts Council Ireland.....	10
4.	Annex 1 – Suggested follow up actions	12
	General.....	12
	CCWLSIR	12
	ETRA.....	12
	CCEI	13
5.	Annex 2 – Visit Stakeholders.....	14

1. Deputy Presiding Officer's Foreword

It was a privilege to lead a delegation from the Senedd to Ireland at the start of this autumn term. The visit was borne from a meeting with the Ceann Comhairle during his visit to the Senedd in March, where he encouraged further collaboration between the Senedd and the Oireachtas, and I'm grateful to him for being a champion of Wales-Ireland relations and for his generosity of time during our time in Dublin. The visit's focus was rooted in the Ireland-Wales Shared Statement and parliamentary business, and I was pleased that we were able to discuss the important role committees play in both parliaments in scrutinising and influencing Environmental matters, as well as taking the opportunity to hear about encouraging investment in Ireland for the arts, sports, and tourism. I was pleased to have the opportunity to discuss our parliamentary procedures with Oireachtas officials, as well as the forthcoming reform in both our legislatures. This work is particularly pertinent as we look to prepare for the 7th Senedd, and I'm hopeful that we can continue to learn from each other as legislatures and Members in this regard.

The delegation remained in Dublin to undertake important and worthwhile engagement with key stakeholders, and I know their discussions on international engagement, the arts, and the work being undertaken in areas of renewable energy were particularly fruitful. Meanwhile, I took the opportunity to visit Stormont, the Senedd's first official visit there since business at the Northern Ireland Assembly resumed, and received a warm welcome from my colleague Deputy Speaker Steve Aiken MLA. We were able to compare notes on our experiences as Deputies, and discuss parliamentary business and engagement between the Senedd and Stormont. This meeting in particular proved to me that our involvement as members in networks such as BIPA, can blossom into rewarding working relationships with valuable outcomes. I hope that this visit to Belfast will be the first of many, and will encourage Members and Committees to engage with our colleagues in Stormont as the Senedd term continues.

I'm thankful to members of the delegation for their commitment and enthusiasm for Wales-Ireland relations, and for showcasing the Senedd and our parliamentary business at its best. This model of visit, a cross-Committee delegation with a thematic focus, was the first of its kind delivered as part of the Senedd's International Framework. Its intention is to put Senedd Business at the heart of international engagement, and I'm hopeful that Members will continue to work in this spirit and incorporate the findings and lessons from our time in Ireland into the work of their Committees.

Our relationship with our friends and colleagues across the Irish Sea is as important as ever, and I hope members will join me in maintaining these strong ties.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "David F. Rees." The signature is written in a cursive style with a small dot above the 'i' in David.

David Rees MS
Deputy Presiding Officer

2. Parliamentary engagement

Oireachtas

- 1.** The Deputy Presiding Officer met with officials from the Houses of the Oireachtas service to discuss parliamentary procedures and the organisation of parliamentary business, with a view to feeding good practice into preparations for the 7th Senedd.
- 2.** There was also some focus on preparations for parliamentary expansion, with the number of TDs increasing from 160 to 174 at the next election. This follows recommendations from the Electoral Commission, which reported in light of the 2022 census and in line with article 16.2.2 of Bunreacht na hÉireann (the written constitution).
- 3.** Members observed that Ministers' responses to Parliamentary Questions were timed, with 3 minutes allotted to their response, and with the Chamber clock counting down their remaining time. The DPO also heard about the organisation of business². This included arrangements in the Dail for Technical Groups³ and their proportional entitlement to speaking time and questions, as well as how additional members may lead to more technical groups in the next Dail.
- 4.** Officials spoke about the "Family Friendly Forum" commissioned by the Ceann Comhairle that reported in 2021⁴, and its recommendations on voting at predictable times and family friendly sitting hours. They also described the Gender Quotas system⁵ and, whilst there is no recall system in place, officials explained how vacancies are filled through by-elections.
- 5.** The DPO heard about arrangements for Committees in the Oireachtas, including Special Committees which can be established to look at a single issue, usually with policy or legislative outcomes. He also heard about the Dail Reform Committee, the designated Committee that is chaired by the Ceann Comhairle,

² The Dail currently meets for its Plenary Business on Tuesday afternoons, Wednesdays and Thursdays, with business adjourning between 8-11pm.

³ Technical Groups can be formed of independent members or smaller parties and will have a proportional entitlement to Leaders' Questions, Priority Questions, private members' time and speaking time arrangements. A minimum of 5 members is required to form a group.

⁴ https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/parliamentaryBusiness/other/2021-11-02_report-of-the-forum-on-a-family-friendly-and-inclusive-parliament_en.pdf

⁵ For the next election, the quota is 40% women candidates

considers matters of procedure, and makes recommendations on the establishment of new and Special Committees.

6. Following his official recognition of the delegation at that afternoon's Plenary, the Ceann Comhairle met with the Deputy Presiding Officer for a bilateral meeting. At this meeting, the Ceann Comhairle reiterated his support for continued collaboration between the two parliaments, and specifically between Committees. The DPO echoed these sentiments, and pointed to the warm welcome received on this visit and the productive meetings with Committees as an example of that cooperation.

Committee on Environment and Climate Action

7. Committee members met with TDs Alan Farrell and Darren O'Rourke.

8. Members discussed Ireland's Climate Action Plan, the approach of both countries' energy transition to renewables, energy exports, the role of fossil fuels, airport expansion plans and key developments in sustainable aviation fuel, and agriculture and agri-foods exports.

9. For renewables, Members discussed commonalities associated with being located in north western Europe, including reliance on the North Atlantic winds, and shared infrastructure, such as energy interconnectors. They spoke of various plans for expansion of solar and onshore and offshore wind development including in the seas between Wales and Ireland, and the importance of balancing this with environmental considerations, including biodiversity.

10. Members exchanged views on best practice and effective scrutiny arrangements, including timetabling challenges, approach to annual scrutiny and committee influence in shaping policy. TDs explained arrangements at the Oireachtas whereby all committees scrutinise the Climate Action Plan and all government departments appear before Committee for scrutiny. They felt that this provides the Oireachtas with both strong oversight and opportunities to shape future plans.

11. They also spoke of differences and similarities in the approach taken in Wales and Ireland to planning (including for port capacity), legislation, and the impact of Ministerial changes.

Committee on Tourism, Culture, Arts, Sport and Media

12. Committee members met with Senators Fintan Warfield and Malcolm Byrne.

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- 13.** Member agreed that there's cross-party support on the importance of arts and culture to the identities of both nations.
- 14.** They discussed challenges faced by touring artists post-Brexit, culture sector budgets, pathways for artists and different approaches to using culture as a soft power.
- 15.** On sector budgets, Members described investment for sports and leisure, community arts and sports and tourism. This included detailed discussions on Ireland's universal basic income pilot for artists, increased sports funding since its success at the Olympics, funding comparisons between neighbouring counties and EU funding.
- 16.** Senedd Members spoke of the findings of the CCWLSIR Committee's inquiry on Culture and the new relationship with the EU and shared evidence of the impact on cross-border movements for Welsh and Irish artists. Members discussed the loss of access to EU funding programmes for the sector in Wales and domestic budget cuts.

Northern Ireland Assembly

- 17.** On Friday 20 September, the Deputy Presiding Officer travelled to Belfast to meet with Deputy Speaker Steve Aiken MLA. This was the first official visit from the Senedd to Stormont since the Assembly resumed, and the first bilateral between the DPO and the Deputy Speaker since Dr Steve Aiken's election to the role in 2024.
- 18.** As the Senedd looks towards its preparations for the 7th Senedd, the meeting was also an opportunity to learn about the arrangements in the Speakers Office around Deputy Speakers and their roles. The Deputies spoke about the distribution of duties, including voting and that in Stormont the Deputy Speakers continue to sit on Committees while in post. They also discussed the support available to Deputy Speakers through Private Offices.
- 19.** The DPO and Deputy Speaker also discussed current parliamentary business in the two legislatures including reform, EU engagement, and work on agricultural pollution. On the latter, the Deputy Presiding Officer suggested, following the meeting, there may be scope in the future to explore cross-Committee work between the Senedd and the Assembly on this particular topic. The DPO also spoke about members' experiences on the UK-EU Parliamentary Partnership Assembly.

20. Both the Deputy Speaker and the Deputy Presiding Officer reiterated their support for further engagement between the Assembly and the Senedd, particularly through Committees, Parliamentary networks such as BIPA, and beyond those networks.

3. Key partners

Department of Foreign Affairs, Irish Government

- 21.** Members met with officials from the Irish Government's Department of Foreign Affairs. Discussions focused on Wales-Ireland relations, diaspora and post-Brexit UK-EU arrangements.
- 22.** Officials updated Members on the Ireland-Wales Shared Statement and Joint Action Plan 2021-25 and cooperation beyond 2025, including areas of the shared statement that are working well and areas where more focus is needed, and the value of the Wales-Ireland Forum.
- 23.** On diaspora, officials described work carried out to ascertain the scale of Ireland's diaspora, such as key sources of information used for diaspora mapping and funding for engagement. Important networks, such as the US congressional Friends of Ireland Group and Global Irish Network, were also highlighted.
- 24.** A discussion followed on soft power metrics and the use key performance indicators in international relations.
- 25.** On Brexit, attendees agreed on the importance of the implementation of the Withdrawal Agreement, including the Northern Ireland Protocol and Windsor Framework. They discussed matters relating to market access in Northern Ireland and how Wales is represented at Trade and Cooperation Agreement governance structures, including at the Parliamentary Partnership Assembly.

Welsh Government's Dublin office

- 26.** Members travelled to the British Embassy to meet with members of the Welsh Government's Dublin office team, who are co-located there.
- 27.** Members received an update from the team on its activities to promote and nurture Wales-Ireland relations, and negotiations on Wales-Ireland cooperation beyond 2025 when the current Shared Statement expires.
- 28.** Members were joined by representatives from Greenlink Interconnector and MaresConnect Interconnector projects delivering the subsea and underground electricity interconnectors linking the power markets in Ireland and Great Britain, between Wexford and Pembrokeshire, and Bodelwyddan and Ireland, respectively.

29. The representatives delivered detailed presentations showing key factors in the infrastructure's developments, including the planning processes, environmental and operational considerations and energy generation capacity.

30. Members were joined by a representative of the British Irish Chamber of Commerce ("the Chamber") who described the chambers' priorities include agri-food, culture, art, sport, tourism, energy, higher education and infrastructure. They described close working with the Welsh Government and set out the chambers' support for the Wales-Ireland Shared Statement.

31. The Chamber explained the importance of Wales to Irish exporters, and a discussion followed on the implementation of the UK's Border Target Operating Model (BTOM), Wales's Border Control Posts (BCPs) and trade flows post-Brexit. Attendees agreed on the importance of improved and positive UK-EU relations, including securing a future veterinary agreement.

Arts Council Ireland

32. Members visited the offices of Arts Council Ireland, who spoke of Ireland's approach to culture and the arts, and its work with UK and Welsh partners. In this regard, they described a "five-nations mentality".

33. Discussions followed on Wales's and Ireland's local government systems in supporting the arts and culture, including the role of local authorities and their relationship to central government.

34. Brexit was described as a "huge disappointment" and a "disaster" for everyone, as Ireland saw the UK as a key Member State for the arts before its withdrawal. Staff described the impact on the Irish sector, including that it had "severely impacted" its ability to work with Wales. A discussion followed on the CCWLSIR Committee inquiry on Culture and the new relationship with the EU.

35. Arts Council Ireland spoke in detail about the Wales-Ireland Shared Statement and agreed with the suggestion from Members, that its arts and culture chapters are the most successful.

36. Discussions turned to funding for the arts and culture, where staff set out the funding landscape in Ireland in addition to EU funding received. Members shared evidence and experience of the impact and outcomes of budget cuts in Wales.

37. Members enquired about the importance of language to culture, and a discussion followed on the importance, and shared experiences of, the Welsh

and Irish languages. There was strong agreement of the value of joint Welsh-Irish language projects and Members spoke of evidence received during CCWLSIR Committee's Wales-Ireland relations inquiry.

38. On strengthening Wales-Ireland relations, all spoke of the importance of collaboration between institutions and their role in bringing communities together, and of networks and joint working more generally. Arts Council Ireland are keen to maintain a dialogue with the CCWLSIR Committee and advised it would welcome annual in-person meetings with Members.

4. Annex 1 – Suggested follow up actions

During the visit, delegation members suggested the below follow up actions for consideration to take forward in future. Members are invited to consider which actions to take forward:

General

1. To scope the establishment of a Senedd Friends of Ireland Group.
2. To explore the possibility of annual visits in future, as originally suggested by the Ceann Comhairle (Speaker) when visiting the Senedd.

CCWLSIR

3. To continue monitoring the Wales-Ireland Shared Statement and Joint Action Plan's renewal.
4. To consider follow up scrutiny to the Wales-Ireland relations inquiry, to include revisiting the Committee's recommendations and the Welsh Government's response.
5. To formalise links with the Chair of the Oireachtas' Committee on Tourism, Culture, Arts, Sport and Media, including to explore the development of a memorandum of understanding, or similar.
6. To diarise termly meetings between the committee Chairs.

ETRA

7. For officials to carry out in-depths research on Wales-Ireland trade.
8. To publish a report on the UK's Border Target Operating Model (BTOM) which details post-Brexit trade arrangements between Wales and the island of Ireland.
9. To include Wales-Ireland trade as a focus area in general scrutiny sessions with the Welsh Government.
10. To explore follow up meetings with The British Irish Chamber of Commerce and other key stakeholders, such as Ireland's Food Safety Authority and the Irish Maritime Development Office (IMDO).

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11. To consider incorporating evidence from key partners in Ireland to inquiry work, as per CCWLSIR's approach.

CCEI

12. To request more information on the Oireachtas's approach to cross-parliamentary scrutiny of the Climate Action Plan.
13. To explore this as a model to strengthen oversight of, and increase opportunities to shape, relevant Welsh Government plans.
14. To circulate the presentations from Greenlink and MaresConnect interconnector projects with Committee members on receipt, for information.

5. Annex 2 – Visit Stakeholders

Houses of the Oireachtas

- An Ceann Comhairle (Speaker) Deputy Seán Ó Fearghaíl T.D
- Deputy Darren O'Rourke T.D. (Sinn Féin) – Environment and Climate Action Committee
- Deputy Alan Farrell T.D. (Fine Gael) – Environment and Climate Action Committee
- Senator Malcolm Byrne (Fine Gael) – Leas-Chathaoirleach (Vice Chair) of the Tourism, Culture, Arts, Sport and Media Committee
- Senator Fintan Warfield (Sinn Féin) - Tourism, Culture, Arts, Sport and Media Committee
- Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh T.D. (Green Party) – Leas-Chathaoirleach (Vice Chair) of the Committee on Social Protection, Rural and Community Development and the Islands
- Senator Alice-Mary Higgins (Independent)
- Officials from the Oireachtas House Services and Committees Secretariat

Northern Ireland Assembly

- Dr Steve Aiken MLA, Deputy Speaker

Committee Stakeholders

- Department of Foreign Affairs, Irish Government
- Welsh Government Dublin Office
- MaresConnect Interconnector & Greenlink Interconnector project teams
- British Irish Chamber of Commerce
- Arts Council Ireland