



**NORTH SOUTH MINISTERIAL COUNCIL
TWENTY-SEVENTH PLENARY MEETING
NSMC JOINT SECRETARIAT OFFICES, ARMAGH
8 APRIL 2024
JOINT COMMUNIQUÉ**

1. The twenty-seventh Plenary meeting of the North South Ministerial Council (NSMC) was held at the NSMC Joint Secretariat Offices, Armagh, on 8 April 2024.
2. The Northern Ireland Executive was led by the First Minister, Michelle O'Neill MLA, and the deputy First Minister, Emma Little-Pengelly MLA, who jointly chaired the meeting. The Government of Ireland was led by the Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar TD. A full list of the members of both delegations is attached as an Annex.
3. Ministers discussed environmental challenges including those facing our water courses such as Lough Neagh and agreed both jurisdictions would share learning, expertise and research.
4. The Council offered their sincere condolences to the family, friends and former colleagues of Dr Peter Smyth, a former Joint Secretary to the NSMC from June 2002 to October 2005, who sadly passed away on 11 February 2024.

BUSINESS AND TRADE MATTERS

5. Ministers discussed the fiscal outlook for each jurisdiction. Promoting economic growth, skills and job creation are key priorities for both Administrations and Ministers discussed relevant areas relating to trade and business.

JOINT SECRETARIES' PROGRESS REPORT

6. The NSMC received updates on the NSMC meetings which had taken place since the previous Plenary meeting and noted the work taken forward in each of the NSMC sectors, including the North South Bodies.
7. The NSMC agreed that, building on the learning from the response to the pandemic, officials in both jurisdictions should continue to consider civil contingency planning and resilience arrangements across both jurisdictions and that an update should be provided to a future meeting.
8. Ministers noted the significant challenges faced in both Administrations in addressing climate change and loss of biodiversity and agreed that all NSMC sectoral meetings consider these issues, so that a report of these discussions can be brought to the next plenary meeting.
9. The NSMC noted that this year marks the 25th Anniversary of the establishment of the North South Ministerial Council and the North South Bodies and that this will be commemorated during the year.

NEW DECADE, NEW APPROACH COMMITMENTS

10. The NSMC welcomed the positive developments in delivery of the commitments under *New Decade, New Approach* and noted that the Government of Ireland and the Northern Ireland Executive will continue to work together, including through the North South Ministerial Council, to deliver key infrastructure projects which will deliver social, environmental and economic benefits improving the lives of people across the island.
11. Ministers welcomed the announcement in February by the Government of Ireland of funding of €800 million for Shared Island investment priorities including €600 million for the A5 Western Transport Corridor, as well as funding for the Narrow Water Bridge, an hourly-frequency rail service between Belfast and Dublin, and completion of the cross-border Carlingford Greenway.
12. Ministers received an update on the A5 Western Transport Corridor including that a Public Inquiry into the scheme was reconvened in May-June 2023; that in October 2023 the Department for Infrastructure received the Final Report from the Planning Appeals Commission; and that Ministers and officials are carefully considering its findings and recommendations.
13. The NSMC noted that both Administrations continue to work together to progress the Ulster Canal restoration project; that substantial completion of the main infrastructure works of Phase 2 (Clonfad to Clones) is expected in Q2 of 2024; and that the estimated completion of all Phase 3 elements (Castle Saunderson to Clonfad), subject to funding, is 2028-2029;
14. The Council was advised that the main infrastructure work on the subsection between Clones and Clonfad) of the Ulster Canal Greenway is expected to be substantially completed in Q2 2024, in parallel with the completion of the Ulster Canal blueway;

and that the subsection between Clonfad and Gortnacarrow is anticipated to be delivered in 2028-2029.

15. A Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA), including a public consultation, has been carried out on the draft report of the All-Island Strategic Rail Review in 2023, and that the final report will be published with recommendations from the SEA appropriately incorporated, pending approval in both jurisdictions.
16. The NSMC noted that the Department of Transport and the Department for Infrastructure continue preparation for projects to be funded under the PEACEPLUS programme, which include improvement of the Dublin-Belfast rail link through the replacement and expansion of the Enterprise rail fleet to provide for sustainable rail stock and reducing journey times.
17. The NSMC noted that a tender process for the main construction works contract for the Narrow Water Bridge was conducted in 2023; and that Louth County Council expects to award the contract to the successful bidder in the first half of 2024.
18. Ministers noted that the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and the Department for the Economy continue to work closely with Atlantic Technological University and Ulster University on the potential for future collaboration, skills provision, and research and innovation; and that there is a particular focus on the key drivers of human capital and innovation in driving strong economic development in the North West region.
19. The Council received an update on Higher Education provision in the North West region and noted that in June 2023, subject to due diligence, the Government of Ireland committed up to €44.5 million from the Shared Island Fund to construction of a new teaching and student services building at Ulster University's campus in Derry-Londonderry; and that this implements the Government's commitment under the *New Decade, New Approach* agreement for capital investment in the campus to expand higher education provision in the North West region.
20. The NSMC noted that in November 2023, the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Skills, the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, and the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs announced €70 million in joint funding to create two new research centres on (i) Climate, and (ii) Sustainable and Resilient Food Systems.
21. The NSMC was advised that the North-South Research Programme, established in 2021, has granted €37.28 million to projects to date.
22. Ministers noted the ongoing engagement of both Administrations with the North West Strategic Growth Partnership, that a plenary meeting of the Partnership took place on 30 November 2023; and that an additional allocation of €1 million from the Government of Ireland was provided to the North West Development Fund in 2021, which allows expenditure on the current phase of the Fund to extend to March 2025.
23. The NSMC agreed that commitments under *New Decade, New Approach* should remain on the agenda of relevant NSMC sectoral meetings and that further updates will be provided to future NSMC plenary meetings.

CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER APPOINTMENTS

24. The NSMC appointed Gary Kearney to the post of Chief Executive Officer of the Food Safety Promotion Board (*safefood*) and approved the appointments of Sharon McMahon as Chief Executive Officer of the Loughs Agency and Alice Mansergh as Chief Executive Officer of Tourism Ireland.
25. The NSMC reappointed Gina McIntyre as Chief Executive Officer of the Special EU Programmes Body and approved the reappointment of Seán Ó Coinn as Chief Executive Officer of Foras na Gaeilge.
26. The NSMC welcomed into post the newly appointed and reappointed Chief Executive Officers and thanked Niall Gibbons, former Chief Executive Officer of Tourism Ireland and Ray Dolan, former Chief Executive Officer of *safefood*, for their significant contribution in providing leadership and direction to the work of those Bodies.
27. The NSMC also thanked the Interim Chief Executive Officers and Designated Officers for their leadership and important contribution to the work of the North South Implementation Bodies and Tourism Ireland.

BOARD MEMBER APPOINTMENTS

28. The NSMC appointed Board Members to the Food Safety Promotion Board (*safefood*) and Tourism Ireland CLG and agreed that appointments will be made to fill the remaining vacancies on these Boards and on the Boards of other North South Implementation Bodies at future meetings of the NSMC.

FUTURE NSMC MEETINGS

29. The NSMC approved a schedule of future NSMC sectoral meetings, a meeting in Institutional format and the next Plenary meeting in Q3 2024.

Joint Secretariat
8 April 2024

www.northsouthministerialcouncil.org

**MEETING OF THE NORTH SOUTH MINISTERIAL COUNCIL
8 April 2024**

Northern Ireland Executive	Government of Ireland
Michelle O'Neill MLA First Minister	Leo Varadkar TD Taoiseach
Emma Little-Pengelly MLA deputy First Minister	Micheál Martin TD Tánaiste, Minister for Foreign Affairs Minister for Defence
Dr Caoimhe Archibald MLA Minister of Finance	Eamon Ryan TD Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications Minister for Transport
Paul Givan MLA Minister of Education	Michael McGrath TD Minister for Finance
Naomi Long MLA Minister of Justice	Paschal Donohoe TD Minister for Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform
Gordon Lyons MLA Minister for Communities	Simon Coveney TD Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment
Andrew Muir MLA Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs	Simon Harris TD Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science
Conor Murphy MLA Minister for the Economy	Heather Humphreys TD Minister for Social Protection and Minister for Rural and Community Development
John O'Dowd MLA Minister for Infrastructure	Stephen Donnelly TD Minister for Health
Robin Swann MLA Minister of Health	Norma Foley TD Minister for Education
Aisling Reilly MLA Junior Minister, The Executive Office	Catherine Martin TD Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media
Pam Cameron MLA Junior Minister, The Executive Office	Charlie McConalogue TD Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine
	Helen McEntee TD Minister for Justice
	Darragh O'Brien TD Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage
	Roderic O'Gorman TD Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth
	Pippa Hackett Minister of State with responsibility for Land Use and Biodiversity