



THE IRISH ASSOCIATION
for cultural, economic and social relations

A vision for the future of North-South co-operation? Strand 2 – a generation on

A Report from
The Irish Association

Foreword

'A vision for the future of North-South co-operation? Strand 2—a generation on'. This title captures clearly the purpose of our recent programme. Between 9 September 2024 and 8 April 2025 the Irish Association ran a series of 4 events to examine the record of cross-border, island-wide co-operation since 1998 and the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. Under Strand 2, the Agreement included the principles and the framework for new North-South relations.

The Agreement led to the creation of 6 Implementation Bodies, namely InterTradelreland, Waterways Ireland, Loughs Agency, Food Safety Promotion Board, Special EU Programmes Body and the Language Body. Also, 6 Areas of Co-operation were agreed, for which common policies are accepted but carried out separately in each jurisdiction—agriculture, education, environment, health, tourism and transport. The North South Ministerial Council, with its standing joint secretariat, was established to be responsible for administering Strand 2 and overseeing the Implementation Bodies and Areas of Co-operation.

Our first symposium, held on 9 September 2024, at Queen's University Belfast, looked at how Strand 2 came about and also paid special attention to the work of the North South Ministerial Council. The 3 subsequent events highlighted and examined the Implementation Bodies and Areas of Co-operation, organised under headings of their economic and social impact, their health and environmental impact and their educational and cultural impact.

On these occasions in Belfast and Dublin we brought together a wide range of distinguished speakers, numbering nearly 60 in total. They included chief executives of the Implementation Bodies and other organisations, academics, commentators and civil society representatives. Each event was attended by upwards of 60 and with 90 at the opening symposium. Participants were from North and South and from all the major political traditions on the island.

The events were very productive. We gained valuable insights into the work of the North South Ministerial Council, the Implementation Bodies and the Areas of Co-operation. From the papers delivered and the following discussions involving speakers and audiences, questions were raised not just about past and current performances but also about future developments. Problems were identified and new areas of co-operation were advocated. A full record of these talks and discussions can be accessed on the Irish Association website (www.theirishassociation.org).

A summary is presented in the final part of this report. It not only draws together the main points from our 4 events, but also puts forward proposals for change and improvement. The names of all our speakers are listed in the report.

The Irish Association is one of the longest running, well established cross-border, all island bodies, established in 1938. In conclusion, supported by this report, we see the maintenance and further development of Strand 2 as essential for meaningful North-South links, to the mutual benefit of the whole island. It is hoped that these findings will lead to future discussion and action.

Professor Brian M. Walker,
President of the Irish Association for Cultural,
Economic and Social Relations.

The Irish Association acknowledges the support of the Department of Foreign Affairs through the Shared Island Civic Society Fund.



An Roinn Gnóthaí Eachtracha
Department of Foreign Affairs



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A full report of these symposia can be found on the Irish Association website www.theirishassociation.org

Acknowledgements

We are indebted to many individuals and organisations for their help with our programme of these 4 events. For providing us with excellent venues, thanks are due to Dr Ryan Feeney and Queen's University Belfast, Belinda Hunter and the Linen Hall Library, Belfast, and Hugh Shiels and the Royal Irish Academy, Dublin.

We are grateful for advice from Suzanne Costello, the Institute of Public Health, Caroline Creamer, the International Centre for Local Government, Professor Etain Tannam, Trinity College Dublin, Mark Hennessey, Irish Times and Dr Anthony Soares and Michael D'Arcy, the Centre for Cross Border Cooperation, Armagh. For their help, thanks are due to Hilary O'Reilly and Richard Hill, joint secretaries of the North South Ministerial Council.

Acknowledgement must be made of the dedicated work involved in the drawing up of the programme and the preparation of this report by a steering committee of the Irish Association, consisting of Stephen Douds, Dr Chris McGimpsey, Dermot O'Doherty, Conor O'Malley, Ruth Taillon and Professor Brian Walker.

We are very grateful to our administrator Eimear Donnelly for her important role in the smooth running of our events.

Special thanks are due to our rapporteurs Alex Richardson and James McElearney for their skillful work in writing up very helpful reports of these proceedings. Declan Brennan provided valuable IT assistance. Kubrix Design planned our printed programmes.

The ideas, opinions and comments in this summary report are the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent or reflect Department of Foreign Affairs policy or the Shared Island Initiative.

Finally, we are very grateful to the Shared Island Civic Society Fund of the Irish Government for their support for this project.

Symposium 1

The Successes and Challenges of North-South Co-operation – the North South Ministerial Council (NSMC) at 25

Symposium One, Canada Room, Queen's University Belfast, 9 September, 2024

10:30am – 11:00am	Registration (Canada Room)
11:00am – 12:00pm	Introduction & Welcome (Council Chamber) Dr. Ryan Feeney , Vice-President (Governance and External Affairs) and Registrar, Queen's University Belfast Negotiating North-South Relations Speakers: Bertie Ahern , Taoiseach 1997 – 2008 Lord Empey , Ulster Unionist Party Negotiator 1998 and Leader of Ulster Unionist Party 2005 – 2010 Chair: Prof. Brian Walker , President, The Irish Association
12 noon – 12.40pm	'North-South Co-operation: the NSMC at 25' (Council Chamber) Speakers: NSMC Joint Secretaries, Richard Hill (North) & Hilary Reilly (South) Chair: Prof. Brian Walker , President, The Irish Association
12.40pm – 1.40pm	Lunch (Canada Room)
1.40pm – 2.40pm	Panel One North-South Co-Operation: A View from the Practitioners Panellists: Tim O'Connor , First Joint Secretary (South), NSMC Dr. Andrew McCormick , Former Perm Sec, Dept Health, N. Ireland Pamela Arthurs , Chief Executive, East Border Region Chair: Dr. Anthony Soares , Director, Centre for Cross Border Studies
2.45pm – 3.00pm	Coffee Break
3.00pm – 4.30pm	Panel Two Strand 2: What's Next? Prof. Katy Hayward , Professor of Political Sociology, Queen's University Belfast Newton Emerson , Columnist and Commentator Prof. Etain Tannam , Trinity College, Dublin Mark Hennessy , The Irish Times, Editor of the "Common Ground" project Chair: Dr. Anthony Soares , Director, Centre for Cross Border Studies

Symposium 2



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Working Together for Economic Development on the Island of Ireland – past, present and future

Symposium Two, Royal Irish Academy (RIA), Dublin, 25 November, 2024

10:30am – 11:00am	Registration
11:00am – 12:00pm	Welcome Prof. Brian Walker , President, The Irish Association Shared Economic Prospects & Challenges – the business perspective Speakers Angela McGowan , Director, CBI, Northern Ireland Danny McCoy , CEO, IBEC Chair: Prof. Brian Walker , President, The Irish Association
12:00pm – 12:45pm	The Joint Implementation Bodies at 25 Speakers Margaret Hearty , CEO, InterTradeIreland John McDonagh , CEO, Waterways Ireland Sharon McMahon , CEO, Loughs Agency Chair: Michael D'Arcy , D'Arcy Smyth & Associates and Senior Research Associate, CCBC
12.45pm – 1.45pm	Lunch
1.45pm – 2.45pm	Areas of Co-operation: another dimension of North–South Relations Panellists Aidan O'Driscoll , former Sec/Gen, D/Agriculture, Food & Marine Prof. Brian Caulfield , Prof. of Transportation, TCD Ray O'Leary , former Ass. Sec. D/Tourism and Transport Dr Joanne Stuart , CEO, NI Tourism Alliance Chair: Michael D'Arcy
2.45pm – 3.00pm	Refreshment break
3.00pm – 4.30pm	Pointers/Opportunities for economic co-operation on the island of Ireland Panellists Prof. John FitzGerald , Emeritus Prof., TCD & Independent Economist Prof. Alan Barrett , Director, ESRI Maureen O'Reilly , Independent Economist and Senior Research Associate, CCBC Michael D'Arcy Michele Shirlow , CEO, Food NI and former board member Tourism NI Sir David Sterling , former Head of Northern Ireland Civil Service & Chair of NIE Networks Chair: Dermot O'Doherty , Vice President, The Irish Association

Symposium 3

North South Symposium on Health and Environment

Symposium Three, Royal Irish Academy (RIA), Dublin, 18 February, 2025

10:30am – 11:00am	Registration
11:00am – 12:00pm	Keynote Address by the two Chief Medical Officers on the Island of Ireland Speakers: Prof. Sir Michael McBride , Chief Medical Officer to the Department of Health, Northern Ireland, and Prof. Mary Horgan , Chief Medical Officer at the Department of Health, Ireland. Chair: Prof. Brian Walker , President, The Irish Association.
12:00pm – 1.00pm	Health Practitioners' perspectives Panellists: Suzanne Costello , CEO, Institute of Public Health. Tom Daly , Former Director General, CAWT Co-Operating and Working Together and Prof. Deirdre Heenan , Prof. of Social Policy, Ulster University. Chair: Prof. Brian Walker , President, The Irish Association.
1.00pm – 1.45pm	Lunch
1.45pm – 2.05pm	The Special EU Programmes Body Speaker: Gina McIntyre , CEO, Special EU Programmes Body
2.05pm – 3.00pm	Environment Practitioners' perspectives Panellists: Senator Malcolm Noonan , former Minister for Heritage, Ireland. Dr Ciara Brennan , Director and co-founder of Environmental Justice Network Ireland (EJNI) and Prof. Mark Emmerson , Co-Centre for Climate, Biodiversity and Water, Queen's University Belfast. Chair: Dr Conor O'Malley , Secretary, The Irish Association.
3.00pm – 4.30pm	Summing Up – Analysts' perspectives Panellists: Turlough O'Donnell , SC, Member of the Climate Bar Association. Ian Marshall OBE , Head of Business Development and Policy, Centre for Advanced Sustainable Energy, Queen's University Belfast. Prof. Brian O Gallachóir , Vice-President, University College Cork and Caitriona Mullan , International Centre for Local and Regional Development. Chair: Dermot O'Doherty , Vice President, The Irish Association.

Symposium 4



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North South Symposium on Education and Culture

Symposium Four, Linen Hall Library, Belfast, 8 April, 2025

10:30am – 11:00am	Registration
11:00am – 11:45pm	Keynote Address on Education by Prof. Tony Gallagher, School of Education, Queen's University Belfast Chair: Prof. Brian Walker , President, The Irish Association
11:45pm – 12:45pm	Education Practitioners' perspectives Panellists: Dr. Anne Devlin , Economist, Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI), Dublin Stephen Douthart , CEO, Middletown Centre for Autism Robin McLoughlin , OBE, Principal, Banbridge Academy and member of the NI Independent Review Panel of Education. Celeste O'Callaghan , Principal Officer, Curriculum and Assessment Unit, Department of Education, Ireland. Chair: Dr. Conor O'Malley , Secretary, The Irish Association
12:45pm – 1:30pm	Lunch
1:30pm – 2:15pm	Keynote Address on Culture by Bob Collins, former Director General of RTÉ, Chief Commissioner of the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland and Chair of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland. Chair: Prof. Brian Walker , President, The Irish Association
2:15pm – 3:15pm	Culture Practitioners' perspectives: Panellists: Tom Boland , Chair, National Youth Orchestra Ian Crozier , CEO, Ulster Scots Agency Seán Ó Coinn , CEO, Foras na Gaeilge Dr. Éimear O'Connor , Director of Collections and Access, National Museum of Ireland Chair: Stephen Douds , Past President, The Irish Association
3:15pm – 4:20pm	Summing Up – Analysts' perspectives Panellists: Liam Hannaway , Chair, Arts Council of Northern Ireland (ACNI) Sam McBride , Journalist John D'Arcy , National Director, Open University in Ireland Anna Walsh , Director, Tyrone Guthrie Centre, Annaghmakerrig Chair: Dermot O'Doherty , Vice President, The Irish Association
4:20pm – 4:30pm	Concluding remarks Prof. Brian Walker , President, The Irish Association

Summary Report

In a series of 4 events, we examined the record of cross-border, island-wide co-operation since 1998 and the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. The Agreement, under Strand 2, included the principles and framework for new North-South relations. This co-operation, integral to the peace process, has been instrumental in addressing shared social, economic and environmental challenges. At these sessions, policymakers, academics and civil society representatives, almost 60 invited speakers, considered how these arrangements operated in the past, how they work today and what changes are desirable for the future. A full record of the discussions can be accessed on the Irish Association website. This summary report draws out the main points raised at these events.

Symposium 1

In our opening symposium on 9 September 2024 at Queen's University Belfast, we heard how Strand 2 in the Agreement came about in the first place. Attention then focused on the North South Ministerial Council (NSMC), established to be responsible for implementing Strand 2 and overseeing the agreed 6 Implementation Bodies and 6 Areas of Co-operation. In their opening joint keynote address, Lord Reg Empey and Bertie Ahern, two of the main architects of the Agreement, described the complex negotiations and political compromises which led up to Strand 2, an essential part of the process. The outcome was a significant achievement which has held well to the present, with the support of both governments. This North-South co-operation, through these institutions and areas, has continued to enhance our daily lives.

The two secretaries of the NSMC, Richard Hill (North) and Hilary Reilly (South), described the practical governance and operational structure of the NSMC. Plenary meetings and sector-specific meetings take place regularly. The fact that over 350 ministerial meetings have occurred since the Council's inception shows the commitment of both governments to maintaining North-South relations, despite political disruptions. We heard about the significant achievements of the NSMC through its Implementation Bodies and Areas of Co-operation over the past 25 years and current initiatives.

In the following discussions involving these speakers and later panels, important points were raised. Reference was made to the interruptions caused by the suspension of the Northern Ireland Assembly over the years, which has prevented the NSMC from functioning for extended periods. But it was noted that despite this there has been no constitutional or political conflict within the bodies themselves. Calls were made for a review of these North-South Bodies and Areas of Co-operation, especially in light of challenges created by Brexit.

There was urging of greater public awareness of the role of the NSMC's ongoing work. The importance of maintaining the formal structures negotiated in the Agreement, particularly the NSMC and the Implementation Bodies, was stressed. At the same time, informal co-operation such as the Shared Island Initiative, which can complement these structures, addressing areas that formal bodies may not reach, was welcomed.

Symposium 2

The second event, held in the Royal Irish Academy, Dublin, on 24 November 2024, examined North-South economic and business co-operation. Attention focused on the three Implementation Bodies with a role in economic co-operation, InterTradelreland, Waterways Ireland and the Loughs Agency, and the three areas of Agriculture, Transport and Tourism. To set the scene, the opening joint address was delivered by Dr Angela McGowan, Director, CBI, Northern Ireland, and Dr Danny McCoy, CEO, IBEC, who spoke of strong co-operation between their two organisations and shared economic prospects and challenges.

The CEOs of InterTradelreland, Waterways Ireland and the Loughs Agency outlined their current activities and future plans. From InterTradelreland we heard of the growth in trade between North and South from a lowly €2 billion at the time of the signing of the Agreement in 1998 to almost €12 billion today. Waterways Ireland cited an economic study which highlighted the €809 million cross-border annual value of its waterways, with their economic, social and well-being benefits. The Loughs Agency outlined how its remit had grown from safeguarding fish stocks to promoting the development of Lough Foyle and Carlingford Lough, as well as their cross-border catchment areas, for commercial and recreational purposes.

The advantages of North-South co-operation in the areas of Agriculture, Transport and Tourism were highlighted. We learned of weekly contact between the government agriculture departments in both jurisdictions, which had proved crucial during the outbreak of Foot and Mouth Disease. The recent All Island Strategic Rail Review was described and special mention was made of the new upscaling of the Dublin/Belfast rail service. The island of Ireland is now marketed abroad by Tourism Ireland as one singular unit, rather than two separate units, which has brought many benefits.

Presentations by speakers and panellists raised important issues which were discussed during the day. The subject of the All Island economy was debated. Advantages of this approach were stressed, both from a business and broader economic perspective. It was reported that business leaders from both jurisdictions have emphasized the positive feedback from their member firms across markets, skills and supply chains.



At the same time, while North-South economic relations can be built upon, so also can East-West economic relations. This may help to alleviate unionist concerns about simply concentrating on North-South relations and an All Island economy.

Various recommendations for future economic development were made. Contributors emphasized the strong current relationships in agriculture/agri-food but highlighted the need for an integrated animal health strategy and a joint food strategy framework. Concern was expressed about the advent of the Electronic Travel Authorisation (ETA) which means that tourists will need a visa to cross from South to North. Support was recorded for the IDA and Invest NI to market the island of Ireland together, rather than simply trying to attract FDI to their respective jurisdictions.

There were calls for enhancing the all island labour market through measures to support upskilling and the mutual recognition of qualifications. Problems in the energy infrastructure were highlighted and the importance of the completion of the North-South interconnector was stressed. While speakers discussed such concerns and made recommendations for future developments, they also emphasised the need for continued political and personal trust to make this North-South co-operation work effectively.

Symposium 3

Our third symposium was convened on 18 February 2025 in the Royal Irish Academy, Dublin to look at Health and the Environment, both key areas under Strand 2. The opening keynote address was delivered by the two Chief Medical Officers, Professor Sir Michael McBride and Professor Mary Horgan. We heard of meaningful North-South health co-operation, with monthly meetings between the two CMOs. In cardiovascular care, the All Island Pre-Congenital Heart Disease Network provides North-South cardiology services and cardiovascular surgery for children. In cancer services and research, the North South Policy and Strategy Group meets regularly to consider opportunities for closer co-operation in treatment.

A follow up panel of health practitioners recorded their experiences of existing health arrangements. We heard of North-South co-operation through Co-operation and Working Together (CAWT), which provides cross-border healthcare in the North West. The Institute of Public Health in Dublin continues to play a key role in facilitating North-South research in public health. At the same time, it was stated that there is scope for greater collaboration, both North-South and East-West.

Concern was also expressed that progress on cross-border co-operation has been slow, with reference to a general dearth of health-related cross-border

research and data. It was argued that the absence of an overarching strategy undermined cross-border co-operation capacity and greater collaboration in various areas was advocated. In the subsequent discussion, public preventative healthcare was recommended as an area for further cross-border work while privately provided healthcare was suggested as a potential means to reduce waiting lists.

We heard of the work of 2 Implementation Bodies. The Food Safety Promotion Board (SafeFood) promotes food safety and nutritional advice across the island of Ireland. The CEO of the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB), informed us how EU programmes have continued, post-Brexit, to support cross-border health initiatives. Launched in September 2023, Peace Plus, valued at €1.1 billion, deals with a number of areas, including €97 million in healthcare and €303 million in environmental commitments. Funding comes from Brussels, London, Belfast and Dublin.

The subject of environmental co-operation was discussed by a panel of practitioners. We learnt of the establishment and work of the Co-Centre for Climate, Biodiversity and Water, which receives funding from Research Ireland, the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (NI) and UK Research, to conduct North-South research collaboration. Concern was expressed that co-operation at a delivery level was often missing, with lack of joined-up support from different departments within the North and between North and South for recommended initiatives. The work of the National Parks and Wildlife Service in the South was discussed.

We heard about the role of the Environmental Justice Network Ireland in advocating environmental actions North and South. Different departmental organisational structures, in the two jurisdictions, were recognised as a barrier to co-operation. Brexit was viewed as a negative factor because it meant that North and South no longer enjoyed identical regulatory laws on the environment. In the discussions which followed it was suggested that an Environmental Protection Agency for Northern Ireland would be helpful.

A final panel of analysts reflected on the issues raised, with special attention on the environment. Mention was made of how cross-border researchers have come together recently through a number of networks. Concern was expressed that while recent reports on agri-food and sustainable energy made valuable environmental recommendations there had been insufficient follow-up. It was argued that the common law system that exists on the island as a whole provides a ready route through which the complexities of environmental law can be navigated. The value of co-operation to tackle urgent matters of climate change and energy security was stressed.

Symposium 4

The fourth and final symposium, held in the Linen Hall Library, Belfast, on 8 April 2025, considered the educational and cultural impact of Strand 2. Attention focused first on Education, one of the designated Areas of Co-operation. Professor Tony Gallagher, formerly head of the School of Education at Queen's University Belfast, delivered the opening keynote address. He gave examples of existing cross-border educational collaboration, in particular the Standing Conference on Teacher Education, North and South and Universities Ireland, both linked to the Centre for Cross Border Studies (now Cooperation), Armagh. He looked at student mobility patterns, noting the sharp decline in northern students attending southern universities, compared to the past.

A panel of practitioners gave valuable insights into the educational field. We heard about how the Middletown Centre for Autism was founded in 2007 as part of the Agreement, but unlike other Implementation Bodies, stands apart in both structure and governance. It is funded equally by the governments of Northern Ireland and Ireland, and its work spans the entire island. The Creative Connections programme is a new, cross-border initiative designed to integrate creativity into school life across the island of Ireland. It was developed through direct co-operation between the Republic's Department of Education and its counterpart in Northern Ireland.

Attention was drawn to growing educational disparities between North and South. The most striking difference is found in the levels of post-secondary non-tertiary qualifications, where Northern Ireland has lagged behind new developments in the Republic. We heard of the work of the Independent Review Panel of Education looking at education in Northern Ireland. Attention is drawn in this report to the need for change and what the two jurisdictions can learn from each other in the further education sector. Northern Ireland now has a number of impressive, recently built, regional colleges of further education, such as the unit in Enniskillen. The challenge is to put these colleges to greater and better use.

In the afternoon attention turned to Culture. A keynote address was delivered by Bob Collins, former chair of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland and director-general of RTÉ. He urged that culture had great potential to bridge divides, not reinforce them. He insisted that a greater understanding of each community's cultural contributions is essential not only to identity formation, but to reconciliation itself. He encouraged the two Arts Councils to jointly showcase cross-border cultural output. He turned to language, insisted on its beauty and purpose, and challenged those who sought to weaponise it. He believed that sport also had the capacity to unite.

The panel which followed included information about the work of another Implementation Body, the Language Body, which consists of two agencies, Foras na Gaeilge and the Ulster Scots Agency. We heard from the CEOs of both organisations. The main role of Foras na Gaeilge is to promote the Irish language throughout the island of Ireland. Current priorities include 28 community language centres and a determination to promote everyday use of Irish, not solely classroom ability. From the Ulster Scots Agency we heard of the importance of seeing Ulster Scots identity in its own right and culture, on both sides of the border. There was a call for a better understanding of Ulster Scots language and traditions.

We learned about the work of the National Youth Orchestra of Ireland. Its mission is musical excellence and relationships across the island. About 10 per cent of current members are from Northern Ireland. The role of the National Museum of Ireland in Dublin was highlighted. The importance of cultural institutions curating joint exhibitions and touring programmes was stressed. In the discussions that followed, it was observed that culture-led co-operation is already shaping attitudes—through youth orchestras, community language projects, pipe band qualifications and cross-border festivals.

A last panel commented on earlier proceedings and gave their own useful perspectives. We heard how the Open University of Ireland now has 6500 northern and 1000 southern students who study online without noticing borders. The Tyrone Guthrie Centre continues to draw artists and writers from North and South, as well as from abroad. At present the amateur drama movement, under the Amateur Drama Council, runs 37 drama festivals, from West Cork to Ballymoney.

Concern was expressed that in the arts the government spend per head is £5 in the North and £25 in the South. Despite this gulf the two Arts Councils still co-fund a number of organisations, such as Poetry Ireland, the Tyrone Guthrie Centre, the Ireland Chair of Poetry and touring projects. More support was urged for the arts, especially in Northern Ireland. A final point raised was that 'good news' is often difficult to sell, and ongoing North-South co-operation does not get the publicity it deserves.



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Conclusions

The Irish Association has been operating in an all island context since its foundation in 1938. Arising from its core objective of strengthening North-South cultural, economic & social relations through networking and dialogue, the Irish Association puts forward the following conclusions from the issues discussed in this series of events for further discussion and action.

The 25th Anniversary of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement afforded a significant opportunity to view both the activities and the institutional arrangements under Strand 2 from a positive but not uncritical perspective. Our programme of events took up this challenge, also focusing on new research and fresh analysis, leading to thoughtful and insightful new thinking on the future of North-South co-operation. The Irish Association concludes that the maintenance and further development of Strand 2 is essential for meaningful and long-term cross-border links, to the mutual benefit of the whole island.

Achievements

From our discussions we learned of the work of the North South Ministerial Council and the 6 Implementation Bodies and 6 Areas of Co-operation. The considerable economic, social and cultural benefits brought about by these organisations and areas are described in this report. Crucial for such important work has been the involvement of both governments in all these arrangements, providing a level of co-operation not seen before. The North South Ministerial Council has played a significant role, hosting over 350 ministerial meetings, despite political disruptions.

Some of these benefits deserve mention here. There has been a significant growth in trade between North and South from the time of the signing of the Agreement and the present, aided greatly by the work of InterTradelreland. The Loughs Agency has led the development of Lough Foyle and Carlingford Lough, while Waterways Ireland has boosted the value of our waterways. The importance of the recent All Island Strategic Rail Review was stressed. The work of Tourism Ireland in marketing the island of Ireland abroad has brought many benefits.

We learned of meaningful North-South health co-operation, with monthly meetings between the two Chief Medical Officers. An example of this co-operation is the All Island Pre-Congenital Heart Disease Network which provides North-South cardiology services for children. In the environmental area, the newly established Co-Centre for Climate, Biodiversity and Water conducts important North-South research collaboration. The Special EU Programmes Body continues its work to support cross-border initiatives. Peace Plus, valued at €1.1 billion, launched in September 2023, deals with a number of areas, including healthcare and the environment. At the same time as describing these benefits, our speakers put forward proposals for change and improvement.

Economic Co-operation

The CEOs of InterTradelreland, the Loughs Agency and Waterways Ireland in outlining their current activities and future plans, called for a review of the funding, resourcing and the operating arrangements of the Implementation Bodies involved in economic and business development. In discussing this work, a theme that emerged is the need to afford the bodies greater discretion and autonomy in the performing of their functions.

Meriting serious consideration too is the Skills and Labour Market, and valuable proposals made included an 'All Island Labour Mobility Task Force' and a 'Working Visa Scheme'. The potential for large-scale development planning arising from the joint ESRI/NISRA modelling of the NI and All Island economies and collaboration between the newly appointed science advisors in both jurisdictions, was cogently expressed.

Health & Environment

There is broad consensus on expanding the scope of the Health Area of co-operation, especially public preventative healthcare, e.g. in well-being and mental health, as there is for cross-border access to privately provided healthcare to reduce waiting lists. Accordingly, the formal scheduling for co-operation in Health is recommended to be expanded to encompass all areas of preventive medicine.

On Environment, while there is much co-operation taking place in the research and analytical areas, this needs to be recognised and supported and there are serious divergences in terms of overarching institutional arrangements, including the absence of an independent environment agency in Northern Ireland, that are detrimentally affecting the whole island. Towards effective remedy, the formal Area of Environment is recommended to be strengthened by the greater aligning of protection arrangements in both parts of the island.

Energy emerged as a major area of concern under this heading. Despite many years of close co-operation, problems were being experienced with the size and scope of the energy grid, North and South, and with further delays to the long-planned cross-border electricity interconnector, which urgently needed to be addressed. Establishing Energy as a formal Area of Co-operation is recommended in this regard, with the remit to include deployment of new eco-saving technologies.

Education & Culture

A clear conclusion from the discussions is that the cultural, economic and social development of both jurisdictions on the island depends on seriously increased investment in education, grounded in robust and adaptive institutional frameworks, and for the area to be treated as a policy priority. For these reasons the current formal Area of Co-operation in Education should be expanded and be extended to third level and post-graduate collaboration.

The carefully calibrated management of culture, understood as both personal and political identity, can be a significant positive driver towards reconciliation in Northern Ireland and across the island. Holding back achievement of this objective is the continued severe under-provision of resources for the ARTS in Northern Ireland. More positively, the public service broadcasters on the island – BBC, RTÉ, TG4 – have the potential to play a bigger role in the promotion of shared cultural narratives, as do the existing North-South language agencies.

Finally

These conversations – sometimes celebratory, sometimes exasperated, always candid – show an architecture that is sturdier than the headlines imply yet far short of its potential.

- When North-South co-operation is allowed to become routine it delivers. From shared health registries to cross-border waterway corridors, from joint language agencies to all island research projects, practitioners described fluent partnerships that now feel perfectly normal.
- But normality is also the danger. Successes are under-reported, budgets remain asymmetric, and in too many areas (further education places, creative-industries funding, systematic data-sharing) the momentum depends on individual champions rather than settled policy.
- Politics still matters – and so does imagination. Formal institutions stall when Stormont stalls; yet our speakers reminded us that artists, educators, clinicians and entrepreneurs keep inventing new pathways regardless. Their ingenuity is the best insurance policy Strand 2 possesses.

The Irish Association's job was to listen, curate and test the evidence. We end this series convinced that the mechanics of co-operation work; the ambition often doesn't. Raising that ambition – matching southern investment in culture, matching northern ingenuity in lifelong learning, hard-wiring evaluation and publicity into every joint initiative – is the unfinished business the Agreement bequeaths to the next 25 years. The record assembled in this report is therefore not a valedictory scrapbook; it is a prompt-book for the next act.

In summary, the programme exemplified the ongoing need for The Irish Association as a neutral platform where representatives from all political traditions in the island feel comfortable in engaging in dialogue and discussion – leading to co-operation across the island of Ireland.



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Specific Proposals

Economic Co-operation

A review of the funding, resourcing and the operating arrangements of the Implementation Bodies involved in economic and business development to include potential for affording each body greater discretion in the performing of its functions.

Advancement of CBI/IBEC and InterTradeIreland proposals to implement a joint Skills and the Labour Market, through mechanisms such as an 'All Island Labour Mobility Task Force' and a 'Working Visa Scheme.'

Advancement of large-scale development planning arising from the joint ESRI/NISRA modelling of the NI and All Island economies

Support collaboration between the newly appointed science advisors in both jurisdictions.

Health & Environment

The Health Area of Co-operation to include public preventative healthcare, e.g. in well-being and mental health, and facilitating access to privately provided healthcare to reduce waiting lists. This expansion to be achieved institutionally by increased collaboration at a policy level and a programme of specific co-operation initiatives.

The formal Area of the Environment to be strengthened by the greater aligning of protection arrangements in both parts of the island, assisted by establishing an independent environment agency in Northern Ireland.

Energy to be formalised as an additional Area of Co-operation. The Energy remit to include deployment of new eco-saving technologies.

Education & Culture

Significantly increased investments in education by way of robust adaptive institutional frameworks and for the area to be treated as a policy priority.

Institutionally, the expansion of the formal Area of Co-operation in Education beyond primary and secondary levels to third level and post-graduate policies and initiatives.

The careful and calibrated development of culture, at both the personal identity and political levels, to be actively promoted as a potential positive driver towards reconciliation in NI and across the island.

Early and sustained rectification of the continued severe under-provision of resources for the ARTS, in Northern Ireland in particular.

The need to encourage and enable the public service broadcasters on the island – BBC, RTÉ, TG4 to play a bigger role in the promotion of shared cultural narratives, alongside the existing North-South language agencies.



Who We Are

With the help of notable members of the unionist and nationalist communities throughout the island, the Irish Association was founded in 1938 to promote better North-South relations. Since then, the Irish Association for Cultural, Economic and Social Relations has been working to make reason and good will take the place of passion and prejudice in Ireland, North and South.

During the past eight decades, the Irish Association has made a real contribution to the growth of tolerance, reconciliation, mutual trust and human rights; the record of seminars, interactive dialogues and conferences indicates our capacity to sustain and develop this contribution.

We are now faced with a challenge to transform and sustain the dynamism to continually recreate platforms and processes to enable new forms of relationships to emerge in Northern Ireland and on the island of Ireland.

To negotiate successfully this new, critical juncture in the island's history, an impartial forum for dialogue and debate, respected by all, is required. The delicate period ahead of social and political change demands broader and deeper analysis, debate and communication at all levels of Irish society. The Irish Association, with its established reputation of fairness and hospitality to the most diverse traditions, is ideally placed to assist in this task.

The Irish Association will continue to provide as many opportunities as possible to encourage key participants in social and political change to put forward for examination and debate their ideas on the issues that will shape the patterns of life on the island of Ireland in the years to come.

