



Address to the 58th Plenary Session of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly

Druids Glen Hotel, Newtownmountkennedy, Co. Wicklow

13 May 2019

The New Common Charter for Cooperation Within and Between these Islands

1. About the Centre for Cross Border Studies

1.1. Since its creation in 1999, the Centre for Cross Border Studies (CCBS), based in Armagh, Northern Ireland, has pursued its central mission of contributing to the increased social, economic and territorial cohesion of the island of Ireland. It achieves this by promoting and improving the quality of cross-border cooperation between (a) public bodies, and (b) between public bodies, business and civil society. Complementing this strategy, CCBS also works to improve the capacity of people involved in social and economic development to engage in mutually beneficial cross-border cooperation. Finally, it addresses information gaps and other barriers that constrain cross-border mobility and cross-border cooperation through research, provision of resources, tools and other support.

1.2. CCBS's pursuit of its mission has been framed by two primary public policy imperatives: the commitment to cross-border and North-South cooperation integral to Strand II of the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, and the European Union's Cohesion Policy with its focus on social, economic and territorial cohesion, and supported by the EU's Territorial Cooperation and Structural Funds programmes.

1.3. Throughout its existence, therefore, the Centre for Cross Border Studies has been deeply concerned with community, social and economic development and cooperation particularly on the island of Ireland, but also between the island of Ireland, Great Britain and beyond.¹ This concern informed the Centre's desire to initiate the "Towards a New Common Chapter" project.

¹ For more information on the Centre for Cross Border Studies, see <http://crossborder.ie/>.

2. About the “Towards a New Common Chapter” project

2.1. The “Towards a New Common Chapter” project began in late 2014, and has been made possible with the generous support of the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, the Northern Ireland Community Relations Council, and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade’s Reconciliation Fund.² The project has looked to support and inspire grass-roots community commitment to cross-border cooperation in all its dimensions: cooperation at the border, wider North-South cooperation, and East-West cooperation between the island of Ireland and Great Britain. It has worked towards a “bottom-up” vision of the importance and role of cross-border cooperation within and between these islands, whilst also noting the need for community groups to possess the necessary skills and capacity to not only engage in their own cross-border initiatives, but also to enter into more productive dialogues with relevant local, regional and central government policies and strategies.

2.2. Inspiration for the project came from the commitment to cooperation by the Governments in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland expressed in the chapter of agreed text that appeared in Northern Ireland’s Structural Funds Plan and Ireland’s National Development Plan for the period 2000-2006 – the Common Chapter.³

2.3. However, the 2000-2006 period also saw the collapse of the power-sharing institutions in Northern Ireland as well as the suspension of the North-South Ministerial Council, and their restoration in 2007 following the 2006 St Andrew’s Agreement did not result in the revival of the Common Chapter. The failure to reintroduce the Common Chapter has been interpreted by the Centre for Cross Border Studies as threatening the marginalisation of and political commitment to cross-border cooperation, particularly at times of political or economic crisis.⁴

2.4. Earlier drafts of the New Common Charter included a section reflecting what community groups do not want in relation to cross-border cooperation if it is to be successful.⁵ This included how it should not be the unique preserve of any one government, agency, group or community, that it should not be used for party political purposes, or be driven by the need to achieve large impacts in a way that privileges the involvement of larger institutions and organisations, thereby dismissing the value of micro-community initiatives and their potential to contribute to significant positive change. However, at the meeting bringing together representatives of community groups from across these

² For more on this project, see <http://crossborder.ie/towards-a-new-common-chapter/>.

³ *Northern Ireland Structural Funds Plan 2000-2006: ‘Northern Ireland: - a Region achieving Transition’* (2000); Government of Ireland, *Ireland: National Development Plan 2000-2006* (Dublin: The Stationery Office, 1999). In the Northern Ireland document the agreed text appears under the section entitled “Co-operation with the Republic of Ireland” (pp.87-96), while in the Irish document it comes under the chapter “Co-operation with Northern Ireland” (pp.177-186).

⁴ In 2014, for example, before Oireachtas Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement, the Centre for Cross Border Studies stated: “Since the demise of the Common Chapter, the limited but nevertheless important references to cross-border cooperation have dwindled and all but disappeared from major policy documents. Unless there is a clear policy imperative supported by resources – and it is made clear to civil servants and other public officials that it is part of their job – even the most motivated people will, with the increasing pressures of austerity, see cross-border cooperation as an unaffordable luxury”. Centre for Cross Border Studies, “Submission to the Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement” (26 June 2014), p.3; <http://www.crossborder.ie/site2015/wp-content/uploads/CCBS-Presentation-to-GFA-Committee-26-06-2014.pdf>.

⁵ In its earlier drafts, this document was entitled the New Common *Chapter* for Cooperation Within and Between these Islands.

islands to agree a final version of the New Common Charter, it was decided to omit this section from the document, although noting that it should be used to inform a set of guiding principles for policy-makers.

2.5. The New Common Charter for Cooperation Within and Between these Islands that you have before you is, therefore, the result of a series of intensive conversations between a range of community groups from Northern Ireland and Ireland, and more recently with groups from England, Scotland and Wales. The New Common Charter represents a shared desire to maintain and strengthen relations between communities across these islands, to work together on issues of common concern, and to advocate for the provision of the requisite structures and means to cooperate within and between these islands in whatever circumstances may arise.

3. Taking the New Common Charter forward: The role of political representatives across these islands

3.1. The “Towards a New Common Chapter” project has now entered its final funded phase. This involves bringing the New Common Charter for Cooperation Within and Between these Islands to the direct attention of legislators and policy-makers across all relevant jurisdictions. This process began last week at a meeting with the Oireachtas Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement, and is continuing here today at the 58th Plenary Session of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly.

3.2. In light of this Assembly’s nature, and given that the sets of relations envisioned within the New Common Charter for Cooperation Within and Between these Islands reflect the core strands of the Good Friday Agreement, which include not only the North-South dimension, but also its East-West, we would ask members to support it and work with us in ensuring all administrations across these islands put in place policies and funding structures to encourage cross-border and cross-jurisdictional cooperation at grassroots community level. We hope that today offers an opportunity to discuss in greater detail the work undertaken as part of the Towards a New Common Chapter project, and how members of this Assembly and political representatives more generally can champion the objectives of the New Common Charter for Cooperation.

3.3. These objectives include how capacity-building measures should be introduced to improve how all levels of government and public bodies across these islands engage with community organisations in the development of policies and strategies with a cross-border or cross-jurisdictional dimension, as well as the need for a comprehensive assessment of the current funding landscape for cross-border and cross-jurisdictional cooperation initiatives aimed at community organisations, and what that landscape should look like going forward. They also include the development of a mechanism for dialogue and cooperation between grass-roots organisations across these islands, mirroring and perhaps interacting with bodies such as the British-Irish Council and this Assembly.

3.4. Along with advice on bringing the New Common Charter for Cooperation Within and Between these Islands to a wider audience of legislators across these islands, this project would be grateful for this Assembly’s concrete support in achieving the objectives outlined above.