

Andrew RT Davies MS - Leader of the Welsh Conservatives
Report on visit to the Oireachtas – November 10th 2022

Purpose of visit

I wished to visit the Irish Parliament in Dublin to form closer relations with colleagues in the Irish Parliament. A large number of sectors in the Welsh economy carry out considerable trade with the Republic of Ireland, including agriculture. I therefore wanted to discuss how we can build on existing ties to benefit both economies. I also wished to discuss other markets crucial to the Welsh economy, such as tourism, which rely on the Irish market. Through building relations with colleagues in Ireland, I hope to be able to establish good working ties to promote the work of the Senedd and share best practice.

Like in Wales, the agriculture and tourism sectors are key to the Irish economy. Through sharing ideas, we will be able to develop new policies that can be brought forward in the Senedd.

Visiting colleagues in parliaments across the world helps us promote the work of the Senedd to them. I used the visit to explain the work I do and the Welsh Conservative Group do in the Senedd, and the role the Senedd plays more generally for the people of Wales.

Meeting with Committee for Environment and Climate Action – Deputy Brian Leddin, Deputy Richard Bruton and Senator John McGahon

The committee members started the meeting by telling me that Ireland has been working hard towards expanding its renewable energy generation, particularly in recent years, and is well on its way to being a climate change leader in Europe.

In 2020, wind power alone provided 36.3% of the country's electricity. As of July 2022, wind had generated 34% of Ireland's electricity demands so far this year. Currently, almost all wind power generation in Ireland is onshore, however we discussed the Irish government's plans to have 5 GW of offshore wind capacity built by 2030, as part of working towards the goal of 35 GW by 2050. Ireland's sea-to-land mass is seven times the size of the country, allowing it to develop and invest in becoming a significant source of European offshore wind energy, and it is already the second highest user of renewable wind electricity in Europe.

In 2020 Ireland reached its renewable electricity target, averaging at 40% renewable through the year (mostly generated from wind). However it was noted that heating, cooling and transport targets were not reached.

Ireland seeks to become a European leader in renewable energy production, with the target of halving all emissions by 2030 and, having signed the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act 2021, has now put Ireland on a legally binding path to net-zero emissions no later than 2050. Other targets include decarbonising the electricity system to 80% by 2030.

Meeting with Committee for Agriculture, Food and Marine – Deputy Jackie Cahill, Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice, Senator Tim Lombard and Senator Paul Daly

The committee highlighted the announcement of the €1.3 billion Forest Programme, aiming to offer grants and premiums for the planting of trees which will be between 46% and 66% higher than the previous rates. It will be the largest ever government investment in the sector, be 100% exchequer

funded and is now subject to state-aid approval by the European Commission – with the aim of re-engaging farmers with afforestation.

Ireland, like Wales and the rest of the UK, struggles to attract young people to the agricultural sector. The committee shared common concerns of the farming population, with 27% of farmers in Ireland reporting their wellbeing was ‘poor’ or ‘below average’ earlier this year. This was linked to several concerns, including workload, money, policy changes, regulation and farm succession.

Meeting with Committee for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Sport and Media – Senator Malcolm Byrne

During this meeting the committee highlighted a proposed tourism bed tax in Ireland, which has led to fears that it would shut businesses and lead to job losses. This nightly accommodation levy proposal has been criticised by the Irish Tourism Industry Confederation (ITIC) (an umbrella group of Irish hotels, accommodation providers, pub-owners, restaurants and attractions) because they believe many businesses will not survive if the Tax and Welfare Commission’s suggestion goes ahead. The ITIC has claimed that the measure would only serve to further hike inflation and make Ireland a less attractive place to visit at a time when purse strings across the world are being tightened due to a cost of living crisis.

The conversation around tourism led us to discuss the housing crisis in Ireland, whereby similarly to Wales high demand and lack of sufficient housebuilding has made it increasingly difficult for people and hardworking families to secure and afford adequate housing; compounded even further by the aftermath of the pandemic and hosting Ukrainian refugees who are tragically fleeing war.

We discussed the ‘Housing for All’ policy - the Irish government’s housing plan to 2030. It is a multi-annual, multi-billion euro plan which will improve Ireland’s housing system and deliver more homes of all types for people with different housing needs.

It was noted there are still significant challenges to be overcome, the ‘Housing for All plan’ is intended to deliver for the Irish people through increased housing supply; a range of affordable purchase and rental measures; new initiatives to tackle homelessness; and ongoing, long-term reforms of the housing and planning systems.

This Plan will increase new housing supply to an average of at least 33,000 new units per year over the next decade. This will include over 10,000 social homes each year over the next five years, with 9,500 of these being new-builds, and an average of 6,000 affordable homes for purchase or rent.

Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Employment – Deputy Richard Bruton, Deputy David Stanton and Senator Garret Ahearn

During this meeting I was informed that Irish trade hit a record of €842 billion last year, despite challenges faced from Covid and Brexit. This was fuelled by strong exports, which accounted for €451 billion of that total. The committee shared that the Republic’s ability to fend off recession is attributed to the resilience in their economy enabled by their ability to attract investment, trade goods and services internationally.

Almost 1/3 of the €165 billion worth of goods exported by Ireland last year went to the US, with them and the EU making up their key trading partners. There are concerns that current global struggles with supplies, climate change and rising energy costs due to the war in Ukraine could lead to a difficult performance for Irish trade.

Committee on Health – Senator Seán Kyne

During this meeting we discussed government's health care reform programme - *Sláintecare*. I found the cross party nature of this programme particularly interesting. In June 2016, the Dáil established the Committee on the Future of Healthcare with the goal of achieving cross-party, political agreement on the future direction of the health service, and devising a ten year plan for reform. The agreement among all political groupings in the Oireachtas on the extent of challenges facing the health service, and on the need to set out a vision for long-term change, was reflected in the Committee's Terms of Reference. The key elements included the recognition of:

- The severe pressures on the Irish health service, the unacceptable waiting times that arise for public patients, and the poor outcomes relative to cost
- The need for consensus at political level on the health service funding model based on population health needs
- The need to establish a universal single tier service where patients are treated on the basis of health need rather than on ability to pay
- That to maintain health and wellbeing and build a better health service, there is a need to examine some of the operating assumptions on which health policy and health services are based
- That the best health outcomes and value for money can be achieved by re-orientating the model of care towards primary and community care where the majority of people's health needs can be met locally and;
- The Oireachtas' intention to develop and adopt a 10 year plan for their health services, based on political consensus, that can deliver these changes.

We also discussed the Health Service Executive (HSE) of Ireland's announcement that it will now offer relocation packages worth up to over €4,000 to foreign health professionals who want to move to the country. This is the latest in a series of measures to solve the labour shortage in Irish public healthcare. This policy is aimed at accelerating recruitment to meet emerging and increasing future demand.