

# National Infrastructure Summit



Janet Lynch, circular and bioeconomy, Arup; Peter Walsh, chief executive, Transport Infrastructure Ireland; Michele Connolly, partner and head of corporate finance, KPMG; Michael Mahon, chief infrastructure officer, Eirgrid; Ivan Yates, summit host; Paul O'Neill, managing director, infrastructure and government advisory, KPMG; Caoimhe Donnelly, chief sustainability officer, CIE; Shay Cloherty, managing director, iQuest; Jonathan Reinhardt, senior consultant, Diatec Group



Anne Marie O'Connor, deputy regulator, Office of the Planning Regulator



Brian Sheehan (right), infrastructure delivery director, Uisce Éireann speaking to Ivan Yates, summit host

## Tackling the challenge of bringing country's vital infrastructure up to speed

The first National Infrastructure Summit came at an opportune time, with constructive discussions about the many issues facing Ireland in the next 20 years, and how to overcome them writes

**Quinton O'Reilly**

To say that the first-ever National Infrastructure Summit came at a crucial time would be an understatement.

Only a few days before it, a special report from the *Business Post* revealed how underinvestment in infrastructure is putting Ireland's economic growth at serious risk. For everyone attending the summit, the importance of a forum like this had never been greater.

In Croke Park on Tuesday, May 16, summit chair Ivan Yates, entrepreneur and broadcaster, mentioned that significant preparation had been put into the summit, matching the scale of the problems faced.

He made way for the ministerial address delivered by Paschal Donohoe, the Minister for Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform. Delivering his speech over video as he was in Brussels, the minister mentioned the many projects which have been successfully delivered since the National Development Plan (NDP) was laid out.

He pointed to the projects and programmes trackers which provide details for over 320 projects and 140 programmes, with almost 100 projects going for more than €50 million as of the first quarter of this year.

Following the minister's talk, David Moloney, secretary general for the Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform, gave an overview of the NDP.

Emphasising his determination to deliver on the plan, Moloney said any changes were designed to remove roadblocks and increase the rate of project completion.

"You have to drive decisions and have an administrative infrastructure to drive efficiency and we have the structures to do that," he said.

Shortly afterwards, the first panel discussion of the day focused on the broader landscape, and the challenges in delivering infrastructure in a world impacted by Brexit, Covid and the war in Ukraine.

This featured a packed panel which included Deirdre Frost, project manager (Digiwest) and policy analyst for the Western Development Commission; Donal Murphy, senior investment director for Ireland Strategic Investment Fund (ISIF); Maria O'Dwyer, head of asset



Paul O'Neill, managing director, Infrastructure & Government Advisory, KPMG; Maria O'Dwyer, head of asset management, Uisce Éireann; Donal Murphy, senior investment director, Ireland Strategic Investment Fund; Deirdre Frost, project manager (Digiwest) and policy analyst, Western Development Commission; PJ Rudden, external member, Project Ireland 2040 Delivery Board, Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform

Pictures: Maura Hickey



Eleni Harlan, managing consultant, Transport for London



Michael Danaher, infrastructure head of programmes and projects, Iarnród Éireann

management at Uisce Éireann; PJ Rudden, external member of Project Ireland 2040 Delivery Board; and Paul O'Neill, managing director of Infrastructure and Government Advisory at KPMG.

Speaking about the recent investment from Dexcom in Athenry, Frost highlighted that a major reason to focus on this urban area was the fact that its base sat on two motorways, the M6 and M18, allowing it to access a skilled workforce.

Quality infrastructure was critical for economic development and prosperity, especially in the north and west, areas that relied on industries like agriculture and tourism, said Frost.

"We need to refocus and redouble the original mandate of the planning framework, which is to support regional investment and development across all regions through the enabling of investment," she said.

When asked about the British open-book system, which has more collaboration regarding fiscal reward and other factors, and if Ireland has the balance right, O'Neill said we needed to do more.

"The measures initially are great, but certainly, when you look internationally like the UK, Canada and Australia, you have more collaboration and cooperation," he explained. "[There's] an ele-

ment of risk and reward sharing, and it's not just words: both sides working need more transparency."

The next panel discussed the challenges and opportunities in delivering sustainable infrastructure for Ireland.

Panellists included Caoimhe Donnelly, chief sustainability officer for CIE; Janet

**David Moloney, secretary general, Department of Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform**



Lynch, circular and bioeconomy lead at Arup; Michael Mahon, chief infrastructure officer for Eirgrid; and Peter Walsh, chief executive of Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII).

Mahon said Ireland had over 315 construction projects to deliver by 2030 and that of the many challenges faced, the big one is communication.

"The key challenge in delivering the projects over the last number of years is progressive consent and acceptance of the projects. What we've focused on is increasing and looking at new ways of public engagement and explaining why it's necessary."

Walsh added that while TII's overall challenge and opportunity was to decarbonise transport and save the planet, this required clear communication and guidance from the government and collaboration with key stakeholders.

"We need to work with industry and the private sector and incentivise innovation and risk-taking," he stated. "We need people to be able to make profits and that their endeavours are rewarded."

### Thinking creatively

Once the morning coffee break was done and dusted, it was onto international projects, starting with those located in London. Eleni Harlan, managing consultant for Transport for London, spoke about how it approached its infrastructure projects.

Alongside having accountability, simplifying the corporate structure and empowering people to get things done, the crucial thing to understand is that there isn't one right way to achieve your aims.

Instead, you have to be creative and think outside the box. Instead of thinking about transport, think about how to make spaces more liveable for the people in them.

"The healthy streets approach is... [about] designing places for people, not for journey time reliability or congestion," she said. "It's about thinking about the individual's experience from end to end."

Leading into this was Anne Marie O'Connor, deputy regulator for the Office of the Planning Regulator, who talked about the importance of investing in strong strategic spatial planning to ensure the delivery of critical infrastructure.

Speaking about the Planning and Development Bill 2022, she said the significant change it brought was support for a plan-led approach to development, which brought its own benefits.

"What it means is we can address key issues more thoroughly and make big decisions early. That always struck me working in development management and with planning applications. Why are all the big decisions left until the very end of the pipeline? Making hard decisions earlier gives greater certainty later."

The subject of governance was the focus for the next panel discussion featuring Ana-Maria Ruiz Rivadeneira, senior policy analyst on infrastructure, governance and PPP for the OECD; David O'Brien, construction adviser, Office of Government Procurement (OGP); and Mary Hughes, director and town planning consultant for the HRA and external board member for Project Ireland 2040.

When asked what key point the audience should take away from this discussion, Ruiz Rivadeneira stressed the importance of having informed talks early.

"The discussions have to happen at the right time with the right information," she said. "We can't have a discussion from a strategic point of view when it's about to be implemented; it needs to happen in advance... [So] you have a better way of quantifying the impact of investment and better communicating the cost and benefits."

Before the lunch break, Jonathan Reinhardt, senior consultant for Diatec

Group, gave a spotlight talk on digital collaboration, highlighting the role BIM and digital collaboration tools can play in bringing a vision to life.

### Buy-in from all parties

After the lunch break, the afternoon spotlighted three different matters. The first was a talk on how taxing SUVs and tolling trucks can help clean up transport at a pan-European level, delivered by James Nix, manager of Freight at Transport & Environment (T&E).

Touching on many areas, such as how studies found those driving at an elevated position drove more aggressively, as well as the frequency of accidents SUVs are in with cyclists and pedestrians, he highlighted the proposed threshold for taxation, which charges based on exceeded weight, width and height.

The penultimate talk was on delivering Uisce Éireann's Capital Investment Plan, in which Brian Sheehan, infrastructure delivery director for Uisce Éireann, spoke about how it aligns with the NDP.

Highlighting just how much the organisation has achieved in the past ten years - it invested over €10 billion in water across the country during this period - he acknowledged there was more to do and that sustainability should be built into each project step.

"We aim to become net zero by 2040, we are looking at how we achieve that, and we're looking at how sustainability becomes a BAU (business as usual) activity. We build it into our processes, our decision making, our appraisal models, our procurement contracts, and we can play a leading role in that space into the nature and scale of work we do."

The final talk was on Irish rail, with Michael Danaher, infrastructure head of programmes and projects for Iarnród Éireann, who took the audience on a whirlwind tour of how it is operating.

Covering its development of both capacity and flexibility, Danaher referenced the earlier Transport for London talk by mentioning the development of regional cities like Cork and Waterford.

"It's buy-in from developers, investors, government and all the agencies," he said. "Everyone comes together and has a common mission to make sure... your connectivity and housing demands are met, and then you improve your inter-city connectivity."

Bringing what will be the first of many National Infrastructure Summits to a close, Yates took away many positives, including thought leadership, transparency and some accountability with great scope for future summits to explore.

"We look forward to building on this summit to ensure that the NDP is implemented," he concluded.