

National Infrastructure Summit



Tom Ferris, economist; Martina Finn, managing director, AtkinsRéalis Ireland; David Moloney, secretary general, Department of Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform; and James Dinneny, strategic advisory lead, Ireland and Northern Ireland, AECOM



Leah O'Dwyer, founder and chief executive, ZeroMission; Derval Cummins, director of transportation, AECOM; Paul Sheridan, director of main contracting services, Construction Industry Federation; Jennifer McGrath, head of road safety and micromobility, Dublin City Council; Aebhin Cawley, managing director, Scott Cawley



Sean Sweeney, Metro Link project, director delivered the afternoon keynote on the MetroLink system and its challenges and opportunities

Decisive action is vital for building our country's future infrastructure

Infrastructure is a key building block of society and with both water and the energy grid requiring upgrades, action is needed, writes **Quinton O'Reilly**

The Third National Infrastructure Summit, held at the Radisson Hotel on Thursday, May 8, brought together the major stakeholders in planning, construction, and development.

Summit chair Ivan Yates, an entrepreneur and broadcaster, welcomed everyone and clarified the challenges ahead. With Ireland's population expected to hit 5.8 million by 2030, there's even more reason to act now.

"There are some things I need to just say from the outset; things are not okay," he said. "We've gone from a situation where moving from concept to completion is about eight years. We've moved to planning alone taking eight years, and the subsequent issues [add to it]."

The event started with a keynote government address from Jack Chambers, Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform, and Digitalisation. Describing infrastructure as "the silent backbone of our economic prosperity", he highlighted the importance of taking action now.

"This government believes that investing in infrastructure is an absolute, time-sensitive necessity," he said.

"The total capital investment in 2025 will be over €15 billion, and what we build and accelerate over the coming years will set the standard for decades to come."

This led to a fireside chat as Yates chatted to Matthew King, co-head of infrastructure and head of major project advisory and asset management at KPMG; and Paul O'Neill, co-head of infrastructure and head of infrastructure strategy and commercial advisory at KPMG.

Both were encouraged by Minister Chambers' address with O'Neill highlighting the importance of having political champions to push major infrastructure projects.

When asked where to commit resources, O'Neill mentioned that prioritising is the key, and not losing sight of the opportunity to bring private investment to help underpin infrastructure delivery.

King added another element to focus on: messaging. While there's a significant focus on the future economic benefits of upgrading infrastructure, he said stakeholders need to realise that this is a national emergency which requires substantial upgrades to our energy grid, water supply, and more.

This all led on to the day's first panel discussion, dealing with delivering major infrastructure projects faster, smarter, and better. This featured David Moloney, secretary general at the Department of Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform; James Dinneny, strategic advisory lead for Ireland and Northern Ireland at AECOM; Martina Finn, managing director at AtkinsRéalis Ireland; and Tom Ferris, economist.

Elaborating on some of the challenges already faced with securing private and public investment on a multi-annual basis, Finn mentioned the importance of building confidence in investors and the supply chain and that the government's actions can't happen quickly enough for everyone in the room.

"There need to be metrics in place to make sure it's happening quickly enough and to unblock some of the planning and major infrastructure projects," she elaborated. "Because if that doesn't happen



James Dinneny, strategic advisory lead, Ireland and Northern Ireland, AECOM; Sarang Jape, head of sales for utilities & smart grids, Schneider Electric UK & Ireland; Juliana de Araujo de Moraes, tender director Ireland, Schneider Electric; James Delahunt, corporate finance partner, KPMG; Aoife O'Grady, head of zero emission vehicles Ireland, Department of Transport; Shay Cioherty, director of revenue, experiences & reader revenues, Business Post; Matthew King, co-head of infrastructure & head of major project advisory and asset management, KPMG; Aebhin Cawley, managing director, Scott Cawley; and Paul O'Neill, co-head of infrastructure & head of infrastructure strategy and commercial advisory, KPMG

this year or next, there will be delays."

Before the coffee break, Yates had another fireside chat, this time with John Moran, mayor of Limerick. Talking about local governance, he recommended changing how we view land in Ireland.

Instead of waiting to buy when an investment or project is decided, view it as a strategic asset to buy first, as it provides options in the future.

"The point I'd make to the Taoiseach is take the land," he said. "There are no more strategic assets that the country can have in the Strategic Investment Fund than the public land for the next 100 years."

Improving the grid

After networking and coffee, attendees returned to their seats, and it was time for the next fireside chat, this time about water and flood management.

Maria O'Dwyer, infrastructure delivery director at Uisce Éireann, and Seán O'Neill McPartlin, director of housing policy at Progress Ireland, took the stage.

When asked how Uisce Éireann could improve efficiency, O'Dwyer stated that the organisation is on a massive journey to meet current and future demand.

"Time is the biggest impact on money, and if we can get those decisions made faster, we can get onto site faster and save a lot of money."

"We're on a massive journey, we are building a new utility, we've inherited a system that was managed locally with minimal investment, so we've a huge journey to go on there with digitalisation... and deliver better services for the public."

The focus went onto future energy needs, and Maurice Mortell, chair of Digital Infrastructure Ireland; and Sarang Jape, head of sales for utilities and smart grids at Schneider Electric UK & Ireland, chatted about data centres.

Jape mentioned how data centres can give back to society, which includes feeding energy back to the grid.

"As the end users are ultimately funding the data centres, they're consuming



Emma Silke, electrification manager, network development & electrification, ESB Networks; Dr Eva Barrett, director of policy & regulation, Irish Solar Energy Association; Ivan Yates, summit host; Aoife O'Grady, head of zero emission vehicles Ireland, Department of Transport; and Justin Moran, director of external affairs, Wind Energy Ireland



Jack Chambers, Minister for Public Expenditure & Infrastructure

more and more data, data centre operators are responsible for giving back to society and can do so in multiple ways," he said.

With the lunch break soon approaching, it was time for the final panel of the morning: developing the national grid to meet future demands.

This panel included Aoife O'Grady, head of Zero Emission Vehicles Ireland at the Department of Transport; Dr Eva Barrett, director of policy and regulation at the Irish Solar Energy Association; Emma Silke, electrification manager Network Development & Electrification, ESB Networks; and Justin Moran, director of external affairs at Wind Energy Ireland.

Dr Eva Barrett was clear in her thoughts on messaging, saying that we can achieve what we want to do, but the approach needs to change.

She mentioned that solar and wind can only reach their potential if the grid can support them, whereas Ireland wastes

some of the power generated from these sources.

"We lost 7.1 per cent of solar-generated electricity last year, and that's quite a lot, and that has a chilling effect on the sector," she said. "Those behind projects lose that remuneration... that sends a message to suppliers that you don't know how much you're going to be compensated."

After the lunch break, Yates welcomed everyone back and then proceeded to the next government address on offshore energy and transport.

Jerry Buttimer, Minister of State for Community Development, Charities and Rural Transport, gave the address, saying that he knew "firsthand that strong infrastructure builds strong community", and the crucial role it plays in modern life.

"If infrastructure were at a dinner party, transport would be the gift that arrives early, stays late and brings dessert," he added. "Its features are part of every national challenge that we face. Housing, climate, productivity, rural development and social cohesion."

The next panel, which focused on offshore energy and its future, included

Donal Murphy, senior investment director at Ireland Strategic Investment Fund (ISIF); Kieran Collins, director of government and infrastructure at KPMG Ireland; Michael Farrington, head of function for ORE Ports Facilitation at the Department of Transport; and Vanessa O'Connell, project director for Dublin Array Offshore Wind Farm at RWE.

Collins stated that there is much to learn from other jurisdictions in how they addressed offshore wind farms, such as in the UK, to help influence projects like SC-DMAP (South Coast Designated Maritime Area Plan) and the national DMAP.

"We can look forward and take lessons from other jurisdictions in the next phase of the SC-DMAP and beyond," he said. "The focus should be on SC-DMAP and National DMAP, [and asking] if we need a change of strategy and approach for those auctions going forward. We will learn lessons along the way from the planning process as well."

Next on stage was Dr Sean Sweeney, programme director for MetroLink, who delivered the afternoon keynote on the MetroLink system and its challenges and opportunities.

Dr Sweeney was clear that the road from planning to completion is a rocky experience, but the benefits far outweigh the obstacles. Referencing other metro projects in cities such as Copenhagen and Amsterdam, he mentioned that they faced issues but were positively received once they were up and running.

Metro project

"Every major metro project has a rocky gestation," he said. "For Copenhagen, once it opened, it's changed the city, with huge regeneration and passenger satisfaction of nearly 99 per cent."

"Again, there were huge delays for Amsterdam, but now it's the backbone of its public transport network, and these projects tend to overperform in business cases."

The penultimate session was a fireside chat with Peter Walsh, chief executive of Transport Infrastructure Ireland, who discussed active travel infrastructure. Throughout the chat, he mentioned the need to see infrastructure in practical terms and not forget that investment doesn't happen in a vacuum.

"When we build infrastructure, we're not burning money," he said.

"The economic return is what we expect to happen in a modern society. If we're building the MetroLink, we're spending money to develop it, and at the end, we have infrastructure that helps with the functionality of society."

To round up the day, the last panel was on delivering a low-carbon transport infrastructure. This included Aebhin Cawley, managing director at Scott Cawley; Derval Cummins, director of transportation at AECOM; Jennifer McGrath, head of road safety and micromobility at Dublin City Council; Leah O'Dwyer, founder and chief executive of ZeroMission; and Paul Sheridan, director of main contracting services at Construction Industry Federation.

When asked about decarbonising public transport, Cummins mentioned the importance of giving the public options to change their behaviour.

"When it comes to decarbonising transport, we can't rely on electrification and alternative fuel and continue to have the same behaviours," she said. "The rest has to come from behaviour change. We must change how we move around, and it can't come without the major public transport we need."

With the summit now ended for another year, Yates concluded it by reiterating how action needs to be taken now, saying, "We're running out of time to get this right", but was optimistic that the discussion featured the necessary optimism and realism to push stakeholders into action.