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Programme of co-operation between Ireland and the United Kingdom

The Taoiseach and the Prime Minister have published a progress report on the wide-ranging programme of bilateral co-operation which the two Governments had agreed, earlier this year, to take forward and intensify.

In it they noted the historical and geographical links between Ireland and the United Kingdom, which were reflected in the common travel area, in reciprocal voting and residence rights and in social, professional and family ties which are uniquely close among European Union countries. It was appropriate that these links should be matched by similarly close co-operation between Government Departments in the two countries.

They welcomed the many personal contacts which had been established at Ministerial and official levels in the few months since their two Governments had come to office. They reaffirmed that there was mutual interest in building on those contacts in ways which would bring concrete benefits in the many fields where there is scope to develop further the significant co-operation which is already going on, as described in separate reports being released today. Transport links, the fight against crime and drugs, health and food safety, the protection of the environment in the Irish Sea, and school and youth exchanges are but a few of these areas.

The European Union Jobs Summit on 20-21 November had emphasised the need to improve the employability of people within a changing labour market. The Prime Minister and the Taoiseach noted that both Governments had accorded high priority to improvements in education needed to respond to modern demands. Both Governments had announced programmes of action, which recognised the important place of information and communications technology both as a tool of education, and as an essential skill for young people entering the jobs market.

The Taoiseach and the Prime Minister undertook that both countries would share views on the use of the new technologies in education, and would consider together how their potential might be used co-operatively in education, not only to develop individuals' capacities and sustain competitive advantage, but also to improve communication and to draw together the young people of their respective societies.

PROGRAMME OF CO-OPERATION BETWEEN IRELAND AND THE UNITED KINGDOM

1. There is a unique relationship between Ireland and the United Kingdom, stemming from their geographical proximity and shared history and from the resulting close intermingling of people and cultural influences. This uniqueness has long been reflected in many special arrangements, such as common travel area and reciprocal residence and voting rights and, in the non-governmental area, in shared organisational and other close arrangements across a wide range of professional, cultural and sporting fields.

2. These links have been paralleled by similarly close co-operation between Government Departments in the two countries. These were given further impetus in December 1995, when the Irish and British Governments agreed to strengthen such East-West co-operation between Departments of State and to facilitate non-Governmental contacts. The two Governments issued a statement in the margins of the European Council at Noordwijk, Holland, on 23 May 1997, which identified further potential areas of co-operation. The Prime Minister and the Taoiseach confirmed their commitment to taking forward and developing this programme of bilateral co-operation, when they met in London on 3 July 1997. This paper summarises the progress which is recorded in a fuller report.

3. Since 23 May the Taoiseach and the Prime Minister have met on four occasions when they have discussed Northern Ireland and bilateral issues. There have been many visits of Ministers to both countries. The main areas of East-West co-operation are summarised below. These are in addition to the many contacts between Northern Ireland Ministers and Departments and their Irish counterparts.

Foreign and European Union Affairs

4. The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs visited Dublin on 3 November where he met the Taoiseach and the Minister for Foreign Affairs. The subjects discussed included European and international, as well as bilateral issues. The Secretary of State for International Development met the Minister of State in the Department of Foreign Affairs with responsibility for overseas development, for talks on development issues.

Justice and Home Affairs

5. The Permanent Secretary of the Home Office and the Secretary General of the Department of Justice Equality and Law Reform met on 18 July 1997, and this was followed by a meeting between the Home Secretary and the Minister of

Justice in the margins of European Union meetings in Luxembourg on 9/10 October 1997.

6. The two Departments have agreed to co-operate more closely on a range of criminal matters, including the confiscation of assets from convicted criminals and combating organised crime and drug trafficking. It was agreed that there should be more systematic co-operation on immigration at operational level, in support of the common travel area. It was also hoped that there would be further co-operation on asylum matters, and on prison issues. Both Departments agreed to implement a more structured programme of co-operation, with dedicated meetings on specialised subjects, including regular meetings to discuss developments in the criminal law.

Ireland/Scotland

7. In June 1997 the Minister for Education and Industry in the Scottish Office launched the Columba Initiative to foster links between Gaelic speakers in Scotland and the Island of Ireland. The Minister visited Dublin on 20/23 October 1997 for discussions with the Minister of State at the Department of Arts Heritage, Gaeltacht and the Islands, and there will be continuing contacts between officials on the Initiative. In the course of the year there has been a range of official-level contacts between the Scottish Office and Irish Departments of State, including schools inspection matters, violence in schools, police training, and support arrangements for tourism.

Ireland/Wales

8. A major part of co-operation between Ireland and Wales concerns transport links. Most of this work takes place under the European Union INTERREG programme (which is aimed at developing cross border co-operation in border and coastal areas). The aims of the joint Ireland/Wales programme are to promote networks of co-operation across the Irish Sea and to improve transport links between and through the two regions and to the rest of the EU. A related transport initiative, BRIDGE-IT, which is expected to begin at the turn of the year, will provide information about traffic conditions and public transport in Ireland and Wales.

Transport

9. Transport co-operation in 1997 has focused on facilitating the movement of passengers and goods between Ireland and the United Kingdom, and into Europe, building on the major improvements effected in 1996. Improvements have been made to the Cork-Dublin-Belfast-Larne-Stranraer rail link. There has

been significant addition to capacity on sea-ferry and air links and substantial increases in passenger and goods movements. A pre-security clearance system for rail freight containers for subsequent transit through the Channel Tunnel has been put in place, obviating the need for subsequent checks. There has been close co-operation between the two Governments on enforcing and approving standards of marine safety, both in relation to the inspection of ships and search and rescue activities.

Trade and industrial matters

10. The Minister of State in the Department of Trade and Industry visited Dublin on 24-25 July, where he met the Minister of State in the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, members of the Dublin Chamber of Commerce and officials of the Irish Trade Board. Discussions included EU matters and wider world trade issues.

11. The United Kingdom and Ireland enjoy a strong trading relationship. Two-way trade between the two countries amounted to £15.6 billion in 1996. Ireland is the United Kingdom's fifth largest export market and the United Kingdom is Ireland's largest - accounting for 25% of all exports. There had been a significant rise in trade missions visiting Ireland from the United Kingdom - 21 missions in 1996 compared with just 2 in 1993. Many of the companies who had participated in these missions were new or inexperienced exporters. There is close co-operation on matters relating to consumer affairs.

Social Security

12. It is hoped that the Minister for Social, Community and Family Affairs will visit London shortly to meet the Secretary of State for Social Security to discuss co-operation between the two Governments on social security and related matters. Earlier this year officials of the two Departments met in Dublin to discuss a high level Memorandum of Understanding on social security fraud. This followed a joint review of 1,500 potentially fraudulent social security cases which led to significant savings. The two countries are co-operating in developing the exchange of electronic data for social security purposes. Electronic links have been established to speed up claims to sickness benefit, child benefit and pensions.

Agriculture, fisheries and food safety matters

13. On 21 July and 24 October 1997 Ministers from the two Governments met to discuss agriculture, fishing and food safety issues. In subsequent official discussions on rabies control it was agreed that the two Departments should

keep each other informed about their assessment of possible changes to quarantine arrangements. If and when changes were made, the aim should be to preserve a single common area for quarantine purposes. Officials also exchanged information about their thinking on food safety issues and agreed to co-operate further on these issues as policy developed.

Employment

14. A seminar between the relevant Departments in Great Britain, Ireland and Northern Ireland took place in London in November 1997 on the theme of Welfare To Work. This followed a similar event in Dublin in 1996 which looked at ways of tackling long-term unemployment. Work is in hand to identify ways in which the two countries can co-operate on youth training initiatives, with the aim of providing skills for young people in the labour market.

Education

15. There is a continuing programme of school partnerships which takes place under EU educational co-operation programmes. In the academic year 1997/1998 the respective agencies responsible for youth exchanges intend to strengthen the bilateral relationship through the linking of schools, curriculum development projects, a small programme of shadow visits for head teachers, and the establishment of links between local education authorities in the two countries. It has also been agreed that an important area for further development is in the field of information and communication technology, including networks for schools. A meeting took place on this subject on 18 May 1997, and papers have been exchanged on linking schools to the Internet. The respective Cabinet Ministers responsible for Education are to meet on 17 December to discuss and take forward co-operation in this and other areas.

Youth exchanges

16. The organisation, Encounter, which promotes exchanges between the two countries on social and economic issues, organised a Youth Conference in Dublin in June. This brought together Irish and British professionals involved in youth work and policy development on youth, to discuss ways of facilitating and expanding youth exchanges. The two governments have agreed to proceed with follow-up action on the basis of proposals submitted from the Conference.