

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

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