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Senedd Cymru | Welsh Parliament

Pwyllgor Diwylliant, Cyfathrebu, y Gymraeg, Chwaraeon, a Chysylltiadau Rhyngwladol |  
Culture, Communications, Welsh Language, Sport, and International Relations Committee  
Cysylltiadau rhwng Cymru ac Iwerddon | Wales-Ireland relations

Ymateb gan: Sefydliad Iechyd Cyhoeddus Cymru | Response from: Institute of Public Health

Culture, Communications,  
Welsh Language, Sport, and  
International Relations  
Committee, Welsh Parliament

E: [SeneddCulture@senedd.wales](mailto:SeneddCulture@senedd.wales)

24th February 2023

**Re: Institute of Public Health response to Inquiry into Wales-Ireland relations**

Dear Sir/Madam,

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the Culture, Communications, Welsh Language, Sport, and International Relations Committee inquiry into Wales-Ireland relations.

The Institute of Public Health (IPH) works to inform public policy to support healthier populations in Ireland and Northern Ireland. As such, our response focuses on the opportunities that this model of international engagement provides for population health. It also provides recommendations as to how the current model could be enhanced to respond to current and future public health challenges.

We have presented our feedback under each key area of interest posed by the Committee:

**1. Wales-Ireland relations post-Brexit**

The Institute welcomes the commitment to strengthen and formalise bilateral relations between Wales and Ireland. Overall, we see this as an opportunity to enhance transboundary collaboration to improve and protect population health.

At present, health is not included as a key priority area within the Shared Statement or Joint Action Plan, yet it is central to all others outlined. Working to improve population health is associated with wider societal and economic benefits. Transboundary cooperation and partnership working towards common health goals can offer economies of scale, particularly through knowledge exchange and support.

Therefore, the Institute suggest that health is included as a key priority area going forward.

Ireland and Wales, and the wider United Kingdom, share many population health challenges. Rising levels of chronic disease, an ageing and diversifying population, and the detrimental impact of international crises such as the cost-of-living and climate change are challenges faced by all governments. Major ports operate in Wales and Ireland, and as globalisation and international trade increases so too does the need for a concerted effort to manage related health risks; such as infectious disease transmission, food safety issues and even humanitarian risks from human trafficking and displacement of vulnerable people.

Poor health is associated with substantial costs for the individual, but also costs to the health service and wider society. Prevention of disease is key, and high-level leadership is needed to support cohesive policies aimed at reducing major disease risk factors at a population level; such as alcohol use, smoking, physical inactivity and unhealthy diets. Strong connections already exist between key health organisations in Ireland and Wales, with the work of Public Health Wales being notable as highly influential within public health. However, a high-level, formalised relationship between the two countries which prioritises health will undoubtedly strengthen this further at a regional and local level.

Geopolitical factors, such as Britain's exit from the European Union, can be obstacles to transboundary collaboration on policy. There are benefits to be gained, however, in addressing these shared challenges in partnership. Learning from the COVID-19 pandemic has shown the value that formalised pathways for transboundary cooperation can hold for implementing health policy. From the outset, close partnership working was required between government departments and across borders to align the policy direction, for knowledge exchange and to enable strategic cooperation. Going forward, a similar approach which harnesses the benefit of joined up working should be used to respond to and prepare for other shared health threats. This approach would benefit from high-level leadership and formalised pathways with the shared goal of improving health and wellbeing.

## **2. Current approach to bilateral engagement between the Welsh and Irish governments and whether it is fit for purpose post-Brexit**

Britain's exit from the European Union has highlighted the importance of formal governance structures to facilitate cooperation between countries. The Institute welcome the formal bilateral engagement structure that has been applied to strengthen Wales-Ireland relations and see it as an essential platform to build stronger collaboration on public health.

Whilst we cannot comment on particulars of engagement structures and processes, we are supportive of the overall high-level commitment that has been made and see it as symbolic of a collaborative approach that is needed at all levels, across sectors and between countries.

Regular evaluation of the approach would be welcomed to evaluate the effectiveness of the approach and to identify urgent or topical areas of high value to public health and wellbeing that require renewed leadership and collaboration.

### **3. The Ireland-Wales Shared Statement and Joint Action Plan (2021-2025) as an approach to international engagement**

We welcome the Wales-Ireland Shared Statement and Joint Action Plan as a high-level structure to support transboundary engagement. The United Nations Sustainable Development Framework is an excellent framework on which to base bilateral engagement priorities, and it is encouraging to see it referenced throughout the Joint Action Plan. However, we would highlight to the Committee that, as it stands, health has not been included as a priority area for cooperation. It is our recommendation that health should be a priority area in this and all similar transboundary engagement policies. This will be further explored under section 5 'Priority areas for cooperation between Ireland and Wales'.

### **4. The funding of future cooperation and collaborative projects between Ireland and Wales**

Sufficient, recurrent funding to support transboundary collaboration between Wales and Ireland will be essential. We would like to bring the Shared Island Unit to the Committee's attention as a model for funding future projects. This whole of government initiative sits within the Department of the Taoiseach and works alongside the Northern Ireland Executive and British Government to address strategic challenges faced on the island of Ireland. Please access the Government of Ireland website for more information on the Shared Island Initiative: [gov.ie](http://gov.ie) - [Shared Island \(www.gov.ie\)](http://www.gov.ie).

### **5. Priority areas for cooperation between Ireland and Wales**

At present, health is not included as a priority area for cooperation. The Institute recommend that health is added as a core priority area in this and all other transboundary engagement policies.

The health of a population is impacted by many factors, known as the determinants of health. Some factors cannot be altered, such as age and genetic make-up, but many are outside of an individual's control, such as the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work and age. These conditions are known as the environmental and socioeconomic determinants of health and are shaped by regional and global factors such as the distribution of power and resources. As such, health is the responsibility of many different policy sectors working together, rather than the health sector alone. This is known as the 'Health in All Policies' (HiAP) approach, which can be used to address complex health challenges, and to support high-level government goals that impact multiple sectors, including health. There is an opportunity to apply a 'HiAP' approach in strengthening Wales-Ireland relations. This approach is recognised as a cornerstone of international cooperation and is already used at a global level; for example, to implement the International Health Regulations to prevent and control infectious disease outbreaks, chemical and nuclear accidents and other public health threats of international concern.

The current Joint Action Plan is based on a commitment to sustainable development, which is very welcome and highly applicable to health. We are particularly supportive of Priority Action 2, 'Climate and Sustainability', given the detrimental impact climate change continues to have on human health. Health is a key component of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); directly under SDG 3 'Good Health and Wellbeing' but also under many others including SDG1 'No poverty', SDG 2 'Zero Hunger', SDG 'Quality Education', SDG 5 'Gender Equality', SDG 6 'Clean Water and Sanitation', SDG 7 'Affordable and Clean Energy', SDG 8 'Decent Work and Economic Growth', SDG 10 'Reduce Inequalities', SDG 11 'Sustainable Cities and Communities', SDG 13 'Climate Action' and SDG 16 'Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions'. Similarly, health is central to all priority areas that have been identified within the Joint Action Plan and should be the overarching priority on which all transboundary engagement is centred.

Including health as priority action within this plan could hold the following benefits:

- Economies of scale, as many actions that are positive for health tend to also benefit the wider economy and the environment; for example, policies aiming to improve physical activity levels and reduce air pollution through encouraging active travel
- Endorse a 'Health in All Policies' approach to improving health and health equity and addressing complex policy challenges which span across government departments and borders
- Horizon scanning for shared public health threats to support a collaborative, planned response
- Establish formal networks and frameworks to support action on shared public health threats
- Strengthen infectious disease outbreak coordination and response, including through collaborative working between port health authorities, as well as pandemic preparedness and emergency planning
- Knowledge exchange and support on the development of policies and legislation of mutual interest. For example, alcohol-related harm is a substantial public health concern shared by all five nations. Minimum Unit Pricing (MUP) of alcohol has been introduced in Ireland and Wales. Evaluating these policies from a public health perspective and sharing learning, particularly with those countries sharing a land border who have not implemented the policy, will help to progress public health efforts.

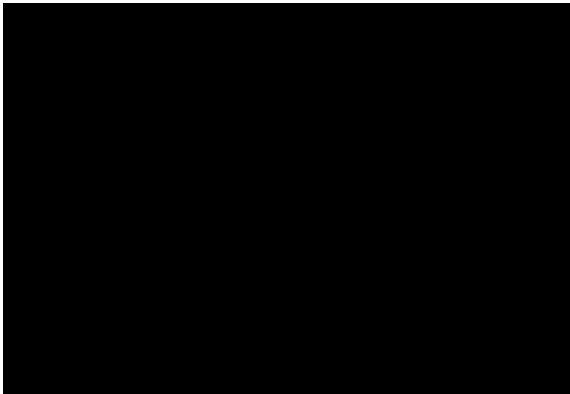
## **6. Opportunities in developing parliamentary relations between the Senedd and Oireachtas**

The Institute welcomes the intention to '*deepen parliamentary links by supporting Senedd Cymru and the Oireachtas to explore opportunities for exchanges on shared challenges such as legislating for language policy, equality and sustainability.*' We recommend this is extended to include legislature of relevance to health. This may be directly in relation to risk factors for chronic disease e.g. through the regulation of

unhealthy commodities or may pertain to wider determinants of health e.g. legislation on air quality or road safety. We also note that the British Irish council does not include health as a defined work sector, and again would encourage that health is included as a key area for collaboration going forward.

The Institute are happy to support the Inquiry further if required. Please do not hesitate to contact us should you require more information or wish to discuss any points we have raised.

Yours sincerely,



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