

Wednesday 11 January 2017,
Launch of Engineers Ireland Strategy 2017- 2020

DERMOT BYRNE SPEECH (c. 10 mins)

Minister, Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen, good evening. The launch of the new Engineers Ireland Strategy for 2017-2020 is indeed an auspicious occasion, and represents the culmination of a lot of hard work and dedication of our Engineers Ireland Council and Executive Board, our staff, our volunteers and our valued partners.

I'd like to echo Engineers Ireland Director General, Caroline Spillane's welcome to the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Paschal Donohoe TD who has kindly agreed to launch our strategy, and I would like to also thank all our guests, our Engineers Ireland members and our staff for taking time out to be here.

The Minister himself of course has a strong grounding in engineering principles, having served as Minister for Transport for several years and, during his time as member of Dublin City Council, serving as Chair of the Environment & Engineering Strategic Policy Committee.

Caroline has already very concisely and effectively delved into the mechanics of our new strategy, and our vision 'to foster a community of creative professionals delivering solutions for society'. So, my thoughts today are focused mainly on expanding more on the ethos behind our approach, and the common ground that exists between our values - relating to Progress, Community, Trustworthiness and Excellence - and the critical work that is being undertaken by the Minister in his department.

In working for the common good, planning for the long-term and ensuring our society gets value for money in investment, I strongly believe the activities of Engineers Ireland, and the engineering sector by extension, have clear parallels with the objectives and functions of the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. We both seek to deliver well-managed and well-targeted public services in a modernised, effective and accountable manner.

In this respect, it is very positive to hear the Minister himself recently outline his priorities to include commitments to progress capital initiatives in transport, flood prevention, health, broadband, and school-building, as well as a focus on long-term investment. This is something we at Engineers Ireland would strongly endorse.

Engineers Ireland wants to work with the Minister and Government to ensure the total capital spending package of over €4.5 billion announced in the Budget across a range of government departments, will be effective in progressing spend on regional and local roads, flood relief schemes and the opening of LUAS cross city in 2017. This increase of almost €400 million on 2016 represents a welcome 26% increase in capital expenditure in comparison to 2014 and we vehemently support the Minister's view that progressing high-capacity public transport should be a priority.

Additionally, while some progress has been made in the last number of years relating to broadband infrastructure, an area hugely underpinned by the contribution of engineers, there are still some frustrating delays within rural areas. The single most outstanding issue here is the award of the National Broadband Plan (NBP) intervention to a contractor and to confirm the deployment schedule nationally. The €15 million earmarked to help progress the Plan should facilitate progress on this.

We also warmly welcome the Minister's decision to bring forward the review of the capital plan to this month, and the additional €2.2 billion committed to housing and to housing-related infrastructure. In this context, we also believe now is an opportune time to consider how long-term infrastructure planning is actually done in Ireland.

Engineers Ireland believes a single infrastructure unit is needed to sustainably plan investment in key areas such as housing, transport, education, health, energy, water and the digital economy.

As things stand, planning and delivery in these areas are spread across Government departments, each competing for finite funding, with multiple layers of decision-making and little central oversight. We believe an independent assessment of our long-term infrastructure needs is required, and then a single planning and delivery unit charged with prioritising and driving critical initiatives should be established, as in the UK and Switzerland. This would support coordination, delivery and execution to ensure we can meet our infrastructural needs going forward to support sustainable economic prosperity.

I read with interest an article recently where the Minister alluded to the potential friction between a growing economy and poor infrastructure and I believe the point is well made. Centralised decision-making and implementation quickens up the infrastructure development process hugely. Engineers Ireland contends that a single-planning unit has the capacity to eliminate this friction in a cost-effective and de-politicised manner.

Additionally, on behalf of Engineers Ireland, and at a personal level as Climate Change is a subject I feel very strongly about, I also believe the Minister's recent commitment to ensure our infrastructure development meets the requirements set down by the Paris agreement is extremely timely.

And Ireland is making inroads in this respect. In electricity, the transition to a zero-carbon electricity supply is already well underway, with renewable sources now above 25 per cent of the electricity mix, and with a real prospect of achieving the 40 per cent target by 2020, provided we stay the course. In the heating sector we must increase the energy efficiency of our residential homes through a process of deep retrofit, and then replace their heating systems with low carbon heating systems. In transport, an area the Minister is extensively familiar with, there must be an element of behavioural change to support Ireland's emissions-reductions objectives. Citizens must want to change from oil-based transport, and/or be incentivised to do so. The extension of relief from vehicle registration tax on electric vehicles and hybrid vehicles in Budget 2017 was positive in this respect, as are the broader roll-out of bicycle lanes in Dublin and the Dublin Bike scheme. With road-based transport still equating to 80.6% of all journeys (and private cars making up the majority of that figure at 55.8%), low-carbon alternatives have the potential to make a real impact over time on our environment. Essentially, the engineering sector is ideally equipped to

contribute to the long-term national objective of a zero-carbon economy in a cost-effective manner through the technological innovation and ingenuity that is the hallmark of our profession.

The water infrastructure challenge of course remains an intractable one. While the Expert Commission Report on the Funding of Domestic Public Water Services in Ireland was a welcome addition to the debate relating to water infrastructure, the critical need to secure investment for current and future infrastructure requirements in this area cannot be delayed. Within the annual review of infrastructure in the Engineers Ireland State of Ireland 2016 report, water supply and wastewater infrastructure in Ireland achieved 'D' grade status - highlighting below standard services which are poorly maintained, frequently unable to meet capacity and requiring immediate investment. Engineers Ireland is determined to work with the relevant departments of government to ensure that the badly needed improvements required by our water infrastructure are actualized.

The Government's renewed focus on the importance of STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and maths) in schools, as evident in the recent publication of the STEM Education Review Group report and the Action Plan for Education, is also very encouraging. The upturn in student interest in engineering courses is extremely positive, but the economic demand for engineering skills continues to totally outstrip supply. In order to future-proof the country's sustainable economic growth, we need to concertedly build on the renewed student interest in engineering.

Ireland of course is a small-open economy, and we do not operate in a vacuum. The UK's decision to leave the European Union, and the associated uncertainty, is a looming challenge for our members, as well as for the broader economy, over the coming years. Our sample survey of 3,000 of our member engineers in Northern Ireland, Republic of Ireland and the GB region late last year was encouraging in that it showed that the sector is robust and resourceful, with organisations already adapting to the new Brexit business reality. 40pc said they were proactively changing their business strategy to adapt to the new economic reality of Brexit, with most respondents optimistic that the major impact of Brexit will not be felt for several years. We are acutely focused on helping our members adapt competitively to a national and global economy in great flux, and so we move forward with cautious optimism in an uncertain world.

Engineers Ireland has changed a lot in the past 180 years and we need to continue to adapt to ensure we maintain our relevance to the profession, to the economy, and to the broader society. While we in Engineers Ireland adapt to the complex world around us, some things won't change. We will continue to play a vital role in improving the standards of engineering practice in Ireland, greatly facilitated by the dedication of our volunteer members who make an invaluable contribution to their profession. It's only by working together in vibrant collaboration with our 23,000 members, the engineering profession, the Minister's department, Government and industry partners that we will be able to achieve our ambition to improve society and encourage and educate future generations of engineers.

In summary, a key facet of our new strategic mission is to foster long-term planning and investment in infrastructure that will help secure Ireland's future success in a stable and sustainable manner – a vision which is clearly shared by the Minister. We now want to launch the next phase of our organisational development by making Engineers Ireland the dynamo in a community of creative professionals that are making this a reality by delivering real and long-term solutions for society.

I want to finish by joining with Caroline in expressing sincere thanks to everyone who has contributed to the development of our new strategy. I'd like now to call on you to welcome the Minister, and I invite him to address us and to formally launch our strategy.

Thank you.

(Dermot Byrne, President of Engineers Ireland)