

Minutes of the 460th NESC Council Meeting (in person), Thursday, 26th March 2026 @ 10am

The Clock Tower, Department of Education, Marlborough Street, Dublin 1

Attendance: Liz Canavan (Dep Chair), Brid O'Brien, Seán Healy, Naomi Feely, Ian Talbot, Diarmuid Torney, Nichola Mallon, Seamus Coffey, Colette Byrne, Niamh Moore-Cherry, Chris van Egeraat, TJ Flanagan, John Enright, Damian McDonald, Caroline Whyte, Jerry Mac Evilly, Andrew Brownlee, Brian Duff (DSP), Diarmuid O'Leary (DHLGH), Neil Gannon (DoF), and Eimear Flynn, (DPER).

Secretariat: Larry O'Connell, Siobhán O'Sullivan, Cathal FitzGerald, Colette Bennett, Gráinne Collins, Niamh Garvey, David Hallinan, Gemma O'Reilly, Noel Cahill, Jeanne Moore, Damian Thomas and Intern Carla O'Brien.

Apologies: John Callinan (Chair), Karen Ciesielski, Kevin Callinan, Noelle O'Connell, Colin Scott, John Hogan (Neil Gannon attended), John McKeon (Brian Duff attended), DPER (Eimear Flynn attended) and Graham Doyle (Diarmuid O'Leary attended).

1. Administration: The minutes of the last meeting were agreed.

2. Social Cohesion: Overview & Intergenerational Fairness:

Collette Bennett gave an overview of the status of the various strands of the social cohesion work to date and Grainne Collins presented the key findings from the chapter on intergenerational fairness. Council members warmly welcomed the paper. The question was raised whether intergenerational fairness could be a theme in the planned conference on social cohesion. The use of narratives was welcomed but concern was raised about the framing of intergenerational tensions. It was proposed that more attention be given to intra-generational fairness; the impact of marketisation on caring and housing; and the longer-term savings of social spending today. The pensions changes that have already been made and inheritance tax were identified as issues worth including. Several points were made on housing including placing more emphasis on the rental sector generally and on older renters in particular. In concluding the discussion, the Chair noted that this was not a final draft and that consideration would then be given to the appropriate structuring and framing of the report as the work proceeds. She indicated that the question of structural participation by pillars that was raised in the discussion would fit in the chapter on trust and legitimacy.

3. Bioeconomy: Leveraging a Strategic Opportunity: Niamh Garvey presented the paper, and this was welcomed by members. The need for ownership of the sector within the government system was emphasised and frustration was expressed at the limited progress made over an extended period despite the capacity and potential of the sector. The relationship of the sector to communities and rural economies was a theme in the discussion, not only in terms of buy-in but also the potential for communities to participate more actively through the co-op model and enterprises. The potential of public procurement and research to advance the sector were highlighted. Several members pointed to the need for more clarity on what is covered by the term 'bioeconomy'. The Chair indicated further NESC input on this issue should be targeted to the action plan that is currently being prepared.

4. Climate & Energy Transition: Time to Re-think: Gemma O'Reilly introduced the climate and energy paper. Some members expressed their initial surprise on seeing the title of the paper but on reading it were happy that it was not proposing a rethink of the climate and energy targets and that rethinking Ireland's approach to achieving the targets was a very worthwhile exercise. The tone of paper was welcomed as was the emphasis on co-benefits as well as on resilience and adaptation. The internal and external challenge of behavioural change was highlighted, and the question was posed as to how policy can create the conditions to enable others to advance the solutions. Reference was made to the win-win outcomes that are not being realised. Another question was where nature and biodiversity fits in this discussion. The issue of structured consultation and engagement was again raised in this discussion and the need for a positive narrative. In summing up, the Chair welcomed the idea of rethinking or maybe refreshing the climate and energy transition, reassessing the path rather than the destination. She referred to the scale of the challenge, the trade-offs and the importance of public engagement and proposed that the paper be further developed.

5. Work Programme Update: 2026-2027: The Director provided an update on the current work programme.

Next meeting will take place on Thursday, 25th June 2026, at the Clock Tower, Marlborough Street.