

Statement from the Core Working Group of the All-Island Cancer Research Institute (AICRI) to the Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement (JCIGFA)

Thursday 21st October 2021

Witnesses

Prof. William Gallagher (University College Dublin)

Prof. Mark Lawler (Queen's University Belfast)

Prof. Maeve Lowery (Trinity College Dublin)

Mr. Ciaran Briscoe (Northeast Cancer Research & Education Trust)

Ms. Eibhlín Mulroe (Cancer Trials Ireland)

SLIDE 1

Dear Cathaoirleach O'Dowd, Deputies and Senators,

Thank you for the opportunity to meet today to discuss our vision for an All-Island Cancer Research Institute, or AICRI for short. First proposed in 2020, the AICRI Core Working Group and wider Steering Committee has made great strides in bringing this critical initiative forward. Indeed, the network of support for this intended cross-border nexus has now grown significantly over the last 12 months.

We would like to first show you the following short video summary highlighting the overall concept of AICRI. We will then describe in more detail the background to our initiative, current activities and plans.

SLIDE 2 – PLAY INTEGRATED VIDEO

On the island of Ireland, one in two people on average will develop cancer during their lifetime. People's lives change overnight. A cancer diagnosis brings huge worry and anxiety not only to patients but their families also.

We want to help patients live longer and better lives after their cancer diagnosis. We will connect cancer researchers across the island of Ireland. We will work alongside patients with cancer to make sure that their voice is heard.

By coming together, we can harness all of our different skills and expertise - to better understand cancer; to develop more personalised treatment options; to ease suffering & save lives.

This is our vision for the All-Island Cancer Research Institute!

We will work hard to uncover better diagnostics and treatments for patients with cancer.

We will learn more about preventing cancer, as well as tackle key issues related to living with and beyond cancer.

We will become a global leader in cancer research and, as a result, we will give much needed hope to patients with cancer and their families.

Please join us in our mission!

SLIDE 3

The cancer burden across the island of Ireland is enormous. Practically every family is affected in some way by the imprint of this disease.

SLIDE 4

A core foundation for our current mission, namely to establish a fully integrated approach to cancer research, was the All-Ireland Cancer Consortium (AICC), which arose as a tangible output of the Good Friday Agreement.

This tripartite cancer research and training agreement between the Departments of Health of Ireland, Northern Ireland and the US National Cancer Institute (one of the premier cancer institutes in the world) was first signed at Government Buildings Stormont in October 1999. This groundbreaking agreement was recently re-invigorated on March 16th this year, in the form of a revised Memorandum of Understanding which was signed by Minister Stephen Donnelly TD, Department of Health Ireland, Minister Robin Swann MLA, Department of Health Northern Ireland and Dr Norman Sharpless, Director of the National Cancer Institute.

This historic occasion for cancer patients, cancer research and cancer care on the island of Ireland saw statements of support from Taoiseach Michéal Martin, former First Minister Arlene Foster, Deputy First Minister Michelle O'Neill and Norris Cochrane, former Acting Secretary of the US Department of Health & Human Services.

SLIDE 5

In his St Patrick's Day meeting with the Taoiseach, US President Biden expressing his renewed commitment to the Good Friday Agreement, referenced this Consortium and how all parties could learn from one another and improve outcomes for cancer patients.

SLIDE 6

The impact of this cross-border and transatlantic collaboration has been very substantial. An evaluation of the Consortium's activities over the last twenty-one years found that this partnership significantly increased both the quality and quantity of research across the island of Ireland, contributed to saving thousands of lives and enhanced the quality of life of cancer survivors. Among many of these achievements have been the establishment of a cancer clinical trials infrastructure for the island, a cancer prevention fellowship programme, and an All-Island Hospice/Palliative Care Institute.

SLIDE 7

Building on this success, our aim now is to establish an All-Island Cancer Research Institute (AICRI). This will be a virtual institute, focusing on bringing together cancer researchers across the island, from the laboratory bench to the hospital setting, in an integrated, team-based approach.

SLIDE 8

We are currently putting together an ambitious, comprehensive, and cross-cutting cancer research programme involving multiple stakeholders. These stakeholders include academic, clinical and industry partners, as well as patients, funders, and government agencies.

SLIDE 9

Ten academic institutions have agreed to partner to fulfil the AICRI vision. Representatives from these institutions, along with patient advocates from both jurisdictions, are members of the AICRI Steering Committee, which was established in February 2021. They are joined by the Director of the HSE's National Cancer Control Programme and the CEO of Cancer Trials Ireland.

SLIDE 10

AICRI will focus on 4 key themes, covering (1) cancer prevention, (2) cancer diagnostics, (3) cancer treatment, and (4) survivorship/quality of life.

SLIDE 11

A wide range of cutting-edge projects relating to these thematic areas has already been garnered from the cancer research community across the island. Our role within AICRI is to work towards integrating these plans into a common research framework which will best deliver for cancer patients, while also helping to drive economic and social benefit.

SLIDE 12

Cancer patients treated in research-active hospitals, particularly those with strong academic links, have better outcomes than those who are not. Embedding of research within the National Cancer Control Programme for Ireland and the Northern Ireland Cancer Strategy is critical to ensuring optimal care for our citizens.

Focussing on cancer is particularly relevant in the context of the COVID-19, as our work has shown the adverse impact that the pandemic can have on cancer services and cancer patients on this island unless we act rapidly and decisively.

SLIDE 13

AICRI directly addresses a critical need identified within Ireland's National Cancer Strategy 2017-2026 which acknowledges a current '*absence of an overarching framework for cancer research...*'. It also acknowledges that '*it is vital to ensure that research is a strong component of cancer services*'.

SLIDE 14

AICRI's activities are also well aligned to the draft Cancer Strategy for Northern Ireland 2021-2031, which has been identified as an immediate priority of the Northern Ireland Executive.

SLIDE 15

In addition to clear benefits to the healthcare system, both in the short- and long-term, AICRI will also greatly assist further development of a cross-border ecosystem for innovation.

It will provide new discoveries and talent for the burgeoning, indigenous biotech industry in both Ireland and Northern Ireland, while also acting as a 'gravitational hub' to retain and attract large-scale pharma and allied companies.

SLIDE 16

We greatly welcome the recent approval from the North South Ministerial Council for the new PEACE PLUS Programme for 2021-2027, which will provide critical funding to support cross-border projects in key areas directly aligned to AICRI, such as R&D and healthcare intervention trials.

Moreover, we are excited by the opportunities afforded by the new HEA North-South Research Programme Call 2021. We are, at present, preparing a submission under this call to create an all-island interdisciplinary training programme for emerging cancer researchers in the areas of cancer prevention, diagnostics and treatment.

During a keynote address in September 2017 at an “International Cooperation in the Fight Against Cancer” event in Dublin, then Vice-President Biden said *“every day, every minute matters to patients and we must bring that sense of urgency to our cancer research and care systems”*.

Thank you.