First, I would like to thank the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister and the Northern Ireland Assembly and Business Trust for inviting me today. I am delighted to have this opportunity to talk to you about the progress which the Irish EU Presidency has made so far, and our priorities for rest of our term.

Ireland’s 7th EU Presidency is taking place against a uniquely challenging economic background. So it was clear what our priorities must be: to secure economic stability and to ensure that it leads to jobs and growth.

We set out from the start three key areas where we intend to make a difference: people-centred economic recovery which is designed to last, investment in job-friendly growth, and a new engagement with Europe’s international trading partners. Our approach has been to identify concrete proposals in those areas where progress will make a real difference.

We also intend to build on the reputation we have won in previous Presidencies of being an impartial honest broker with a firm focus on results.

As Presidency we have also been keen to work closely with you, our closest neighbours.
We joined the EU together 40 years ago. Both of our countries, and the Union we joined, have changed almost beyond recognition in that time. For Ireland, we have become a more confident, outward-looking country. Our membership of the Single Market has transformed our economy into one of the world’s most open. We have made good use of EU support, to build a modern infrastructure and a very strong educational system.

Our shared membership of the EU has also contributed to the transformation of our relationship with Britain, and to the hugely positive evolution in the situation within this island.

We don’t take Europe for granted. We have always thought long and hard about how we want the EU to evolve, and how we fit within it - the eight EU-related referenda we have held since 1972 are testament to that debate. But our people see the benefits which EU membership has brought over the last 40 years, and which I believe it will continue to bring.

Because we have so many shared interests with Northern Ireland across the EU agenda, we are determined that our Presidency will have a genuine North/South dimension. I came to Belfast myself at the end of last year to set out our Presidency priorities to the EC-UK Forum here in Stormont. We are delighted that colleagues from Northern Ireland have taken part in the Informal meetings of EU Ministers we have already held in Dublin, as well as in many other Presidency meetings and conferences. Ministers Jonathan Bell and Jennifer McCann both made a valuable contribution to the meeting of the EU’s European Affairs Ministers which I hosted in January to discuss strengthening democratic accountability and legitimacy. I look forward to meeting them both later today. Minister O’Dowd jointly opened with Irish Education Minister Ruairi Quinn a very successful conference last month on teacher educators. Our
team in the Permanent Representation in Brussels has been strengthened by the presence of an excellent secondee from the Northern Ireland Civil Service.

Ten weeks into the Presidency, the purpose of my visit today is to update you on how it is going so far, and to set out what we hope to achieve in the sixteen weeks which remain. So how are we doing?

We can already point to some good achievements.

Perhaps most significantly, on 8 February Member States reached agreement on the EU’s budget for the next 7 years (the Multiannual Financial Framework or MFF). The EU absolutely needed this agreement to underpin our pursuit of stability, jobs and growth. The agreement reached is a compromise that broadly satisfies all Member States, and has boosted the credibility of the EU at a critical time. We believe the budget is focussed on the right issues: tackling youth unemployment, boosting key growth areas such as research and innovation, maintaining solidarity with less developed Member States and with regions which have been particularly severely affected by the economic crisis.

We were particularly pleased that €150m has been allocated for a successor to the PEACE III programme for Northern Ireland and our border counties. The PEACE programme has played an important role in the strides we have taken together in recent years. It has reinforced progress towards a peaceful, stable society through projects which help to reconcile communities. We are delighted that this work is now set to continue.

As Presidency, Ireland has focussed particularly on the needs of Europe’s young people. Unacceptably high youth unemployment is one of the greatest blights on our continent. We and you know this to our cost: our youth unemployment rates of 30% in Ireland and 20% here in Northern Ireland threaten the well-being of a generation. We have a responsibility to act now to ensure that Europe’s young people can achieve their full potential. If we do not, if we fail
them, the consequences for our communities and societies will be dire. Any sustainable economic recovery must have our young people as its driving force.

So we were pleased that the MFF agreement includes €6 billion for a new Youth Employment Initiative. And we were delighted to steer through political agreement last week on the new Youth Guarantee: this will stand as one of the achievements of our Presidency. The Guarantee aims to ensure that young people who are not working or studying receive an offer of employment, continuing education, an apprenticeship or a traineeship. Successfully implemented, the Youth Guarantee will increase the employment rate, reduce early school leaving, and help lift young people out of poverty and social exclusion.

Like you, we attach enormous importance to agriculture and fisheries policy, and have set ourselves the target of achieving agreement on a reformed Common Fisheries Policy and Common Agricultural Policy during our Presidency. We are pleased with the progress we have already made. Last week, Ireland led a tense all-night negotiation on the CFP, and brokered agreement on the introduction of a Europe-wide ban on discarding unwanted fish: a huge stride forward in the CFP reform process. We have made good progress on the CAP too, securing broad political endorsement of the thrust of our proposals for reform, aimed at the sustainable development of a competitive and efficient agriculture sector.

We have also taken significant steps in our drive to promote a more stable economic environment, without which there can be no sustained recovery and growth. Last month the Irish Presidency helped broker an agreement with the European Parliament on the “Two Pack” of economic governance legislation, designed to improve budgetary and economic coordination among euro area members. With our economies so intertwined, this will benefit not just the
eurozone, but the EU as a whole. Under our Presidency, a key decision has been taken to move forward on an enhanced cooperation basis for a Financial Transaction Tax: not something in which you or we will take part nationally, but an important step for the EU as a whole. And last week, the Irish Presidency reached a breakthrough in talks with the European Parliament on an overhaul of banking rules, to make sure that European banks hold enough good quality capital to withstand future economic shocks, to enforce greater transparency, and to discourage excessive risk-taking including through restrictions on bankers’ pay. Finance Minister Michael Noonan secured Member States’ broad political agreement to this deal just yesterday.

Our drive as Presidency to improve the working of the Single Market, to reflect new market trends and the way our citizens now live their lives, has also born fruit in recent weeks. The signature in February of a Unified Patent Court Agreement will provide businesses with a central one-stop shop for registering and protecting patents. We devoted a significant part of an Informal meeting of Justice Ministers in Dublin to a productive discussion of reform of data protection, to increase individuals’ control over their personal information. This will help to boost confidence and trust in the digital economy.

As an open, trade-focussed economy, with a privileged relationship with the US, we are committed as Presidency to boosting EU-US trade. We have set ourselves an ambitious target to work out the formal mandate from the Council to start negotiations on a new EU-US Free Trade and Investment Agreement. We have made good progress. Last month, President Obama called for a Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, and the Tánaiste has discussed the way forward on this with US Secretary of State John Kerry. The Taoiseach will take the opportunity of his visit to Washington around St Patrick’s Day to drive forward this work, and it will be the focus of a meeting of Trade Ministers we have called in Dublin in April.
With potential benefits of €150 billion, and the possibility of adding 2% to Europe’s growth rate, this agreement is a prize worth fighting for.

Every Presidency can expect to find itself dealing with the unexpected, and this one is proving no exception.

We have moved swiftly to address the horsemeat scandal, first exposed in January by the Irish Food Safety Authority, and now revealed as a pan-European issue. Minister for Agriculture Coveney called an urgent meeting that agreed on control and testing in all Member States, and last week’s meeting of the Agriculture Council continued the urgent work to address this issue, to restore consumer confidence that the food we eat is what it says on the packet.

Responding to recent developments in Mali, meetings of Development and Defence Ministers which we held in Dublin agreed to resume €250 million in EU funding to support peace and democracy in Mali, and help displaced Malians. And I am delighted that Ireland and the UK have agreed to offer a joint training contingent to the planned EU training mission in Mali. This cooperation between our armed forces shows the distance we have travelled together in recent years.

So a good set of practical results a third of the way through our Presidency. But we have a lot more to do, to reach the stretching goals we have set ourselves in the remaining 16 weeks. We are realistic – a Presidency which involves chairing negotiations in at least 1600 meetings is bound to come up against some unexpected hurdles. But we are ambitious.

A major focus will continue to be the MFF. Agreement among Member States is far from the end of the process. The European Parliament must agree to the deal, and pass almost 70 pieces of legislation to put it into effect. It is our job to take this forward with the Parliament, and we aim to complete the process by
the end of the Irish Presidency. This is a huge political challenge: the Parliament has made clear that its agreement cannot be taken for granted.

But we believe that our strong relationship with the European Parliament will help. Ireland has been at pains over the years to listen to and understand the concerns of MEPs, and to build close and constructive links with the European Parliament, which now decides jointly with the Council on nearly all European legislation. We have picked up the tempo further as Presidency. In January, twenty Irish Ministers spent three days briefing 27 EP committees on our Presidency priorities. I myself have already participated in hours of debates during the two EP Plenary sessions held since January. Just last week, the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste met the Presidents of the Parliament and the Commission in Dublin to talk about the Multiannual Financial Framework.

I firmly believe that our investment in our relationship with the Parliament has underpinned a number of agreements we have already brokered between the Council, the Parliament and the Commission since January. And that it will help us as we take forward our discussions of the MFF. We are confident that, with good will on all sides, we can achieve the agreement with the Parliament that we need before the end of our Presidency. Implementing the MFF on time is absolutely critical to underpin recovery across the EU.

We will also be seeking progress and further agreements on a wide range of other issues. There is much more to be done on Banking Union, and on proposals to advance the Single Market and the digital economy.

We aim as Presidency to drive forward in a coordinated and consistent way the new European Semester process of economic and budgetary coordination between Member States.
We will be applying our own national experience of using research and innovation to underpin economic growth, as we push forward the Horizon 2020 programme to make Europe a world-class research and innovation centre and boost high-potential sectors of the knowledge economy. Researchers across Europe must be able to access funding with minimum red tape. And Small and Medium Enterprises, who have great potential to generate growth and jobs, must also benefit from funding for research and innovation – which is why we are focussing as Presidency on the Competitiveness for SMEs Programme, or COSME.

This audience, I know, understands the need for any Government, and any EU Presidency, to deliver results through concrete progress on complex legislative dossiers. But I am conscious that our work – negotiating, drafting compromises, prioritising those proposals which can have the most concrete effect - can sound dry as dust to many of our citizens.

Which is why we are delighted to hold the Presidency during this, the European Year of Citizens. The aim of the year is to encourage debate, throughout our societies, about what it means to be part of the European Union.

Our citizens enjoy rights, including the rights of free movement of persons, goods and services across the continent. We benefit from protection in the workplace, equality between men and women and freedom from discrimination, protection as consumers. The younger among us may take these rights for granted. But they would have been inconceivable to past generations.

People in the EU need to understand the rights which their EU citizenship gives them, and how to derive the most benefit from them.

And we want to encourage people to think about their relationship with the EU, and the future direction they want the Union to take.
After all, the EU’s decisions are taken by the political leaders of Member States, and by Members of the European Parliament. Both these decision-making groups are chosen directly by our voters, in national and European elections. So the future of the EU is in the hands of the EU’s citizens, and we all have a responsibility to make informed choices when we vote.

We are using the opportunity of the Year of Citizens to get a debate going in Ireland on the EU – one which is open to civil society, NGOs, and anyone with an interest. The Year was formally launched at an event in Dublin on 10 January, and I co-chaired with Commissioner Reding that day the first in a series of citizens’ debates on the EU, with 200 participants. Tánaiste Eamon Gilmore took part in a second citizens’ debate in Cork last month, and more are planned across Ireland throughout the Presidency and beyond. I am particularly looking forward to meeting a group of young people from Northern Ireland to discuss “Youth and Europe” later today.

I hope I have given you a good sense of where our Presidency is at. We are pleased with our progress to date, but in no way complacent. We have a lot still to do. We are realistic about the challenges, but ambitious – we have set ourselves stretching targets, and are determined to pull out all the stops to achieve them.

We will continue to use our Presidency, and the Year of Citizens, to inform a real debate in Ireland about the EU. And we will continue to work closely with you, our neighbours and friends, over the next four months of our Presidency.

I am delighted to have this chance to thank you for your support so far, and to answer your questions.