

Meeting: Bridge Owners Forum Ireland, First In-person Meeting

Location: Queen's University Belfast, UK (Civil Engineering Research in Ireland conference 2026 (CERI2026))

Date & Time: 18/06/2026, 15:15 – 16:15

People Attended:

Edmond Kenny, DoT	Paul Fidler, University of Cambridge (UK BOF)
Kris Campell, DfI	Marie Osuillivan, Cork County Council
Chris Pires, TII	Flor Rahilly, Cork County Council
Fergal Cahill, TII	Ciaran Hanley, UCC
Roger Ryan, DNRDO	Luke Pendergast, University of Nottingham
Thomas Kerr, DNRDO	Maria Pregnolato, TU Delft
Raj Arora, TU Delft	Gianna Gavriel, University of Galway
Myra Lydon, University of Galway	Darragh Lydon, Queen's University Belfast
Gary Campbell, Queen's University Belfast	Liam Duffy, TII
David Hester, Queen's University Belfast	Michael Costelloe, Kildare NRO

Purpose of the Meeting

The purpose of this first in-person meeting was to discuss the establishment of a Bridge Owners Forum Ireland (BOFI) as a national platform for bridge owners and key stakeholders. The forum is being initiated through the EPA-funded Group CRANN Project, following stakeholder engagement that identified a need for improved communication, knowledge sharing, and collaboration across bridge-owning organisations in Ireland. Dr Myra Lydon delivered a presentation where the purpose of the BOFI establishment was explained as well as the gaps identified from the previous meeting that was held online.

The proposed forum aims to:

- Facilitate collaboration and knowledge sharing among bridge owners.
- Identify common technical and asset management challenges.
- Share best practices and lessons learned.
- Develop a repository of case studies and experiences.
- Identify research needs and connect bridge owners with relevant expertise.
- Support coordinated action across bridge-owning organisations.

The following gaps and challenges were highlighted:

- Limited collaboration between bridge-owning organisations.
- Fragmented data and information sharing.

- Lack of communication and coordination mechanisms.
- Inconsistent inspection and maintenance practices.
- Limited contractor capacity and delivery constraints.
- Need for better sharing of experiences and solutions.

Paul Fidler (UK Bridge Owners Forum) shared experiences from the UK forum, highlighting:

- The forum was established to improve communication between bridge owners who were facing similar challenges independently.
- It has operated successfully for over 25 years, driven primarily by bridge-owner needs.
- Membership is largely bridge-owner focused, with external speakers invited where relevant.
- A strong filtering mechanism is required to manage requests from consultants, suppliers, researchers, and contractors wishing to present.
- The UK forum now operates through subscription funding.
- Professional technical secretariat support is necessary for producing high-quality minutes and continuity.
- The key advice was: "**Just do it.**"
- The issue highlighted was that the forum was never registered as an organisation
- Another issue is that the forum was mainly managed by a single person, Professor Cam Middleton who has unfortunately passed away last March. Prof. Middleton was doing an amazing job at running the forum and taking decisions. His absence has affected the management of the forum.

A long discussion took place regarding the most appropriate **governance structure for BOFI**.

Participants generally agreed that:

- The forum should be **driven by and for bridge owners**.
- Bridge owners should form the core membership and governance structure.
- External stakeholders (academia, consultants, contractors, suppliers, industry representatives) should participate through a managed and structured process.
- Care should be taken to maintain a confidential environment where bridge owners can openly discuss challenges and issues.

Based on the discussions held, a two-tier approach was broadly supported:

- Major bridge-owning organisations.
- Responsible for strategy, priorities, governance, and agenda setting.
- Safe environment for discussion among asset owners.

Extended Network

- Academia.
- Industry.
- Consultants.
- Suppliers.

- Smaller local authorities.
- Subject matter experts.

Participants could be invited to contribute to specific discussions, projects, or challenge areas identified by the core forum.

Membership Considerations

Several important questions were raised:

- Who should qualify as a bridge owner?
- Should local authorities be represented individually or through the Road Management Office (RMO)?
- How should organisations such as:
 - TII,
 - DFI,
 - Irish Rail,
 - Waterways Ireland,
 - OPW,
 - PPP concessionaires, be represented?

Concern was expressed that a very large membership could undermine productive discussion, and that a manageable number of representatives may be preferable.

Research and Academia

Participants recognised the value of academic involvement while maintaining a bridge-owner-focused structure.

Key points included:

- Research should be driven by real bridge-owner challenges.
- Universities can support technical investigations and funding applications.
- Better access to bridge data would enable valuable research.
- Academic participation should be structured so that owner confidentiality is maintained.
- Consideration should be given to appointing a liaison or mechanism linking BOFI and academic researchers.

Research Priorities

Examples of potential collaborative research themes discussed included:

- Wind effects on long-span bridges.
- Data access and sharing.
- Development of evidence-based bridge closure and restriction procedures during extreme weather.

- Climate adaptation and resilience planning.
- Research projects directly addressing bridge-owner needs.

Stakeholder Engagement

The meeting highlighted the importance of engagement with:

- Local authorities.
- TII.
- Department of Transport.
- DFI Northern Ireland.
- Irish Rail.
- Waterways Ireland.
- OPW.
- PPP operators.
- Industry and academia.

Participants agreed that stakeholder mapping should form part of the next phase of forum development.

Agreed Next Steps

The following actions were agreed:

1. Prepare and circulate meeting minutes.
2. Undertake stakeholder mapping to identify core and extended membership.
3. Develop proposed governance and membership options for discussion.
4. Organise a follow-up online meeting with key bridge-owner representatives.
5. Identify priority technical topics and challenges for future BOFI activities.
6. Consider lessons learned from the UK model while developing an Irish structure suited to local needs.
7. Use the remaining duration of the CRANN Project to support establishment of a sustainable forum.

Meeting Close

The meeting concluded with strong support for the establishment of a Bridge Owners Forum Ireland and agreement that momentum should be maintained while resources are available through the CRANN project. Participants expressed interest in continuing engagement and developing a practical structure for the forum

Detailed Minutes

Bridge Owners Forum Ireland – First In-Person Meeting

Date: 18 June 2026

Time: 15:15–16:15

Venue: CERl Conference, Queen’s University Belfast (Hybrid Meeting)

Chair: Dr. Myra Lydon (University of Galway)

Minute Taker: CRANN Team (funded by the Environmental Protection Agency)

1. Welcome and Introduction

Dr. Myra Lydon welcomed attendees to the first in-person meeting of the proposed Bridge Owners Forum Ireland (BOFI). The meeting was held as part of the CRANN Group, funded by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), which includes the establishment of a national bridge owners forum as one of its key stakeholder engagement outputs.

Dr. Lydon explained that the purpose of the meeting was to discuss the proposed structure, governance, membership, and focus of the forum rather than formally establish it. The intention was to gather feedback from bridge owners and stakeholders to ensure the forum develops in a useful and sustainable manner.

2. Background to the Bridge Owners Forum Ireland

Dr. Lydon outlined the rationale for establishing the forum, noting that previous stakeholder engagement had identified a strong desire for improved collaboration and communication among bridge owners in Ireland. The proposed forum would provide:

- A national platform for bridge owners and other relevant stakeholders.
- Opportunities for collaboration and knowledge sharing.
- A means of identifying common technical and research needs.
- Support for more coordinated bridge management and decision-making.

Key challenges identified during previous consultations included:

- Limited collaboration across organisations.
- Fragmented data and information sources.
- Lack of communication and coordination.
- Inconsistent inspection and maintenance approaches.
- Limited contractor capacity.
- Project delivery constraints.

Attendees were reminded that one particularly valuable proposal from the initial online meeting was the creation of a repository of case studies and lessons learned that could be shared across the sector.

3. Lessons from the UK Bridge Owners Forum

Presentation and Discussion – Paul Fidler (UK Bridge Owners Forum)

Paul Fidler provided an overview of the development and operation of the UK Bridge Owners Forum.

Key points included:

- The UK forum originated in response to a lack of communication between bridge-owning organisations working on similar technical challenges independently.
- The forum was established by Professor Cam Middleton, who recognised the need to bring bridge owners together.
- Initially supported through UK Department for Transport funding, the forum now operates through membership subscriptions.
- The UK forum has functioned successfully for approximately 25 years.
- Membership is primarily limited to bridge owners, with external experts invited to contribute on specific topics.
- A strong filtering mechanism is required to ensure presentations remain relevant and do not become overly commercial.
- Dedicated technical secretarial support is important to accurately capture technical discussions and maintain continuity.

Paul noted that Ireland has an opportunity to build on the UK experience while developing an approach suited to the Irish bridge-owning community.

4. Discussion on Membership and Forum Structure

Extensive discussion followed regarding the optimal structure and membership of the proposed forum.

Bridge Owner-Led Approach

Liam Duffy (TII) emphasised that the success of the UK forum is based on it being driven by and for bridge owners. He highlighted that bridge owners face many common challenges and benefit from being able to discuss issues openly within a trusted professional environment. Discussions often cover inspection practices, bridge defects, assessments, standards, and asset management concerns.

Kris Campbell (Department for Infrastructure, Northern Ireland) echoed this view and highlighted the significant benefits of:

- Building professional networks.
- Sharing experience.
- Knowledge transfer between practitioners.
- Preserving institutional knowledge across organisations.

Size and Representation

Several attendees discussed the challenge of determining who should represent bridge-owning organisations. It was recognised that:

- Too many participants could reduce meaningful discussion.
- Large bridge-owning bodies would likely require representation.
- Not all local authorities would necessarily need individual representation.
- Existing structures such as the Road Management Office (RMO) may provide an efficient means of representation.

Bridge owners identified included:

- Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII)
- Department for Infrastructure (DfI)
- Road Management Office (RMO)
- Local Authorities
- Irish Rail
- Waterways Ireland
- Office of Public Works (OPW)
- Public-private partnership (PPP) operators
- Other infrastructure owners and operators.

5. Academia and Research Engagement

A significant portion of the discussion focused on the role of academia.

Attendees recognised the benefit of ensuring that research activity better aligns with real bridge owner needs. Key themes included:

- Access to bridge data for research purposes.
- Improved communication between researchers and bridge owners.
- Supporting research that directly addresses operational challenges.
- Development of challenge-driven research programmes.

Examples were provided of current research needs, particularly in relation to climate adaptation, wind loading events, bridge monitoring, and decision-making during severe weather events. Access to operational and monitoring data was identified as an important enabler of such work.

Attendees referenced the UK practice of issuing “challenge statements,” allowing researchers to focus on problems identified by asset owners. This was viewed positively as a possible future model for BOFI.

6. Industry and Wider Stakeholder Participation

Discussion highlighted both the opportunities and challenges associated with including consultants, contractors, suppliers, and other industry representatives.

Key considerations included:

- Maintaining the forum as a safe and confidential space for bridge owners.
- Avoiding conflicts of interest or commercial influence.
- Ensuring transparency around participation.
- Providing mechanisms for specialist expertise to contribute when required.

Several participants suggested a model in which:

- A core forum comprises bridge owners.
- Additional stakeholders participate through invited presentations or working groups.
- Industry and academia engage through structured mechanisms without compromising the bridge-owner focus of the forum.

Examples from other organisations were discussed where industry representatives are organised into separate stakeholder groups that can nominate representatives when appropriate.

7. Potential Governance Model

A number of proposals emerged during discussion.

A broad consensus developed around the possibility of:

Core Forum

A small bridge-owner-led body that:

- Sets priorities.
- Determines meeting agendas.
- Identifies technical challenges.

- Provides overall governance and strategic direction.

Wider Stakeholder Network

A larger network including:

- Academia.
- Consultants.
- Contractors.
- Industry bodies.
- Local authority representatives.
- Other interested stakeholders.

This structure would allow specialist expertise to contribute while maintaining a protected environment for bridge-owner discussions.

8. Suggested Priorities

Several themes emerged as possible priority areas for future activity:

- Development of a bridge case-study repository.
- Data sharing and access.
- Climate adaptation and resilience.
- Wind-event management and monitoring.
- Inspection and maintenance practices.
- Research priorities identified by bridge owners.
- Knowledge transfer and capacity building.

Attendees stressed the importance of focusing on a limited number of key issues and demonstrating practical progress rather than attempting to tackle all challenges simultaneously.

9. Next Steps

The following actions were agreed:

Action 1

CRANN Group to prepare and circulate minutes of the meeting to bridge owner representatives.

Action 2

CRANN Group to undertake a stakeholder mapping exercise identifying:

- Core bridge owners.
- Infrastructure owners.
- Academic stakeholders.
- Industry stakeholders.
- Potential governance arrangements.

Action 3

A follow-up online meeting to be organised with a more focused group of bridge owner representatives to progress governance and membership discussions.

Action 4

Potential members to provide further suggestions regarding structure, representation, and priorities by email.

Action 5

Develop an initial technical programme and identify priority topics for future meetings.

Action 6

Use the remaining duration of the CRANN project to support the establishment of a sustainable forum structure before longer-term arrangements are considered.

10. Closing Remarks

Dr. Myra Lydon thanked all attendees for their participation and valued contributions. Participants agreed that there is a clear need for a Bridge Owners Forum in Ireland and that the discussions held during the meeting provided a strong foundation for its future development.

The meeting concluded at approximately 16:15