



An Roinn Gnóthaí Eachtracha
Department of Foreign Affairs

Evaluation of Ireland's Expo 2020

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List of Abbreviations

BB	Bord Bia
CG	Commissioner General (of Expo)
COVID-19	Coronavirus disease (2019)
DFA	Department of Foreign Affairs
DG	Director General
DHoM	Deputy Head of Mission
EAU	Evaluation and Audit Unit
EI	Enterprise Ireland
GAA	Gaelic Athletic Association
GIU	Global Ireland Unit
HEI(s)	Higher Education Institution(s)
HOM	Head of Mission
HQ	Headquarters
HR	Human Resources
IDA	Industrial Development Agency
KI	Key Informant
KII(s)	Key-Informant Interview(s)
KPI(s)	Key Performance Indicator(s)
MEASA	Middle East, Africa and South Asia
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
NCI(s)	National Cultural Institution(s)
OPW	Office of Public Works
PMF	Performance Management Framework
POB	Project Oversight Board
QA	Quality Assurance
SMG	Senior Management Group
SMT	Senior Management Team
TI	Tourism Ireland
TOR	Terms of Reference
UAE	United Arab Emirates

Glossary of Terms

Internal Stakeholders	DFA HQ and Embassy Abu Dhabi personnel.
External Stakeholders	Other Government Departments, State agencies, National Cultural Institutions, other public institutions (including Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)), Irish Community representatives, peer Foreign Ministries and external consultants.
Expo Partners	Representatives of Semi-State agencies, National Cultural Institutions, other public institutions (including HEIs), and other external organisations who curated and/or contributed to the Expo programme.
Expo Team	HQ – GIU team who led and implemented Expo 2020 including Commissioner General, Director of Expo, Pavilion Director, Expo Attaché and pavilion staff.
Whole of Government	All Government Departments.

Website Links

Ireland's Expo 2020 Website:

[Expo 2020 Dubai | Home | Connecting Minds, Creating the Future | Expo 2020 Dubai](#)

Ireland's Pavilion:

[Ireland Pavilion | World Expo \(virtualexpodubai.com\)](#)

Expo 2020 Interactive Map:

[cr825--expo2020-interactive-map--english-release-39.pdf \(expo2020dubai.com\)](#)

Department of Foreign Affairs Policies

[Our Role & Policies - Department of Foreign Affairs \(dfa.ie\)](#)

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Evaluation Team

The Evaluation and Audit Unit (EAU) is an independent unit that reports to the Secretary General of the Department of Foreign Affairs. Their work is reviewed by an independent Audit Committee. This evaluation was undertaken by staff of the EAU and the consultancy firm, Trade Advisers. The report is the product of the authors, and responsibility for the accuracy of the data included in this report rests with the authors. The findings, interpretations, conclusions and recommendations presented in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinion or views of the DFA.

Executive Summary

Introduction

Ireland's participation at World Expo 2020 Dubai was designed, planned and implemented by the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA), in partnership with other Government Departments, State agencies, National Cultural Institutions (NCIs), public institutions and external partners from the cultural, business, and educational sectors, and supported by representatives of the Irish community in Dubai.

Originally scheduled for 2020, the Expo was postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic until 1 October 2021 to 31 March 2022. Expo 2020 was the first World Expo to be held in the Middle East, Africa and South Asia (MEASA) region, as well as the first to be hosted by an Arab country. The theme was "Connecting Minds, Creating the Future" with three sub-themes of Opportunity, Mobility and Sustainability. A total of 192 countries participated, each with an individual country pavilion. The event recorded more than 24 million visitors¹ from 178 countries, with 30.3%² from overseas.

The cost of Ireland's presence at Expo Dubai, managed by the DFA, was €13.4 million between 2019 and 2022. The project adopted the "Team Ireland" approach to contribute to the delivery of *Global Ireland* goals in the region. It aimed to showcase Ireland as a great place to live, visit, work and learn and to facilitate the discussion of prominent global issues.

Purpose and methodology

Evaluating large-scale promotional events is inherently challenging, but essential to inform strategy, business planning and potential participation in future events, as well as to provide a mechanism for accountability. In light of these factors, an independent review of Ireland's participation in Expo Dubai was undertaken in 2022. This aimed to examine the extent to which objectives were achieved and to capture insights and learning for the future.

The evaluation adopted a mixed methods approach, engaging a range of 28 stakeholders from within and outside the DFA, which ensured the inclusion of different perspectives on the project's implementation and results.³ It also included a site visit to the Expo in March 2022, a review of 145 key documents and a comparative analysis of peer countries' participation.

¹ Source: [Expo 2020 Dubai records more than 24 million visits after late surge \(thenationalnews.com\)](https://www.thenationalnews.com/2022/03/31/expo-2020-dubai-records-more-than-24-million-visits-after-late-surge/) Source: [Expo 2020 Dubai records more than 24 million visits after late surge \(thenationalnews.com\)](https://www.thenationalnews.com/2022/03/31/expo-2020-dubai-records-more-than-24-million-visits-after-late-surge/)

² Source: GIU Ireland at Expo 2020 Dubai – Event Report & Recommendations

³ This included "internal" stakeholders such as DFA HQ and (former) Embassy Abu Dhabi personnel present during Expo and "external" ones such as representatives of Government Departments, State agencies, National

Overall assessment

Ireland's theme for Expo Dubai (*Placing Creativity at the Centre of Human Experience*) was developed with three objectives: first, that it would reflect Government policy; second, that it would express contemporary core values of the people of Ireland (community and personal connection), and the belief in human creativity as a key contributor to wellbeing; third, that as a human-centric theme it would provide clear differentiation in an Expo dominated by high-technology displays and self-promoting nation-branding.⁴

Ireland's presence at Expo Dubai 2020 is considered successful by most of the stakeholders consulted. There is broad agreement that it was a valuable and unique experience, that Ireland succeeded in 'cutting through' the multiple competing messages and that the DFA was an appropriate leader for the project. It was also a tangible example of successful systemic Government collaboration led by the DFA. This assessment was also reflected in media coverage of Ireland's participation in the Expo.

The COVID-19 pandemic provided a significantly challenging context, with the Expo delayed by a year, periods of stalled project progress and unprecedented disruption to travel. In addition, there were multiple leadership and team changes at HQ that were frequently cited as impacting the effective management of the project. This also resulted in a late engagement with Team Ireland; although as the project gained momentum, the Expo provided a platform for Team Ireland to work together, leveraging networks, relationships and resources and contributing to raising Ireland's visibility and reputation in the region.

A central conclusion is that Expo 2020 is a valuable and unique example of the DFA successfully leading and delivering a global public diplomacy event, deploying Ireland's assets under the auspices of Team Ireland. Further, that experience can contribute to organisational learning as set out below. It also showed the benefits of building on a wide concept of Team Ireland and the need to engage it early in the planning phase. To achieve this, more effective workforce planning and project governance are required. The importance of assembling a stable and well-resourced team with strong leadership in HQ and on the ground, as well as institutionalising processes and tools supporting project delivery and institutional memory constitutes a key learning of this project.

The purpose of the evaluation was to examine Expo 2020 against the criteria of effectiveness, capture insights and serve as a mechanism for accountability. The main findings are summarised below.

Cultural Institutions, other public institutions, Irish Community Representatives, peer Foreign Ministries and an external consultant.

⁴ Source: GIU Ireland at Expo 2020 Dubai – Event Report & Recommendations

Effectiveness

Visibility and reputation: Ireland's resources for the Expo did not allow it to compete directly in visibility with countries with larger and more technology-based pavilions. However, having a reasonably centrally located pavilion and a headline cultural event at the outset of the Expo allowed Ireland to capture significant attention. Consciously developing a strong collaboration with the Expo organisers and focusing the media strategy on generating coverage for Riverdance and other large-scale events, as well as for Ministerial visits, paid off. Moreover, there is agreement that the Expo helped to advance Ireland's standing in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the broader MEASA region. In this sense, the project is seen as relevant to Ireland's foreign policy objectives. It was also emphasised that not participating would have had reputational costs in the UAE and a loss of opportunity to build valuable relationships.

Opportunities for engagement: There were nine Ministerial visits to Expo Dubai, two of these as part of trade missions. In the context of these visits, Ministers, high-level officials, sector representatives and members of the Irish community in the UAE attended the Irish pavilion and its large-scale events. This enabled several bilateral engagements, especially at the political level with local authorities, which would not have taken place otherwise. Overall, there are expectations that the relationships developed during Expo Dubai will evolve and be strengthened; however, apart from existing in-country, Embassy led processes, it is unclear whether these were managed and followed up once the Expo ended, and if so how.

Support to work in the region: There is agreement that the Expo was complementary and supportive of Embassy Abu Dhabi and State agencies' objectives in the region. For those consulted, it endorsed a longer, ongoing process of raising awareness of Ireland in the Middle East and generated willingness to continue building on it. Insights indicate that the cultural programme was very successful and gave Ireland a profile which was "beyond compare" to similar-sized countries at Expo. It helped to strengthen Ireland's soft power and influence, especially with the Emirati authorities.

Competence for future Expos: Expo Dubai 2020 can be considered a pilot project or prototype of how the DFA and Team Ireland can work together around a large-scale global public diplomacy event. As such, it offers valuable learning that can inform future engagements and places the DFA in a strong position to lead them. This independent evaluation represents an important step towards building competence for further collaborations. The experience also demonstrates that a wider notion of "Team Ireland", one that involves a broad range of Irish public institutions in addition to State agencies and Government Departments, can be highly beneficial to build on for future Expos.

Management and operations

Project design and planning: The project team's leadership and stability, and later the pandemic, were unquestionably issues throughout the preparatory phase (2018-2020). They affected decisions around the budget, pavilion design and interior fit-out as well as content and programming. They also accounted for the late engagement of Team Ireland and necessitated the commitment and effort of staff above and beyond what was initially expected. Personalities, personal connections and goodwill yielded dividends in a challenging context and in the absence of an institutionalised mechanism to reach consensus.

Pavilion design and functionality: The pavilion construction (overseen by the Office of Public Works) faced no significant challenges and Ireland's was one of the first completed pavilions. This helped to minimise the impact of the rise in construction prices during the pandemic. However, the pavilion ended up being used in ways not originally envisaged (due to subsequent adaptations that were made to the programme). Feedback indicates that the venue was not always fit for hosting certain types of events and hospitality. Additionally, the space was not conducive to effective staff working conditions.

Team size and capabilities: There is broad agreement that the core Expo team (HQ – GIU led team including pavilion staff) was about right in terms of size and skills, and that it went above and beyond to deliver a successful event. However, team stability was an issue with multiple changes and gaps along the way and at every level, generating challenges, especially for the team in Dubai, who depended on decisions from HQ. Efforts by Embassy Abu Dhabi were central to developing relationships on the ground and the Expo occupied a considerable portion of the Embassy's time (especially in relation to protocol). This meant that the commitment was greater than anticipated and the Embassy's resources were stretched.

Team Ireland: There is consensus that Expo 2020 modelled Team Ireland at its best, demonstrating the benefits of working towards a common purpose. The Expo provided a platform to work together, leveraging networks, relationships and resources which were second to none. However, different understandings exist of what Team Ireland means in practice, depending on the stakeholder's vantage point. There is also agreement that the benefits of the "whole government" approach can be increased if contributors are engaged earlier in the process and through more institutionalised mechanisms such as a steering committee or working group.

Media strategy: A flexible communication approach was adopted that evolved as the Expo continued. Media coverage was high, and this was one of the main achievements of the project. The Expo drew attention to the region and generated an opportunity to modify the narrative in media circles in Ireland. Some expressed the view that there was an impact on Irish press coverage, which was "more open"

towards the region than before the Expo. There was also the perception that social media engagement could have been exploited further, for example, with a dedicated social media content role.

Budget: The actual cost of Ireland's presence at Expo Dubai amounted to €13.4 million between 2019 and 2022, €0.6 million below budget. It was felt that while Ireland had a modest budget, this was spent well. Sharing the cost of Riverdance's performances with the Expo organisers and securing the handing over of the pavilion to them resulted in significant cost-saving. COVID-19 delays had an impact on the overall project expenditure. This was managed over time to keep the project within budget.

Insights for the future

Early project planning and effective stakeholder engagement: Planning, implementing and monitoring the project through a participatory process will contribute to creating a shared understanding of what the event is and what success will look like, which will in turn support its delivery. For instance, defining Team Ireland's composition and getting its input early on, brainstorming, and agreeing on common high-level goals for the event can provide a sense of co-creation and co-ownership of the project which can translate into shared management of resources and risks.

Adopting a forward-looking and cutting-edge perspective in showcasing Ireland: Being strategic in capitalising on Ireland's strengths in pharma, education, food and drink (as a few examples mentioned) and showcasing innovation and entrepreneurship can help to maximise opportunities for business development. There is space also to demonstrate Ireland's contribution to the global themes underlying the event. This is especially relevant for markets such as the Middle East and Asia.

Adopting a relationships management approach: Agreeing on an early definition of the type of relationships that need to be developed, and how these can be achieved, is required. This should be translated into processes and tools for managing and optimising these relationships before, during and after the event, including mapping and segmentation of target audiences; setting Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) (for example, number and profile of audiences/ businesses/ governments to be reached, number of meetings/ matchmaking events/ receptions/ interactions, changes in perception of Ireland of pavilion visitors); monitoring project progress against the objectives; and documenting outputs such as introductions, leads, meetings, attendants, new clients, collaborations and other yardsticks.

Setting up monitoring and evaluation arrangements: The monitoring and evaluation function should be built into the project planning to support preparation, implementation and evaluation. For example, it can support decisions on what needs to be monitored during the event, what indicators are relevant to evaluate the project and how and when evidence should be collected. During and after the event it

should collect data through various methods such as visitor surveys, interviews, and observations. This is not only beneficial to the evaluation of the project ex-post but also allows for the early identification and mitigation of risks.

Establishing specific and measurable targets: During project planning, the vision and high-level goals of the event should be translated into specific and measurable targets (Annex 3 provides examples of best practice in relation to KPIs. It should also define primary and secondary target audiences for each of these. This will enhance strategic focus, allowing for better planning and leveraging of resources across the Government. It will also enable an objective assessment of performance.

Resourcing the project consistently for three years: A clearer definition (and shared understanding) of the general and specific objectives for the event will facilitate effective workforce planning. For instance, it was suggested that the Expo team should stay in place for three years (that Expo should be considered equivalent to a posting), including at least six months to wrap-up and hand in the project. In terms of team size, having a second senior position on the ground could be beneficial. Recognising the impact that the Expo, and in particular high-level visits, has on the Embassy's human resources is also advisable. Language skills, cultural sensitivity, and a friendly and outgoing disposition, along with specific technical skills are essential for team members. Some technical skills can be outsourced including event management, media relations, social media content creation, and monitoring and evaluation.

Leveraging relationships and resources: Working closely with the event organisers in designing the agenda of events and matching Ireland's programme to the event theme(s) are essential. This investment yielded benefits in Dubai not only from a resourcing perspective but also in terms of strengthening Ireland's influence and soft power. Engaging and sharing information with the EU and Member States, third countries and the Irish diaspora should also be considered and factored in as early as possible in the project.

Elevating Ireland's Expo presence in social media: Social media storytelling should be used to elevate the impact of the event. For this, it is necessary to contract a dedicated social media content creator with video editing and photography skills.

Documenting processes and decisions: To enable project monitoring and evaluation and enhance institutional memory, the project should apply project management approaches and consistently update project documents and keep records of plans, progress, risks and decisions around the event. Project documentation will be the primary reference source for assessing progress and performance

of the event, but also can be used to follow-up and continue building on results and provide a benchmark and reference for future events' teams.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

The mission of the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) is to serve the Irish people, promote their values and advance their prosperity and interests abroad. Ireland's core Foreign Policy, *Global Ireland: Ireland's Global Footprint to 2025* commits to strengthening Ireland's presence in the Middle East and Gulf region. Within this context, Expo 2020 Dubai, one of the world's largest public diplomacy and promotional events with 192 participating countries, opened on 1 October 2021. In line with the Government decision of 21 November 2017 that Ireland would participate in Expo 2020, DFA was the designated lead of the "Team Ireland" approach. In partnership with other Government Departments, State agencies, National Cultural Institutions (NCIs) and other public institutions, DFA designed, prepared, implemented and oversaw Ireland's participation in Expo 2020, with both a physical and digital⁵ presence. The actual cost of Ireland's presence at Expo Dubai, managed by DFA, was €13.4 million between 2019 and 2022. Implemented during a period of significant global disruption due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the project adopted a "whole of government" approach to contribute to the delivery of *Global Ireland* goals in the region. The key objectives of Ireland's participation were to promote Ireland's culture, heritage, arts, economic interests, education opportunities, and facilitate the discussion of topical global issues. While evaluating large-scale public diplomacy and promotional events is inherently challenging, it is nevertheless essential to inform strategy, business planning and participation in future events such as Osaka 2025 and to provide a mechanism for accountability.⁶ In light of these factors, an independent review of Ireland's participation at Expo 2020 Dubai was undertaken.

2. Purpose and Scope of the Evaluation

2.1 Purpose

The evaluation is an independent, evidence-based assessment of Ireland's participation in Expo 2020 Dubai under the criteria of effectiveness and learning. The purposes of the evaluation as outlined in the Terms of Reference are:

⁵ Ireland's dedicated website for Expo is located here: [Expo 2020 | Ireland - this is Ireland](#)

⁶ The Government of Ireland approved Ireland's participation at Expo 2025 Osaka on 13 April 2022.

- To examine the effectiveness i.e., the extent to which the project achieved its objectives, what were the results and any second-order effects of Ireland’s preparations for, and participation in, Expo 2020;
- To capture insights and learnings to inform strategy, business planning, operations and specifically, participation in Expo 2025 Osaka;
- To serve as a mechanism for accountability.

The evaluation questions are set out in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Evaluation questions

Evaluation Questions	
Effectiveness	<p>1. To what extent was the Department effective in achieving its objectives in line with relevant key policies and strategies?</p> <p>2. To what extent did the management structure, systems, capabilities and approaches (at headquarters and country level), enable the Department to manage the resources allocated, allow for an adequate assessment and management of risks, and facilitate the effective delivery of Expo 2020?</p>
Learning	<p>3. What were the key lessons learned from the preparation and operation of Ireland’s contribution and how can they be applied to Ireland’s participation in Osaka 2025 and similar large-scale, public diplomacy events?</p> <p>4. What are the key insights emerging from this evaluation that can contribute to overall organisational learning for Osaka 2025 and other cross-government projects managed by DFA?</p>

2.2 Scope

The evaluation covers the period 2018⁷–2022 and complements the project team’s Project Lessons Learned review presented to DFA’s Programme completed by the Global Ireland Unit for the Project

⁷ While the initial budget, planning and project parameters were finalised in 2019, work was underway in the Office of Public Works (OPW) and in DFA from 2018. Ireland participated in international Expo meetings in Dubai as early as October 2018 and in early 2019, the first Commissioner General was appointed.

Oversight Board (POB) in December 2022. The parameters of this evaluative work focus on the DFA's input into Ireland's presence at Expo 2020 and should be of maximum utility to the Expo 2025 team.

3. Methodology

In consultation with the GIU and other stakeholders, and based on feedback from the Reference Group, the Evaluation Plan was agreed. A mixed methods approach was applied to this evaluation including:

- A site visit to Expo 2020 in March 2022 by the EAU;
- A review of 145 key documents;
- 28 semi-structured interviews;
- A comparative analysis of peer countries' participation in the Expo.

The mixed method approach allowed the triangulation of evidence from a series of sources. The visit by the EAU in March 2022 facilitated some observations of the overall Expo site, the Irish pavilion and peer pavilions while it was still running (Appendices 1 and 2). The purpose of the interviews was to collect evidence from key internal and external stakeholders that would allow the evaluation team to address the research questions. The sample of interviewees was agreed after careful consideration of the role and functions that a variety of stakeholders played in the project. This ensured the inclusion of different perspectives on the project's implementation and results. Interviewees included:




- Internal stakeholders: DFA HQ and (former) Embassy Abu Dhabi personnel present during Expo
- External stakeholders: Government Departments, State agencies, National Cultural Institutions, other public institutions, Irish community representatives, peer Foreign Ministries and an external consultant.

The interviews followed pre-defined interview guides addressing common topics for all stakeholders, as well as targeted questions depending on the interviewees' profile.

A workshop was held with the GIU to consider early findings in December 2022. The Reference Group contributed feedback on drafts of the report before it was finalised.

Notes from all discussions and evidence coming from the documentation reviewed was examined in light of the evaluation questions. The findings of each question were then synthesised in a set of lessons learned and insights for the future.

Table 2. Data collection summary

 Document Review	 Interviews	 Site Visit
145 documents were reviewed including policy and strategy documents, GIU event report & recommendations, POB minutes, expenditure reports & media reports	28 interviews conducted with 32 internal and external stakeholders	A site visit to Expo was undertaken by EAU in March 2022, and the team met officials from 5 countries and viewed 30 pavilions

3.1 Limitations

Some limitations were encountered during the evaluation, including the absence of targets or benchmarks against which the performance of the project could be assessed. Therefore, the findings of the review are mainly of a qualitative nature and focus on establishing what has worked well and less well, as well as lessons for the future. Moreover, limited data was collected on the outputs and outcomes of activities e.g., profile of visitors, visitors’ experience, changes in visitors’ perceptions of Ireland, partnerships generated, etc. This is likely due to the absence of any monitoring and evaluation input to the Expo team at project design or at later stages. Thus, the assessment of effectiveness relies on a self-reported assessment of results from a balanced sample of internal and external stakeholders.

4. Context

4.1 Policy Context

The Department’s *Statement of Strategy* (DFA, 2021a)⁸ focuses on the implementation of the commitments assigned in the *Programme for Government: Our Shared Future* and to meet international challenges. The Department’s core activities are underpinned by Ireland’s Foreign Policy,

⁸ [Statement-of-Strategy-2021-2023.pdf \(dfa.ie\)](https://dfa.ie/Statement-of-Strategy-2021-2023.pdf)

Global Ireland: Ireland's Global Footprint to 2025 as well as other policy and strategy documents.⁹ Expo 2020 was seen as a key opportunity to advance Global Ireland's commitments under the Programme for Government, *Our Shared Future*, to promote Ireland's interests on the international stage.

4.2 Expo 2020 Dubai

For 170 years, World Expos have been among the largest international events in size, scale, duration and visitor numbers. They serve as platforms for showcasing countries' culture and innovations, as well as bridges between governments, companies, international organisations, and citizens. Ireland's previous participation was at Expo Milan 2015 and Expo 2010 Shanghai. Expo 2020 took place in Dubai, United Arab Emirates (UAE) from 1 October 2021 to 31 March 2022.

Originally scheduled for 20 October 2020 to 10 April 2021, Expo 2020 was postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the name Expo 2020 was retained for marketing and branding purposes. Expo 2020 was the first World Expo to be held in the Middle East, Africa and South Asia (MEASA) region, as well as the first to be hosted by an Arab country. The theme of Expo 2020 was "Connecting Minds, Creating the Future". The Expo also had three sub-themes: Opportunity, Mobility and Sustainability, each of which had its own pavilion. Ireland's country pavilion was located in the Mobility pavilion. Thematic Weeks were organised around the three themes. The main Expo 2020 Dubai site was a 438-hectare area (1,083 acres) located between the cities of Dubai and Abu Dhabi. The design was organised around a central plaza - Al Wasl Plaza - enclosed by three large thematic districts, each dedicated to an Expo 2020 sub-theme. A total of 192 countries participated in Expo 2020, each with a pavilion. The event recorded more than 24 million visitors¹⁰ from 178 countries, 30.3%¹¹ of whom visited from outside the region.

4.3 Ireland at Expo 2020

Ireland's participation in Expo 2020 Dubai showcased Ireland to a global audience, in a region with significant trade and investment potential. Ireland's programme aimed to raise awareness of its attractiveness as a place to live, work, study, visit, and do business. It was also an opportunity for high-

⁹ e.g., *Global Ireland: Ireland's Global Footprint to 2025*; *The Global Island: Ireland's Foreign Policy for a Changing World*; *Statement of Strategy*; *A Better World: Ireland's Policy for International Development*; and regional strategies.

¹⁰ [Expo 2020 Dubai records more than 24 million visits after late surge \(thenationalnews.com\)](https://www.thenationalnews.com/uae/expo-2020-dubai-records-more-than-24-million-visits-after-late-surge-1.4611111)

¹¹ GIU Ireland at Expo 2020 Dubai – Event Report & Recommendations

level visits to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and to strengthen Ireland's relationships with MENA counterparts.

A Team Ireland approach was a fundamental principle in the programme design and delivery of Expo 2020. Ireland's presence at the Expo built on the collaboration of several Government Departments, State agencies, NCIs, other public institutions and other external partners from the cultural, business, and educational sectors, supported by representatives of the Irish community in Dubai, all of which contributed by providing content to Ireland's pavilion and delivering an 'International Programme' (large scale events curated by Ireland on the Expo site, but outside of the Ireland pavilion) and a 'Pavilion Programme'.¹²

4.4 Ireland's Objectives in Expo 2020

The Global Ireland Unit of the Global Ireland and Economic Division within DFA was responsible for implementing the project plan for Expo 2020.

The Department's objectives for Expo 2020 Dubai were to:

- Promote Ireland's visibility and reputation in the UAE, the wider MENA region and among the 192 participating countries, consistent with the goals of Global Ireland;
- Identify opportunities for economic, scientific, educational, social and cultural partnerships;
- Complement and support the work of the Mission Network and of the Team Ireland¹³ agencies in the region;
- Provide a template and build competence for Ireland's participation in future Expos (e.g., Osaka 2025);
- Provide material for legacy outputs to be used within the wider mission network and by Team Ireland;
- Provide an opportunity for a targeted programme of high-level visits to Expo and the wider region.

¹² Ireland at Expo 2020 Dubai – 1 October 2021 to 31 March 2022, Event Report & Recommendations.

¹³ Global Ireland 2025 identified a number of targets to strengthen Team Ireland's presence abroad which includes a joined up whole-of-government approach (working in partnership with key State agencies).

5. Evaluation Findings

This section presents the evaluation findings stemming from the triangulation of evidence from different sources, including a site visit, the review of project documentation and in-depth interviews with internal (DFA HQ and (former) Embassy Abu Dhabi personnel) and external stakeholders (Government Departments, State agencies, NCIs, other public institutions, Irish community representatives, peer Foreign Ministries and an external consultant).

5.1 Question 1: Effectiveness

This section presents key findings on the extent to which the Department's objectives for Expo Dubai 2020 were met.

5.1.1 Visibility and reputation

Ireland's theme for Expo Dubai (*Placing Creativity at the Centre of Human Experience*) was developed with three objectives: first, that it would reflect Government policy; second, that it would express contemporary core values of the people of Ireland (community and personal connection), and the belief in human creativity as a key contributor to wellbeing; third, that as a human-centric theme it would provide clear differentiation in an Expo dominated by high-technology displays and self-promoting nation-branding.¹⁴

Overall, Ireland's presence at Expo Dubai 2020 is considered successful by both internal and external stakeholders consulted. There is broad agreement that it raised Ireland's visibility and helped to advance Ireland's standing in the UAE and the broader MENA region. The general objective of showcasing Ireland as a great place to live, visit, work and learn is clear to most contributors. In this sense, the Expo 2020 project is seen as relevant to Ireland's foreign policy objectives and there is agreement that the DFA was a fitting leader for it. It was recognised by many stakeholders that not participating would have had reputational costs in the UAE and a loss of opportunity to build valuable relationships.

An important success was the collaborative relationship established with the Expo organisation,¹⁵ which resulted in Ireland being invited to host Riverdance at the Expo's central stage, Jubilee Park, for

¹⁴ Source: GIU Ireland at Expo 2020 Dubai – Event Report & Recommendations

¹⁵ The Bureau International des Expositions (BIE) is the intergovernmental organisation in charge of overseeing and regulating World Expos, since 1931

the month of November 2021. This presence generated significant media and international coverage, as well as a strengthened relationship with the Emirati authorities. The location of the Irish pavilion was also a key benefit resulting from the early relationships and negotiations with the Expo organisers. By being close to Jubilee Park, the main stage of the Expo worked somewhat as “an extension” of the Irish pavilion. This was considered an advantage as it amplified Ireland’s offer of activities and entertainment for high-level visitors. However, as a result of the close proximity to Jubilee Park, external stakeholders who hosted events in the pavilion noted that it was sometimes noisy and not appropriate for certain networking activities, as the pavilion had no acoustic isolation.

Although there was no capture of the actual visitor experience, stakeholders agreed that positive qualities of Ireland as a creative and appealing country were portrayed to visitors. This was underpinned by putting Irish culture, especially music, at the centre and intentionally creating a personal connection with visitors. Efforts to recruit front-of-house staff with an Irish connection and train them on the exhibits paid off, it enabled an authentic representation of Ireland and a warm person-to-person experience.¹⁶ Moreover, the music was listed among the most impressive elements of the pavilion by all groups consulted. Notwithstanding that, for some external stakeholders interviewed, the cultural and artistic elements exhibited reflected a more “traditional” view of Ireland and some felt there was a “missed opportunity” to showcase a “younger”, “entrepreneurial”, “professional”, “innovative” image of Ireland and its people. Since no survey or capture of visitor feedback was conducted while the Expo was running, it is not possible to provide an objective assessment of how the pavilion content was received by visitors and how it impacted on their perceptions and knowledge of Ireland.

The pavilion’s design was deemed as “simple” and “modest”, but “appropriate” considering the budget and objectives for the Expo. There was agreement that, in terms of attracting visitors, Ireland could not compete with countries with larger budgets and pavilions with greater digital content.

Insights from both internal and external stakeholders, as well as analysis of the media coverage, confirm that the three large-scale events gave Ireland significant visibility in a highly competitive environment (Riverdance, St Patrick’s Day festival and Expo World Choir). Essentially, they were seen as “game changers” and allowed Ireland to leave a larger “footprint” at the Expo. It was noted that they provided the opportunity to advance Ireland’s relationships with the UAE government. Owing to its early

¹⁶ In relation to pavilion staff, refer to section on “Team size, structure and capabilities” in section 5.2.

timing and long duration,¹⁷ Riverdance elevated the presence of Ireland and was a significant networking event. As explained by one peer country consulted: “It [Riverdance] provided the opening for relationships. You invite someone to attend Riverdance and there will be a conversation before or after. Ireland used it well.”

5.1.2 Opportunities for engagement

Two of the objectives set for the Expo were aimed at developing successful engagements around the Expo programme. One such example was that the Expo provided an opportunity for a targeted engagement programme built around a series of Ministerial visits. Another was that it served to identify opportunities for economic, scientific, educational, social, and cultural partnerships.

The GIU’s Event Report & Recommendations¹⁸ states that there were nine Ministerial visits to Expo Dubai, two of these formed part of trade missions. In this context, Government Ministers, high-level officials, business representatives and members of the Irish community in the UAE visited the Irish pavilion and attended its large-scale events. State agencies (Enterprise Ireland, Tourism Ireland, Fáilte Ireland, Bord Bia and IDA Ireland) hosted tailored events/meetings at the pavilion for their clients, potential clients and investors.¹⁹ Both internal and external stakeholders considered that the high level of engagement during Ministerial visits and trade missions was the most valuable contribution of Government Departments and State agencies to the project. It is also worth noting the valuable contribution of the Ambassador, who was front and centre during all high-level visits. There is agreement also that the Expo was beneficial to the State agencies who worked together around the Ministerial visits, leveraging each other’s networks and contacts and raising their profiles within the Irish government and in the MENA region.

There are numerous claims that the Expo enabled several bilateral engagements, especially at the political level with the Emirati authorities, which would not have taken place otherwise. However, the project did not have specific targets; therefore, an objective ex-post assessment of enhanced opportunities for economic, scientific, educational, social, and cultural engagements cannot be provided.

¹⁷ Expo Dubai opened on 1 October 2021. Riverdance was a co-production with the Expo organisation which saw 25 performances held at Jubilee Park over the course of a month long residency, starting with a gala performance on 4 Nov.

¹⁸ GIU Ireland at Expo 2020 Dubai – Event Report & Recommendations

¹⁹ *ibid*

In terms of economic engagements, the State agencies reported that, while they did not regard Expo as a means to directly advance their business development targets, in time they saw a value in using Expo as a backdrop against which they could engage and advance relationships towards fulfilling their business development targets. State agencies and other external stakeholders stated that the Expo brought valuable interactions which have had positive effects. Nonetheless, it is recognised that economic and trade opportunities are the result of a larger (and extended) business development programme and not of a one-off event that was Expo. Although there are views that Irish businesses in the region benefited from Ireland's presence at the Expo, there is no data available to quantify this. It was observed that Ireland's Expo and Ministerial visits could have been better co-ordinated with non-Expo trade events that were taking place in the region simultaneously, for example, the Global Pharma conference, Travel and Tourism Trade show, and WETEX conference.

On the cultural side, the Expo generated fruitful collaborations between the DFA and National Cultural Institutions (NCIs) and other public bodies. NCIs, such as the National Museum of Ireland, Design and Craft Council and National Concert Hall, played a significant role in curating, sourcing and co-ordinating cultural programme content. Participating in such a major Government event increased their visibility and raised their profile. Some NCIs have reported that since participating in Expo 2020 they have been asked to curate more events for the Government. It was reported that the Expo gave several Irish artists and makers, who performed or exhibited their work at the pavilion, the opportunity to reach new audiences, and at an opportune time when performances had recently been significantly curtailed due to COVID-19.

In terms of scientific or educational partnerships, while not a central focus, successful engagements were established with the Department of Education, Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, as well as with institutions such as the Irish Universities Association, Science Foundation Ireland, the UNESCO Chair on Human Rights, Sport and Sustainable Development at Munster Technological University, Technological University Dublin and Queen's University of Belfast. These partnerships provided valuable content for the pavilion's temporary and permanent exhibitions, as well as activities built around the Expo Theme Weeks.

Overall, there are expectations that the partnerships and, more generally, the relationships developed during Expo Dubai, will evolve and be strengthened. However, apart from existing in-country, Embassy-led processes, there was no evidence of how relationships have been managed and followed up since the Expo ended. In the absence of a framework to manage and curate the relationships built during the Expo there is a risk of loss of relationships and institutional learning.

5.1.3 Support to work in the region

There is consensus that the Expo was complementary and supportive of the Embassy and State agencies' work in the region. For those consulted, it endorsed a longer process of raising awareness of Ireland in the Middle East and generated willingness to continue building on it. Insights indicate that the cultural programme was very successful and gave Ireland a profile which was "beyond compare" to other comparable sized countries at Expo. It helped to strengthen Ireland's soft power and influence with the Emirati authorities. There are numerous claims, anecdotes, and media pieces about the impact of Riverdance, the Expo World Choir and St. Patrick's Day festival at the Expo and on relationships with the UAE government. Expo Ministerial engagements were also understood to have "taken relationships to another level", as noted by internal stakeholders. Interviewees indicated that the Expo also gave the Embassy access and connections to high-level visitors from countries other than the UAE (e.g. the Vice President of the European Commission, the Lord Mayor of the City of London, the Welsh Commissioner on Future Generations and EU Commissioner for Interinstitutional Relations and Foresight).

Efforts by Embassy Abu Dhabi were central to developing relationships with stakeholders on the ground. These included the Emirati authorities, and the Irish diaspora. The Embassy's relationship management process relating to Expo started as soon as preparations began (in 2018) and resulted in engagements that were highly beneficial to Ireland from a public diplomacy perspective and in terms of project delivery. The early collaboration to establish good relationships with the Expo organisers was pivotal in enabling Ireland to stage Riverdance at the Expo's central stage for the month of November and, at the wrap up stage, to reduce costs related to dismantling the pavilion.²⁰ Interactions with the diaspora community helped translate into a high presence of Irish people working at the pavilion and attending events. This in turn enhanced the sense of an authentic experience at the Irish pavilion and, for example, at the St. Patrick's Day festival events.

The Expo occupied a considerable portion of the Embassy's time, and over a protracted period due to the delayed start. Changes of personnel in HQ meant that the Embassy was not only engaging with stakeholders in the UAE around preparations for Expo but also in Ireland to give continuity to the project. The commitment was much greater than anticipated and there was, at times gaps in

²⁰ Given its proximity to the Expo's central stage, the Irish pavilion was handed to the Expo organisers "as a gift" instead of having to dismantle it. This is viewed in DFA as an advantage in terms of costs, which not many countries obtained.

communication about programme changes which impacted on relationships with some NCIs and with some stakeholders on the ground.

In terms of State agencies' engagement with the Expo Dubai programme, it took time to clarify the roles envisaged for them. The agencies initially were concerned that they would be expected to work towards DFA Expo objectives, which would divert them from their agreed programme of work and KPIs. However, as HQ leadership strengthened, and Ministerial visits and trade missions began to be confirmed, the State agencies identified ways to work with the Expo agenda and availed of Expo events as a platform to amplify and support their business development agendas and to continue developing relationships in the region. From this perspective, it was considered a successful experience by the agencies and there have been claims that some of those relationships have evolved positively since then.

Interviewees reported some challenges such as the lack of a shared calendar of events and limited early awareness of the Middle East calendar (beyond the Expo). To take full advantage of the Expo months, it was suggested that the Embassy and State agencies' local teams should have worked on a shared calendar and targeted events at least a year before Expo opened. With important events happening in parallel to the Expo, in multiple locations in Dubai, and a distance away from the Expo site, advance planning is essential to allow maximum visibility and networking opportunities for Ministerial and trade engagements.

Finally, as Embassy staff leave Dubai, there is a risk that the legacy and relationships built during the Expo months are lost. While noting that Embassy Abu Dhabi have followed up on the relationships under their purview since the Expo concluded, more broadly there is no evidence of mechanisms to capture or keep track of other relationships and opportunities emerging from the Expo. This would entail establishing processes and tools to maintain and follow up on relationships and leads (external to the host country), post-Expo.

5.1.4 Competence for future Expos

To the extent of our knowledge as evaluators, this is the first time an independent assessment of Ireland's participation in a World Expo has been conducted. This represents an important step towards building competence for Ireland's participation in future Expos. Expo Dubai 2020 can be considered a pilot project or prototype of how the DFA, and Team Ireland can work together successfully around a large-scale global public diplomacy event. In this sense, the Expo 2020 experience brings valuable learnings to inform the Osaka 2025 project and puts the DFA in a better position to lead it.

Expo Dubai was the first Expo led by the DFA. No staff in HQ, on the ground or at the Embassy had experience of managing a World Expo. The Department took the initiative of leading it without a groundswell of experience across the Government and in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. There is a shared sense that it paid off. It allowed the Department to lead a major State undertaking and work across Government. As the project gained traction, it raised the profile of the Department and provided a platform for convening Team Ireland to work towards a shared objective. Both internal and external stakeholders reported that the Expo encouraged closer cooperation amongst them than would have otherwise been the case.

The experience of delivering this Expo demonstrated a wider notion of “Team Ireland”, one that can be beneficial to build on for future Expos. Although among some stakeholders a narrower definition of “Team Ireland” prevailed, one focused on the contribution of some Government Departments and State agencies with a presence in the region, in practice in Expo Dubai, the contributions made by other Irish public institutions, for instance, to the educational, cultural and artistic elements of the programme were enormous.

Finally, while Expo Dubai was seen as a platform to promote Ireland from a cultural perspective, business development was deliberately not prioritised. However, the vision of promoting a strong cultural component does not have to negate the opportunity to treat Expos as platforms to deliver on business and trade objectives. Indeed, other countries of similar size to Ireland prioritised trade enhancement in their participation goals. For example, they focused on showcasing innovative business solutions in the sectors of energy, water and food, and linked these to the broader Expo theme of sustainability, or emphasised commerce and investment more generally as well as tourism and education promotion. They also set quantified activity and outcome targets and a variety of measures to count factors including trade contracts (Appendix 1).

5.2 Question 2: Management and Operations

This section presents findings on aspects related to the management of the project by the Department, including design and planning, pavilion functionality, team size and capabilities, Team Ireland approach, media strategy and budget.

5.2.1 Project design and planning

The design and planning phase of Expo Dubai was marked by a shifting matrix of responsibilities within the DFA and the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic. Preparations for Expo Dubai had three phases: the first, from 2018 to mid-2020, when the then Trade Division in DFA was in charge and the first decisions around the pavilion concept and programme design were taken, and a Commissioner General was appointed. An open call for proposals was held and there was an initial selection of projects, as well as decisions on the budget. The second phase was in 2020, when the GIU were assigned as lead, preparations were affected by the pandemic, and there were further leadership and team changes. Stakeholders consulted mentioned a lack of clear directives and long gaps in communication between HQ, the DFA team in Dubai and the Embassy in Abu Dhabi during this period. Provisionally, the Ambassador in Abu Dhabi took the role of Commissioner General and picked up the project on the ground. Some external stakeholders mentioned that there was no follow-up on the projects that had been selected as part of the open call for proposals in 2019; this resulted in some reputational risks for the DFA. The third phase was in early to mid-2021. With the GIU leading the project, the appointment of a new Commissioner General and confirmation that the Expo would open in October 2021, preparations and implementation accelerated considerably. Stakeholders consulted agreed that the management of the project changed radically from that stage onwards. In a very tight timeframe, the programme was redesigned and engagements, tenders and contracts with external partners were delivered.

This allowed also for the involvement of other Government Departments, State agencies, NCIs, public bodies and other external partners. The approach towards Ireland's presence in Dubai changed from one focused on trade to showcasing Irish values of community and personal connection, placing creativity at the centre and building on cultural and artistic aspects. The approach was deemed relevant to Ireland's five key policies of Project Ireland 2040,²¹ Future Jobs,²² Global Ireland,²³ Creative Ireland²⁴ and Healthy Ireland.^{25,26} This facilitated the activation of a Team Ireland approach and broader engagement across the Government. There is agreement on the success of the approach; however, there is also a consensus that, had it been possible to finalise and communicate the programme earlier, the benefits could have been even greater.

²¹ <https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/09022006-project-ireland-2040/>

²² <https://enterprise.gov.ie/en/what-we-do/the-business-environment/future-jobs/>

²³ <https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/globalireland/>

²⁴ <https://www.creativeireland.gov.ie/en/>

²⁵ <https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/healthy-ireland/>

²⁶ GIU Ireland at Expo 2020 Dubai – Event Report & Recommendations.

5.2.2 Pavilion design and functionality

The pavilion construction (overseen by the Office of Public Works) faced no significant challenges and Ireland was one of the first to complete the pavilion build. This early completion helped to minimise the impact of the rise in construction prices during the pandemic. An early budget review clarified the breakdown between the capital and programme budget lines; this resulted in adaptations (such as the decision to build a one storey, rather than a two-storey pavilion) to reduce the build costs.

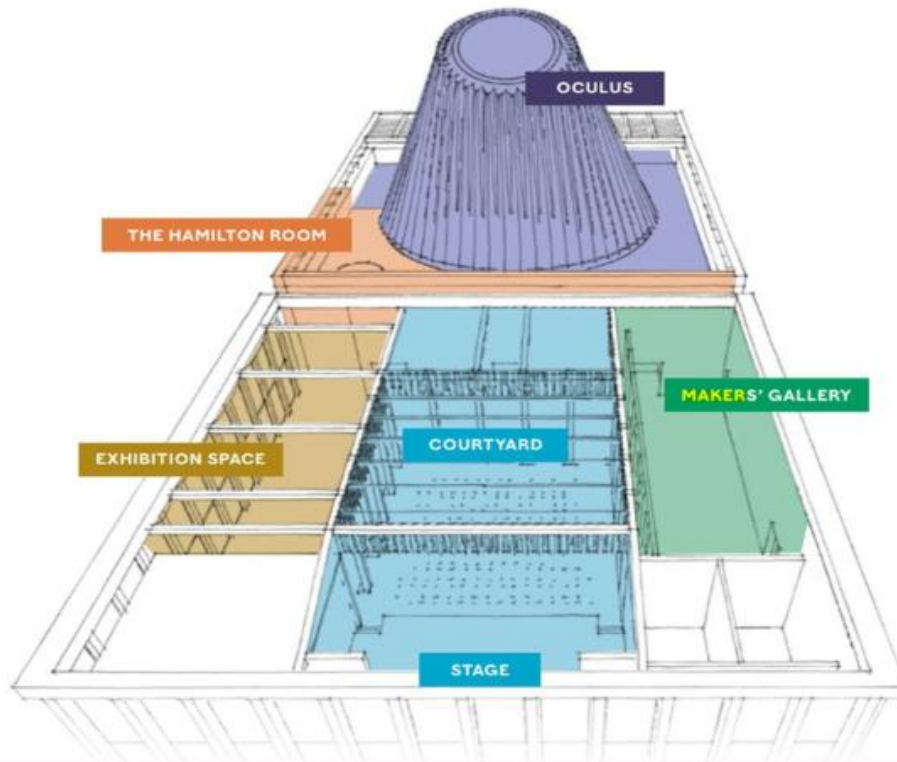
Some stakeholders cited minor difficulties in monitoring the construction process such as distance, different working weeks in Ireland and the UAE, and the pandemic travel restrictions. However, measures were taken to address these (such as setting deadlines and follow-ups for Thursdays as Fridays are not workdays in the UAE) which allowed operations to evolve according to plan and budget. Another advantage noted by internal stakeholders was that the consultants that supervised the pavilion construction and managed contractors had offices in Dubai and had multilingual capabilities and knowledge of both the Irish and Emirati culture and regulatory frameworks. Human Rights agencies were contracted to ensure workers' rights were upheld (there was one agency for OPW and another for the DFA). As reported in the Project Final Report and interviews, workers' welfare was ensured through monitoring and risk control.²⁷

The pavilion design and construction were completed on the basis of the original programme developed when the DFA Trade Division was tasked with delivering the Expo project, and prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. In early 2021, in order to meet the revised Expo opening date on 1 October 2021, under the leadership of the GIU, the programme was re-designed and the pavilion fit-out completed in a very tight timeframe; this involved significant adaptations to the programme and the fit-out, some of which were due to restrictions resulting from the pandemic. As a result, the pavilion design was not entirely fit-for-purpose (e.g. for hosting high-level visitors and certain types of exhibitions, events and hospitality). Internal and external stakeholders consulted consistently complimented the location and aesthetics of the pavilion's exterior design but not its functionality. The EAU team who visited the Expo site in March 2022 noted the Irish pavilion scored well in terms of accessibility compared with 30 other pavilions visited (Appendix 2). Among the limitations, stakeholders mentioned:

- the small gallery space and empty corridors;
- the lack of meeting rooms for networking activities;
- the lack of space for staff to take breaks;

²⁷ GIU Ireland at Expo 2020 Dubai – Event Report & Recommendations.

- the very limited office space and shortages of desks;
- the lack of a kitchen and bar to prepare and serve Irish food and drinks;
- the absence of acoustic isolation and anti-glare screens; and limited toilet facilities.



Ireland's Pavilion at Expo 2020.

Layout of Ireland's pavilion, Expo 2020

5.2.3 Team size and capabilities

There is consensus across all stakeholder groups that the Expo team²⁸ went above and beyond to deliver a successful event. Many highlighted the personality, positive attitude, reliability, commitment and kindness of team members who delivered the project in the context of a pandemic, long working days and lengthy absences from home. The pavilion staff were warm and engaging with the public and

²⁸ HQ – GIU led team who oversaw and delivered the Expo 2020 project including pavilion staff.

worked with the creative elements exhibited to connect with visitors and provide a truly Irish visitor experience. There is also recognition that members of the Irish community in the UAE made a significant contribution to organising activities for visitors (e.g. delivering ‘Coder Dojo’ classes, bringing children from an Irish dancing school to perform and organising the St. Patrick’s Day festival national parade).

However, as noted already, team stability was an issue and there were multiple staff changes and gaps along the way and at almost every level. This generated challenges, especially for the team on the ground in Dubai, who depended on decisions and feedback from HQ. Internal stakeholders consulted reflected that the core Expo team needs to be constant to ensure continuity of, and care for, the project and relationships and for retaining institutional memory.

There is agreement that the core Expo team was about right in terms of size and skills. There were several factors that accounted for the success of the project, including the network and good relationships of the Director General of Global Ireland Unit across the Government, the experience and networks in the region of the Commissioner General, the active networking roles played by the Ambassador and the Deputy Head of Mission, and the full-time dedication of the Expo Director and Attaché, Pavilion Director and Communications Lead.

Nevertheless, internal stakeholders suggested that it would be beneficial to have a second senior position on the ground and that there are some supporting skills that could be outsourced. For instance, a full-time role for media relations, as well as a role to develop social media content, with photography and video editing skills. Local language capabilities are also vital to operations, as well as event management experience. Finally, the Embassy should be resourced appropriately for the Expo as it faces a great increase of responsibilities in dealing with visits and relationships on the ground.

5.2.4 Team Ireland

The evaluation identified different understandings of what Team Ireland is, depending on the stakeholder’s vantage point. External stakeholders tended to view it from a more practical perspective and considered Team Ireland to be about engaging several Government Departments and State agencies and translating this into joint activities such as Ministerial visits and trade missions. It was acknowledged also that State agencies had their own expectations of Expo. Internal stakeholders tended towards a more holistic view in which Team Ireland is seen to be about maximising Ireland’s soft power – culturally and economically - using all relevant Government resources. Consequently, external stakeholders were generally more of the impression that they were supporting the DFA in delivering its goals, but not that they were co-creating Ireland’s involvement in the Expo.

However, there is consensus that the Expo provided a platform for Team Ireland to work together, leveraging networks, relationships and resources and contributing to the delivery of the project. For some, the level of collaboration “had not been seen before”. Most of the stakeholders consulted affirmed that Expo 2020 modelled Team Ireland and demonstrated the benefits of working together. As the project gained momentum and the programme was finalised in 2021, Government Departments and agencies started to engage with it as it became clearer how it could facilitate them to deliver their objectives in the region. When media coverage increased, for example during the Riverdance month, engagement of Government Departments and agencies increased too.

5.2.5 Media strategy

In terms of media relations, the objective was to place Ireland’s participation at Expo in a variety of media channels (TV, print, digital) and to generate coverage, especially around Ministerial visits and large-scale events. This was a challenge as the other 191 countries participating in Expo were directly competing for the same news space; therefore topics and promotion areas were selected carefully. A media communications agency (Q Communications) with operations in London and Manchester, Abu Dhabi and Dubai, was contracted to deliver the communication and media activities.

The view of stakeholders was that media coverage of Ireland’s Expo was high and that this was one of the main achievements of Ireland’s participation in the Expo. Riverdance was a major attraction and Q Communications secured interviews with regional and international media (e.g. Arabian Radio Network, the Al Arabiya TV network, and CNN). Moreover, there is the view that there was impact on the Irish press which was “more open” towards the region than before the Expo – compared for example to press coverage of the Qatar World Cup which has been more negative than stories generated about Expo Dubai. The Expo drew attention to the region and generated an opportunity to modify the narrative in media circles in Ireland.

The total combined reach (print, digital and social media) was over 5.04 billion views. Table 3 provides an overview of coverage.

Table 3. Media coverage snapshot

Media Coverage (selected)
<p>Total number of articles: 701 including articles in the Khaleej Times, The Gulf Today, Emarat Al Youm, Gulf Business, Al Khaleej, Al Fajr and The National; The Journal.ie; radio segments on Dubai Eye 103.8 and Dubai 92FM; TV coverage on Dubai One TV; CNN; Sama Dubai TV; Abu Dhabi TV; RTÉ and Virgin Media.</p>

Expo World Choir campaign had 38 media pieces and 10 media interviews.

Riverdance at Expo campaign had 255 media pieces and 21 media interviews

Social Media

Total social media reach was 7.09m followers on Facebook, 5.81m on Twitter and over 1.9m on Instagram

Riverdance social media video was viewed over 1.5 million times

Expo World Choir broadcast had almost 1 million views across DFA and Ireland at Expo Twitter, Facebook and YouTube streams

44 influencers, with combined following of 6 million, visited and promoted the pavilion

Source: Project Final Report

However, the perception was also that resources allocated for communication actions were limited and that social media engagement could have been exploited further. There was no dedicated social media content role and social media was delivered in-house. Because of resources, social media actions focused mainly on the three large-scale events.

5.2.6 Expo budget

The cost of Ireland's presence at Expo Dubai was €13.4 million. The total expenditure came in under budget by €0.6 million, €14.05 million being the final budgeted cost (Table 4).

Table 4. Actual expenses versus the allocated budget for 2019-2022 (€000)

	2019		2020		2021		2022		Totals	
	Budget	Actual	Budget	Actual	Budget	Actual	Budget	Actual	Budget	Actual
Operating Costs	56	37	341	163	3,300	3,056	2,400	1,443	6,097	4,699
Capital Expenditure (Pavilion & Exhibition)	1,500	1,500	5,950	6,308	500	1,042	0	-111	7,950	8,739
Total	1,556	1,537	6,291	6,471	3,800	4,098	2,400	1,332	14,047	13,438

Source: Finance Unit, Department of Foreign Affairs. Figures rounded (Nov. 2022).

Costs were assigned to two expenditure categories, Capital costs and Operating costs. Capital costs covered expenses incurred relating to the Pavilion and Exhibition, including design, construction, fit-out, commissioning and installation. Operational costs included costs relating to staffing,

communication, pavilion running costs (electricity, water, cleaning, security, insurance), catering and programme costs.

The budget allocated for capital expenditure was €7.95 million. The actual capital expenditure was €8.74 million, 65% of the total expenditure. The variance between budgeted and actual costs, €0.79 million over budget, are attributed to the design, construction and fit-out of the pavilion, which owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, resulted in increased costs.

The budget allocated to operational costs was €6.1 million. The actual operational costs incurred were €4.7 million, 35% of the total expenditure and €1.4 million under budget. Pandemic related restrictions imposed in January and February 2022, resulted in savings in operational costs owing because fewer events than planned took place.

Ireland's Expo budget was kept under review by the project team and updates were provided regularly to the Project Oversight Board as circumstances changed. The delay in Expo 2020 resulted in a budget extension of one year. Expo interviewees cited the DFA's first time running an Expo and COVID-19 delays as contributing factors affecting the budget. Internal stakeholders mentioned a lack of clarity about budget allocations applicable to them and reallocations from operational to capital expenses over time. Capital expenses were identified as the biggest risk to project overrun – with an Expo premium, COVID related delays, building overruns and last-minute furnishing costs. This affected the pavilion design, the allocation and use of the space within it and wider publicity. It was felt that while Ireland had a modest budget compared to peer countries, that this was well spent and that “we cut our cloth to meet our measure”.

The Expo organisers paid a significant portion of the costs for Riverdance's performances²⁹ and cost-saving was achieved at the end of the Expo by securing agreement to hand over the pavilion to them, thereby avoiding demolition fees, which would have taken expenditure over budget. Consideration of sponsorships was initially pursued but not implemented.

The effect of COVID-19 delays (e.g., suspending pavilion construction and programme disruptions) had an impact on the overall project cost. These were managed over time to keep the project within budget.

²⁹ Stakeholders estimated that the Expo organisers paid 80% of the cost of Riverdance's series of performances held in November 2021.

6. Lessons Learned

6.1 Overall Assessment

Ireland's theme for Expo Dubai (Placing Creativity at the Centre of Human Experience) was developed with three objectives: first, that it would reflect Government policy; second, that it would express contemporary core values of the people of Ireland (community and personal connection), and the belief in human creativity as a key contributor to wellbeing; third, that as a human-centric theme it would provide clear differentiation in an Expo dominated by high-technology displays and self-promoting nation-branding.

Ireland's presence at Expo Dubai 2020 is considered successful by most of the internal and external stakeholders consulted. There is broad agreement that it was a valuable and quite unique experience, that Ireland succeeded in 'cutting through' the multiple competing messages and that the DFA was an appropriate leader for the project. It was also a tangible example of successful systemic Government collaboration led by the DFA. This assessment is reflected also in media coverage of Ireland's participation in the Expo.

The COVID-19 pandemic provided a significantly challenging context, with Expo delayed by a year, periods of stalled project progress and unprecedented disruption of travel. Adding to this, there were multiple leadership and team changes at HQ that were frequently cited as affecting the effective management of the project. This also resulted in a late engagement with Team Ireland; although as the project gained momentum, the Expo provided a platform for Team Ireland to work together, leveraging networks, relationships and resources and contributing to raising Ireland's visibility and reputation in the region.

A central conclusion is that Expo 2020 is a valuable and unique example of the DFA successfully leading and delivering a global public diplomacy event, deploying Ireland's assets under the auspices of Team Ireland. This experience can contribute to organisational learning as set out below. It also showed the benefits of building on a wide concept of Team Ireland and the need to engage it early in the planning phase. To achieve this, more effective workforce planning and project governance is required. The importance of assembling a stable and well-resourced team with strong leadership in HQ and on the ground and institutionalising processes and tools supporting project delivery and institutional memory constitutes a key learning of this project.

6.2 Effectiveness

The project did not have specific and measurable targets, or a monitoring or evaluation framework. This hampered the effective targeting of audiences and activities, as well as the collection of data on which to base an objective ex-post assessment of effectiveness. Having an early agreement on specific and measurable objectives for the Expo (Key Performance Indicators - KPIs), whether they are economic, cultural, social or diplomatic, as well as definitions on the target audiences, is key for making decisions on the Expo theme, content of the programme, human and financial resources needed and for evaluating performance.

Ireland's resources for the Expo did not allow it to compete directly with countries with larger and more technologically based pavilions. However, having a centrally located pavilion and a headline cultural event at the outset of the Expo allowed Ireland to capture significant attention and visibility. Consciously developing a strong collaboration with the Expo organisers and focusing the media strategy in generating coverage for Riverdance and other large-scale events, as well as for Ministerial visits, paid off. Nevertheless, measuring attendance more consistently, as well as capturing the qualitative aspects of visitor engagement, such as changes in knowledge and perceptions of Ireland, should be considered for future events.

The overall feedback was that the large-scale events (i.e. Riverdance, the St. Patrick's Day festival and the Expo World Choir), Ministerial visits, and events hosted in the pavilion helped enhance the reputation of Ireland and develop relationships in the UAE. Yet expectations are diffuse as to the extent to which this will translate into concrete economic, scientific, educational, social and/or cultural partnerships. This could bring a risk of loss of opportunity to continue building on the connections and goodwill generated in the Expo.

Focusing on cultural aspects to attract visitors and generate media coverage does not negate the opportunity to deliver on more commercial aspects. The experience of other countries shows that trade enhancement can be part of the participation goals and that it is possible to set activity and outcome targets to consider factors such as trade contracts.

6.3 Management and Operations

The Expo provided a tangible example of delivering a cross Government project building on a broad concept of Team Ireland; one that engages State agencies, as well as relevant Government Departments, the Embassy, NCIs and other public institutions. Each will bring their own priorities and agenda, but it is possible to identify a common purpose, agree on specific objectives, create synergies, and work in a coordinated manner and share resources to deliver a successful global public diplomacy event.

Expo team leadership and stability, and later the pandemic, were unquestionable issues throughout the preparatory phase. They affected decisions around the budget allocation, pavilion design and interior fit-out, content and programming, and accounted for the late engagement of Team Ireland. It also necessitated the commitment and effort of staff above and beyond what was initially expected. Yet everyone reported being happy to have been part of the event and felt pride in what was collectively achieved.

Personalities, personal connections and goodwill yielded dividends in a challenging context and in the absence of an institutionalised mechanism to reach consensus. Establishing a defined working group or oversight committee at an early stage to agree on the project vision, scope and objectives, as well as establish the parameters on the expected contributions by participating bodies should enable/support co-ownership and evoke shared responsibility for the project.

7. Insights for Implementing Future Events

Insights presented in this section focus on supporting the delivery of future public diplomacy events by the DFA and outline how to enhance our strategic focus and support project management and organisational learning.

7.1. Early Project Planning and Effective Stakeholder Engagement

Planning, implementing and monitoring the project through a participatory process will contribute to creating a shared understanding of what the event is and what success will look like, which will in turn support its delivery. For instance, defining Team Ireland's composition and getting its input early on, brainstorming, and agreeing on common, high-level goals for the event can provide a sense of co-creation and co-ownership of the project, which can translate into shared management of resources and risks.

7.2. Adopting a Forward-looking and Cutting-edge Perspective

Being strategic in capitalising on Ireland's strengths in pharma, education, food and drink (as a few examples) and showcasing innovation and entrepreneurship can help to maximise opportunities for business development. There is space also to demonstrate Ireland's contribution to the global themes underlying the event. This is especially relevant for markets such as the Middle East and Asia.

7.3. Adopting a Relationships Management Approach

Agreeing an early definition of the type of relationships that we want to be developed, and how, is required. This should be translated into processes and tools for managing and optimising these relationships prior to, during, and following the event. This entails several activities, including mapping and segmentation of target audiences, setting KPIs (in terms of, for example, number and profile of audiences/businesses/governments to be reached, number of meetings/matchmaking events/receptions/interactions, changes in perception of Ireland of pavilion visitors), monitoring project progress against the objectives, and documenting outputs such as introductions, leads, meetings, attendants, new clients, collaborations and other yardsticks.

7.4. Setting up Monitoring and Evaluation Arrangements

The monitoring and evaluation function should be built in the project planning to support preparation, implementation and evaluation. For instance, it can support decisions on what needs to be monitored during the event, what indicators are relevant to evaluate the project, and how and when evidence should be collected. It should collect data through various methods such as visitor surveys, interviews, and observations prior, during and after the event. This is not only beneficial to the evaluation of the project ex-post but also allows for the early identification and mitigation of risks.

7.5. Establishing Specific and Measurable Targets

During project planning, the vision and high-level goals of the event should be translated into specific and measurable targets (Appendix 3 provides examples of best practice in relation to KPIs). It should also define primary and secondary target audiences for each of these. This will enhance strategic focus, allow for better planning and leveraging of resources across Government. It will also enable an objective assessment of performance (this is linked to section 7.4).

7.6. Resourcing the Project Consistently

A clearer definition (and shared understanding) on the general and specific objectives for the event will facilitate effective workforce planning. For instance, it was suggested that the Expo team should stay in place for 3 years (that Expo should be considered equivalent to a posting), which includes at least 6 months to wrap up and hand over the project. In terms of team size, having a second senior position on the ground could be beneficial. Recognising the impact that the Expo, and in particular high-level visits, has on the Embassy's human resources is also advisable. Regarding capabilities, language skills, cultural sensitivity, a friendly and outgoing disposition, along with some specific technical skills are essential. The latter technical skills can be outsourced and may include, for example, event management, media relations, social media content creation (this is also addressed in section 7.8), and monitoring and evaluation.

7.7. Leveraging Relationships and Resources

Working closely with the event organisers in designing the agenda of events and matching Ireland's programme to the event theme(s). This investment yielded benefits in Dubai not only from a resourcing perspective but also in terms of strengthening Ireland's influence and soft power. Engaging and sharing information with the EU and Member States, third countries and the Irish diaspora should also be considered and factored in as early as possible in the project.

7.8. Elevating Ireland's Expo Presence on Social Media

Social media storytelling should be used to elevate the impact of the event. For this, it is advisable to contract a dedicated social media content creator with video editing and photographing skills.

7.9. Documenting Processes and Decisions

To enable project monitoring and evaluation and enhance institutional memory, the project should apply project management approaches, consistently update project documents and keep records of plans, progress, risks and decisions around the event. Project documentation will be the primary reference source for assessing progress on, and performance of, the event, as well as continuing to gather results and provide a benchmark and reference for future events teams.

Appendix 1: Comparative Analysis in Relation to Peer Participants

Introduction

The evaluation scope included a comparative analysis of Ireland's Expo in relation to peer participants, where data is available.

The evaluation team also held interviews with officials of The Netherlands' Foreign Ministry and New Zealand's Commissioner General for Expo during October 2022.

Findings

The main findings were:

- Both countries concluded that their participation was successful in achieving their stated objectives. New Zealand attributes much of its success to first mover advantage, allowing it to make and implement the key decisions in good time to determine the work streams, engage specialist teams and establish the governance arrangements.
- Both countries prioritised the strengthening of relationships and trade enhancement in their participation goals: The Netherlands focused on the sectors of energy, food and water to demonstrate innovation. New Zealand emphasised commerce and investment more generally as well as tourism and education promotion.
- Each involved non-official participants - in events such as trade missions for businesses or young "ambassadors" in education promotion. New Zealand had 280 business participants come to the Expo.
- Both countries had set quantified activity and outcome targets and a variety of measures to count factors such as pavilion numbers, trade contracts and press impacts. New Zealand had "soft" and "hard" Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and measured changes in visitor perceptions before and after entering the pavilion.³⁰ The Netherlands recorded over 2,000 online articles and a sustainability award.

³⁰ New Zealand's *soft* KPIs related to the diplomatic/soft power side of the project and *hard* KPIs were set in the areas of trade and investment. For the latter, they used the end of financial year 2017 as the benchmark/baseline. They set targets and measured trade and investment statistics at the end of Expo, and they will measure again in years 2 and 3. They also measured public/visitor perception shifts of New Zealand (in the areas of trade, investment, education and tourism) by carrying out market research with a test group in 2019 and will repeat this exercise in December 2022. They also conducted a visitor survey during the Expo, approaching visitors before and after their visit to the pavilion.

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- Both countries committed large amounts of money and people to run the event – €35 million expenditure by New Zealand and €22 million and over 100 personnel (in Dubai and at home) by the Netherlands.
 - COVID was very disruptive, even after the pandemic had eased – some of the Dutch officials became unavailable and New Zealand experienced prolonged international travel restrictions.
 - New Zealand combined with other countries (some of its neighbouring pavilions) in several joint activities. The Netherlands found reluctance to do so amongst its fellow EU members as the agendas were so diverse and was itself concerned about the time involved to make such collaboration work.
 - Their approaches to final reporting have also been different. The Netherlands is not going ahead with a planned independent evaluation. A full report from New Zealand's organisers is to go to parliament; however this has not been made available to the evaluation team yet.

Conclusions

Amongst the conclusions that can be gleaned from these interviews are:

- the importance of early detailed planning and engagement at home and at the venue;
- the value of a streamlined decision process under a lean board;³¹
- the need to have a clear focus as to themes and objectives and to prioritise the must haves over the nice to haves. This focus is particularly important in messaging and PR;
- the importance of setting KPIs and project monitoring;
- the necessity of a steady and dedicated management team and enough staff to cover the high demands of Expo participation;
- the advantage of long-term engagement with all involved parties; and
- the efficiency of contracting out key tasks to specialist service suppliers.

Other observations

New Zealand's trade aspect included promotion of its food. Its pavilion had a kitchen, restaurant and hosting area where 41,000 people dined. Catering was managed by a mixture of New Zealand staff and Emirates Flight Catering. This facility encouraged longer stays by visitors and fuller conversations.

New Zealand will not take part in Expo 2025 in Osaka, Japan. This is an outcome of the government's assessment of each Expo on its respective merits, considering the risk of non-cooperation and the loss of institutional knowledge with intermittent attendance. The decision to participate (or not) is seen as a strategic one for the Cabinet to make.

³¹ New Zealand had a steering group comprising eight members: four government officials (Commissioner General for Expo and Zealand Trade and Enterprise (NZTE) representatives) and four professionals from the private sector (including specialists in event management and international trade).

Appendix 2: Findings from the EAU's Site Visit to Expo

Two officers from the EAU undertook a site visit to Dubai Expo 2020 in March 2022. The purpose of the visit was to help inform the finalisation of the Terms of Reference for the Evaluation, and to conduct a brief comparative analysis of a sample of pavilions. The team visited approximately 30 pavilions³² and met with officials from a cross-section of five of those countries. The team observed the pavilions from an informal visitor perspective and the observations did not take account of varying budgets and other resources available to countries.

The team considered four main categories and the following observations were noted:

1. Pavilion location and structure

- Of the three possible placements (along principal avenues, secondary and third tier avenues), Ireland's pavilion was well located on a secondary avenue, providing a fairly prominent location which helped generate footfall.
- The location was reasonably proximate to the main Expo stage which was advantageous as Ireland hosted a number of events there (i.e. Expo World Choir and Riverdance). It was also close to a separate Irish village (unrelated to the Irish pavilion) which was helpful in terms of promoting Irish hospitality (see also below).
- Ireland's pavilion was bespoke, designed and furnished to meet the needs of Ireland's programme, and offered scope in terms of visitor offerings (exhibitions, hospitality and events). In contrast, the modular type pavilions observed were small in size, and were limited in terms of location (on third tier avenues), and in terms of their display and presentation options compared to the bespoke design (Ghana and Albania both had modular pavilions).

2. Expo Dubai themes

- The team observed a range of interpretations of the Expo Dubai theme, '**Connecting Minds, Creating the Future**', with three sub-themes of sustainability, mobility and opportunity.
- 15 of the 30 (50%) pavilions visited (countries such as The Netherlands, Germany, Italy and Luxembourg) featured a strong focus on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) themes.
- Some countries built trade promotion into their pavilion themes (France and Estonia) while others strongly promoted their national culture and creativity (Ireland, Peru and Bhutan).

³² Country pavilions visited included, *inter alia*, Canada, Australia, Finland, Albania, Belgium, Peru, France, Denmark, Luxembourg, Italy, Estonia, Bhutan, Thailand, Austria, Ghana, Norway, Germany, The Netherlands, Iran, New Zealand, Spain, Sweden, UK, USA.

3. Technology

- Some of the pavilions visited (e.g. Thailand and Australia) used audio visual technology to create an immersive experience for the visitor, i.e. an experience almost akin to actually being in the country.
- The majority of pavilions visited, including Ireland, offered the visitor an observational experience via audio visual displays.
- The Irish displays and exhibitions were quite static compared to other more interactive offerings (e.g. Germany and Spain).
- Audio quality and accessible voiceover accents matter in terms of getting the attention of local and international visitors and viewers of audio-visual displays. Acoustic quality in the Irish pavilion could have been better.

4. Hospitality and visitor experience

- The most prominent observed means of engaging visitors was through hospitality, offering refreshments, national food, and the chance to sit and relax at a pavilion.
- Some countries offered hospitality external to their pavilion, meaning the visitor could avail of refreshments, take a break, and listen to music at a restaurant, café or bar, without needing to enter the pavilion. External entertainment drew the attention of passing visitors and was particularly useful in terms of generating atmosphere later in the day.
- At the Irish pavilion, it was necessary to enter the pavilion to experience 'Ireland'.
- It was not possible to offer Irish food or refreshments at the pavilion; this was acknowledged as a missed opportunity.
- Ireland paid great attention to developing the front-of-house, or host team. Staff were very well briefed to extend a friendly welcome and to convey Ireland's distinctive culture to visitors and this generated positive feedback. This approach was not as strongly observed as a feature of other pavilions, indeed many had no host staff and relied purely on technology to tell their country's story.

Generally, the use of pavilions to hold promotional events was significantly limited due to COVID-19 restrictions.

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Appendix 3: Best Practice KPIs

What follows is a list of best practice high-level performance indicators that can inform future monitoring and evaluation of Ireland's participation in future public diplomacy events:

Area	Indicator
Expo audience	Number of visitors to pavilion and events
	Profile of visitors (e.g. age, gender, country, profession)
	Pavilion capacity (%)
	Reasons for visiting the pavilion
	Views of Ireland before and after the visit
	Views of/satisfaction with the content/activity
	Awareness/understanding of messages
	Number/profile/regularity of high-level visits
	Number/profile/regularity of G2G/B2B meetings/receptions/interactions/match-making events
	Feedback from high-level visits/G2G/B2B meetings (e.g., reported intention to continue conversations/negotiations after event, potential value of commercial/trade partnership, etc.)
External audience	Media coverage
	Social media activity and engagement
	Website data
Human resources	Team size and organisation
	Performance of management function and pavilion staff
	Staff satisfaction in relation to e.g. workload, tasks, internal communication, relation with visitors, relation with managers, etc.
	Level of collaboration and information sharing between team members/organisations involved
Operations	Financial information (budget/breakdown of costs)
	Performance of technical devices; quality of catering
	Problems (in all phases of the project) and mitigation strategies
Other	Expo prizes and awards
	Sales data (e.g., if there is a kitchen and/or shop)
Benchmark	Data from other pavilions and Expo