

HANSON AT OPENING OF PHASE ONE OF A EUROPEAN PROJECT

David Hanson MP, Minister of State, was in Belgium today for the opening of the first phase of a major extension of the Louvain Institute - a North/South sponsored venture which explains and promotes the benefits of EU membership.

Mr Hanson and the Republic of Ireland's Finance Minister, Brian Cowen TD, attended the opening of phase one of a £9m extension to which Northern Ireland has contributed. They saw an impressive new 200-seater conference and exhibition centre, converted from a former chapel, and a 20-bedroom block.

Further development and refurbishment will be completed by the end of next year.

The Institute is housed in a 400-year-old Irish College which was founded in the seventeenth century by Irish Franciscans. During the past 20 years it has provided programmes to enhance awareness of the EU for more than 30,000 people from both parts of Ireland.

Mr Hanson said: **“Northern Ireland’s contribution highlights a positive North/South collaboration aimed at delivering tangible benefits to all the people on the island of Ireland.**

“It is also a recognition that we have benefited greatly from being part of the European Union and have grown as a region. It is time to give something back as Northern Ireland is now in a position to contribute positively to Europe. We are confident in a future that sees the world becoming more inter-dependent than ever.

”Over the last three years we have invested €10 million of Peace Programme funds in building European networks of co-operation between the people of Northern Ireland and continental Europe. For the last seven years Northern Ireland has also been heavily involved in delivering institutional capacity building in a number of accession states”.

Commenting on how he saw the Institute contributing to the realisation of Northern Ireland's European objectives, he said: **“I want to see the Institute working more closely with groups in Northern Ireland to create networks and partnerships.**

“In conjunction with our Office in Brussels, it can help maximise Northern Ireland’s European profile and play a pivotal role in ensuring that Northern Ireland is the region of choice for people to live, work, invest and visit.”

Notes to Editors

1. The Louvain Institute for Ireland in Europe was established in 1984 as a not-for-profit, non-denominational, non-government organisation to take responsibility for the historic Irish College in Louvain (originally founded in 1607) and to develop it as a resource for both parts of the island of Ireland to enable them to prosper in the European Union.
2. The Institute is housed in a building originally constructed in the seventeenth century as an Irish College within the University of Louvain/Leuven and was founded by Irish Franciscans as a centre for scholarly research on Ireland.
3. Grant-aid from Northern Ireland was made on the basis that it would position the Institute to become an active resource contributing to Northern Ireland's strategic European policy objectives and in raising the region's positive profile in Europe. The Irish Government has contributed £3.7m and the remainder of the £9m will be raised from the private sector.