

## Belfast City Council evidence to the Committee for the OFMDFM

### Consideration of European Issues

#### 1. Purpose

- 1.1 To provide a Belfast City Council response through the submission of an evidence paper to the Committee for the Office of the First and Deputy First Ministers

#### 2. Introduction

- 2.1 Belfast City Council through the Development Department's European unit will provide herein its views of OFMDFMs undertaking of a consideration of European Issues. Belfast City Council's European unit was established in September 2004 based on best practice local authority engagement at EU level elsewhere in the UK and Europe. The unit comprising of five core staff and two fixed term project staff remains the only dedicated EU resource at local authority level on the island of Ireland. It services all departments within Belfast City Council and also provides service on EU issues to the five other councils that make up the Belfast Metropolitan area, namely Lisburn, Castlereagh, Carrickfergus, North Down and Newtownabbey.
- 2.2 In addition, it engages with local stakeholders on EU issues including QUB, UUU, NI Science Park, NI Chamber of Commerce, Titanic Quarter, Belfast Metropolitan College and many others.
- 2.3 The unit has worked with the OFMDFM as a partner since its establishment through
  - i. Annual Opportunity Europe event in St George's Market (five to date)
  - ii. Coordinating regular communication and meetings with Northern Ireland's Honorary Consuls
  - iii. UK Presidency events
  - iv. Showcasing Belfast during profile events in Brussels eg annual open days
  - v. Peace II 4.1 Connect project linking Polish, Swedish, Spanish and Lithuanian regions with Comet looking at best practice urban regeneration projects
  - vi. Sharing information on European policy and contacts

#### 3. Overview of EU Unit

- 3.1 The unit has the following objectives;
  - To interpret and influence EU policy for Belfast City Council and city stakeholders
  - To maximise EU funding opportunities
  - To participate in EU networks to showcase the Belfast metropolitan region and exchange in best practice
  - To raise awareness of EU affairs within the region

- 3.2 Key successes include;
- Secured 12.5 Million euros since 2004 (Urbact I & II, Interreg IIIA, IVA & IIIB, Peace II and III)
  - Interreg IIIC BERI project (so successful was extended by EU Commission)
  - Urbact I (engagement in 6 projects and held as model of good practice by Commission in terms of our local coordination and dissemination)
  - Interreg IIIA Comet Interreg Partnership. Putting the metropolitan area on the map to ensure benefit from the new IVA cross border programmes
  - EYES – EU programme of education through sport programmes
  - Annual Opportunity Europe Programme for schools and general public (accolade)
  - Successful and relentless lobby on EU policy and funding issues including Jeremie and Jessica
  - High profile role in Eurocities network. Now leading working groups and hosting regular meetings on issues such as;
    - Creative industries Clustering
    - Clean Cities
    - Eurocities covenant of mayors on climate change
    - Economic migration
    - Anti poverty policy development
    - EYID
    - EU Day of Entrepreneur
    - Cohesion policy
  - Constant stream of inward study visits
- 3.3 As outlined above, Belfast City Council has a strong track record of engagement in European issues. This stretches beyond the European unit back to the early 1990s when the council, like all NI local authorities, began to secure and implement ERDF and ESF monies through local economic development plans. This work continues in partnership with DETI and DEL.
- 3.4 Belfast City Council through its Economic Development, European and Good Relations units are currently beginning implementation of new programmes and projects under
- Peace III 1.1 £6.3 Million (Peace Plan)
  - Peace III 2.1 £5.6 Million (NFS Bridge - decision pending at stage II)
  - Peace III 2.1 £375,000 (Skatepark)
  - Interreg IVA 6 Million Euros to date
  - Interreg IVB - pending application with the Irish Sea Partnership
  - Interreg IVC re-application of B-Team Brownfield's project
  - Urbact II 1 Million Euro (decision on 24 November)  
Lead partner for the Open Cities economic migration projects (EU RFEC Fast Track project in partnership with DFP)
  - Urbact II partner in building Healthy Communities project

- Quartiers en Crise - Management of the local factor of this EU network involving NI Housing Executive, BAPs, Belfast Regeneration Office, and BHT for the development and delivery of EU projects at grass roots level across Belfast.
- Development of the Power of Possibility project - cities and regions economic re-structuring post conflict (Peace III and stability instrument)
- Plans for development of a sub regional forum on Europe potentially in partnership with NI central government
- Plans for additional funding applications under Culture, Seventh Framework Programme, Life, Progress and many more.

#### 4. OFMDFM consideration of EU issues

- 4.1 Belfast City Council welcomes government's intention to establish a committee on Europe. In light of the recent NI Task Force on Europe and anticipated action plan on Europe for central government it makes sense to create a platform for considering European policy and its impact on NI at all levels and to encourage stronger engagement throughout the region.
- 4.2 Belfast City Council agrees with the three proposed objectives of the committee but would also recommend directly scheduling evidence giving sessions with the Council's European Unit, Good Relations Unit, the NILGA European Working Group, British Council, NICVA and the 5 Interreg Partnerships, all of whom are heavily engaged in European activity.
- 4.3 Objective one -  
Belfast City Council agrees with this objective but proposes the inclusion of scrutiny of European structural fund programmes delivered through NI government departments and agencies and proactively encourage wider involvement in EU wide programmes.
- 4.4 Objective Two -  
Belfast City Council proposes that the committee commissions a thorough audit of existing EU activity throughout NI across all sectors. The NI strategy "Taking our Place in Europe" began this work but there is a wealth of old and new activity that exists that is not known, coordinated or promoted. The Council also proposes developing and implementing new engagement tools such as the highly successful National Forum on Europe in the Republic of Ireland.
- 4.5 Objective Three -  
Belfast City Council welcomes this objective given that over 70% of public sector work is impacted upon by EU policy. EU policy should not be seen as a bolt on issue but rather one that is integrated into all aspects of central and local government and is not seen as a remote, jargonistic issue.

## 5. Recommendation for Action

- 5.1 Through the limited opportunity of an evidence paper, it is difficult to go into detail on proposals for the new EU committee. Belfast City Council however has a specific recommendation for a new tool to enhance engagement with Europe - establish a Regional Forum on Europe. This could reflect the south of Ireland model known as the National Forum on Europe [www.nationalforumoneurope.ie](http://www.nationalforumoneurope.ie)
- 5.2 This would display leadership and ownership at central government level and serve as a neutral platform for dissemination on Europe.
- 5.3 Belfast City Council has looked into the detail of this and other such models of engagement and would be keen to enter into discussion and potential partnership with OFMDFM to explore further. The Council would equally be keen to maintain the existing level of cooperation with the officers of OFMDFM and develop a stronger working relationship, particularly around dissemination of European policy.
- 5.4 Belfast City Council once again endorses the proposal to establish a committee on Europe and would welcome an opportunity to give oral evidence to the committee.