

Brexit Committee

Thursday, 13th August, 2020

MEETING OF BREXIT COMMITTEE

Members present: Councillor Flynn (Chairperson); and Councillors Baker, Brooks, de Faoite, Gormley, Hanvey, Long, Magennis, McMullan, Newton, Pankhurst, Walsh and Whyte.

In attendance: Mr. J. Walsh, City Solicitor;
Mrs. C. Sullivan, Policy and Business Development Officer;
Mr. D. Connolly, City Protection Manager;
Ms. L. Leonard, International Relations Manager;
Mrs S. Steele, Democratic Services Officer and
Ms. E. McGoldrick, Democratic Services Officer.

Apologies

Apologies for inability to attend were reported on behalf of Aldermen Haire, Rodgers and Sandford, and Councillors Canavan, Ferguson, Kyle and McLaughlin.

Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were reported.

Update on Brexit Preparedness (Verbal Update)

The Policy and Business Development Officer provided the Committee with an update on Council's Brexit preparedness and arrangements.

She advised that Officers would continue to monitor developments over the coming months and take part in a range of webinars on subjects related to Brexit and disseminate any relevant information when it became available. She explained that the Council would continue to engage with NILGA and SOLACE in relation to Brexit preparedness and also share information on events such as the Settlement Scheme information sessions. She highlighted that the UK government's website (<https://www.gov.uk/transition>) provided advice on what actions people might need to take to prepare for the end of the transition period.

She confirmed that the Council planned to review and update its Business Continuity Management process for the Council's critical and key services to prepare for the various scenarios. She pointed out that learning from the Covid 19 crisis would be taken into account and Members would be kept informed on the process.

In relation to Belfast Port, the City Protection Manager provided an update on the work being undertaken with central government departments and other stakeholders to

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prepare for implementation of the NI Protocol. He advised that requirements for checks on 1st January were still unknown as these would be dependent on outcomes of negotiations between the EU and UK government. He advised that precautionary planning for the Council, following Food Standards Agency (FSA) direction, was based on current EU requirements and the Council was currently recruiting additional temporary staff to carry out checks funded by the FSA. He reported that there was an assumption that DAERA would be producing a business case to the UK Government to cover all associated costs and that it was anticipated that Councils would be fully funded.

During Members' questions, the City Protection Manager confirmed that meetings were still ongoing with the lead department DAERA, but that no final decisions surrounding issues with Belfast Port had been issued. The City Solicitor confirmed that the previously agreed Members' visit to Belfast and Dublin Ports would be taken forward by Officers.

The Committee was informed of future presentations to the Committee, which included David Phinnemore, QUB; Update on NI Protocol (September) and that previous confirmed Speakers, which had to be cancelled due to Covid-19, would be rescheduled in due course.

After discussion, the Committee noted the update and that the previously agreed visit to the Ports would be arranged by Officers.

The Committee also agreed to invite the following organisations to a future meeting of the Committee:

- The Executive Office/Department of Finance and the Northern Ireland Office to discuss the Shared Prosperity Fund; and
- Representatives from the Brexit Working Group of The European Committee of the Regions.

Shared Prosperity Fund Update

The Committee considered the following report:

“1.0 Purpose of Report or Summary of main Issues

1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide Members with an update on a study currently being undertaken by ekosgen on behalf of SOLACE NI, being managed directly by Belfast City Council officers, to develop a regional local government position on the development and future management and delivery of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (SPF).

2.0 Recommendations

2.1 The Committee is therefore, asked to:

- a) note the ongoing Ekosgen study, commissioned by SOLACE NI, in developing a local government position piece on the future SPF;
- b) agree that the final Ekosgen report, which will be used to inform the development of a Belfast City Council corporate position on the SPF, be brought back to members for their information at a future meeting.

3.0 Main report

- 3.1 Members will be aware that European Structural and Investment (ESI) funds help to pay for initiatives supporting business development, research and development, investment in digital and green infrastructure, as well skills and training interventions and support for job-seekers.**
- 3.2 But with the UK having formally departed the European Union, the country will stop receiving new ESI funding at the end of 2020. Thus, for 2021 and beyond, the UK government faces choices over what to replace ESI funding with. This is important as ESI funding forms a substantial component of spending on regional economic development in the UK, especially in the poorest regions.**
- 3.3 To this end government has announced the creation of the SPF. The objectives set by the Government for the SPF is to tackle inequalities between communities, and raise productivity in those parts of the country whose economies are furthest behind, but so far it has given few details around its scale, design and implementation.**
- 3.4 As you will no doubt be aware Northern Ireland has been a net beneficiary of the EU Structural funds and their impact on economic development has been significant – indeed in Northern Ireland we receive approx. 5% of the total UK allocation, while only representing 2.8% of the population.**
- 3.5 Therefore, the future scope and operation of the SPF as EU successor funding, will be crucial in shaping the future economic and social prosperity of Northern Ireland – by providing funding to support the foundations of prosperity, it can also contribute to eliminating inequalities and ensure inclusive growth for local communities.**
- 3.6 SOLACE NI commissioned research on behalf of the 11 councils to consider the issues and opportunities provided by the SPF and to develop a strong local government position to present to NICS. There is little doubt that given the experience of local councils in delivering and working with local area**

delivery partners through European funded economic development and infrastructure programmes, that we can make an important contribution to co-designing the SPF, sharing our expertise with NICS, to ensure a model that benefits all our communities.

- 3.7 This study will also promote the understanding that some decisions are best made locally, and councils are sometimes best placed, particularly given our community planning responsibilities, to address inequalities in our local communities with partners across agencies, government and civic society, and the future SPF if designed correctly will provide a useful mechanism for us to achieve this added value for our local areas.
- 3.8 In relation to engagement around this study, Ekosgen have consulted with relevant officer from each council and other key stakeholders to understand the current system of European Funding in NI, and areas for potential improvement with a future SPF. Ekosgen have also facilitated a number of virtual workshops involving representatives from each council, NILGA, and also local organisations which manage or deliver European funded programmes.
- 3.9 It is anticipated that the final report from Ekosgen will be considered and agreed by SOLACE NI in early September. This report will then be brought back to members for information and will be used by council officers across relevant departments, in developing a Belfast City Corporate position to be agreed by elected members, on the future delivery of SPF across the city.
- 3.10 Officers expect that announcements on the quantum of UKSPF, its investment priorities and its shape and design, will be made by the UK Government in the Autumn following the Comprehensive Spending Review 2020. Therefore, it will be timely that this eksogen report and specific Belfast City Council response is developed, so that as a council and sector we are in a evidence-based position to inform and contribute to future discussions on the operation of the SPF in Northern Ireland.

4.1 **Financial and Resource Implications**

None associated with this report.

4.2 **Equality or Good Relations Implications/
Rural Needs Assessment**

None associated with this report.”

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The Committee adopted the recommendations.

**EU week of Regions and Cities and
EU Funding Opportunities Update (Verbal Update)**

The International Relations Manager provided information in relation to the EU week of Regions and Cities together with an update in EU Funding Opportunities.

She explained that, this year, the EU week of Regions and Cities would take virtually over three consecutive weeks from 5th – 22nd October. She reported that the registration link would be circulated to Members and joining the meetings would be a good opportunity to engage with a wide range of cities. She advised that the Council had been invited to attend a Panel by the Irish Regions Office on the topic of resilience, to set out and showcase the work that was being undertaken in Belfast and further information would be provided on the participants of the Panel in due course.

During discussion, one member suggested that the Council could organise its own event, in relation to resilience, at the EU week of Regions and Cities in 2021.

The International Relations Manager provided an overview of the Peace Plus Programme 2021-2027. She explained that this would be a replacement programme for the current Peace IV and Interreg Europe Programmes. She presented the following table of the 6 Thematic Areas and Eligible Activities that had been included in the draft Programme:

Thematic Areas	Eligible Activities
Theme 1: Building Peaceful and Thriving Communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Through development and implementation of Local Action Plans (LAPs), per Council area (17 in total, North and South), which are co designed with communities. LAPs will support inclusion, build positive relations, and improve physical and social environment- regeneration, reimagining and restoration, community shared facilities, celebrating cultures, diversity and inclusion○ Small project funds up to £100,000, empowering bottom up, grass roots projects to embed peace○ Building positive relations, focusing on minority and marginalized groups At a Regional or Functional level, transcending local authority boundaries – <i>Belfast City Deal area- an opportunity?</i>○ Developing key Institutional capacity○ Initiatives to re image communities through physical restoration, and creation of shared spaces – Councils will determine which capital projects to include within their LAPs.○ Justice related community interventions.

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<p>Theme 2: Delivering Economic Regeneration and Transformation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Specifically targeting sectors and communities most affected by the Covid 19 crisis and in most need and to mitigate the effects of Brexit. ○ Actions to support SMEs to become more competitive, diversification, digitalisation, R and D, access new markets, network and sectoral clusters. ○ Support for the development of Smart Cities, - develop and adopt new technology approaches to support the delivery of services and the development of new products. ○ Support for Social Innovation in response to societal challenges- Social entrepreneurs, Social economy ○ R and D for specific sectors eg Green Economy, Fintech, Cyber security- collaboration between academia, industry and high level Institutions to strive to be world leaders and create centres of excellence in certain sectors ○ Skills training and apprenticeship, skills development and retaining for any sectors (seen as essential in light of C 19, and for the most marginalised from society). Councils seen as playing a key role here with all key partners ○ Actions to support the rebuilding of the Tourism and Hospitality sectors- infrastructure and products as well as Marketing the region.
<p>Theme 3: Empowering and Investing in our Young People</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Shared Education initiatives from early years settings onwards ○ Mental Health and Well-being programmes- intergenerational trauma, emotional resilience and personal development of young people. ○ Skills development and enhancement of support services, including affordable childcare ○ Empowering young people to become Leaders ○ Cross border skills interventions and qualification recognition.
<p>Theme 4: Healthy and Inclusive Communities (particularly in relation to cross border healthcare and addressing health inequalities)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Innovations in e-Health and integrated healthcare ○ Mental Health interventions- addiction, suicide prevention, wrap around services ○ Rural Health issues including digital health, transport access ○ Rural development, physical reimagining and regeneration ○ Support for victims and survivors including mental health
<p>Theme 5: Supporting a Sustainable Future (cross border collaboration seen as essential)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Collaboration in transboundary management of the Marine and Coastal environment ○ Protection of biodiversity including nature recovery activities, including climate change resilience measures ○ Development and protection of water catchments and associated water quality

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Monitoring and management of air quality and the development of renewable energy ○ Research and data collection across all area as outlined above ○ Investment in Cross Border Rail infrastructure – Belfast to Dublin Economic corridor – driving the environmental efficiency of rolling stock and improving the regularity of services ○ Community engagement and awareness and education on climate change
<p>Theme 6: Building and Embedding Partnership and Collaboration – represents the Interreg (EU regulatory required, cross border specific EU Objective 1 – 15% overall programme budget allocation).</p> <p>This theme will enable North, South Govt department collaboration, as well as small projects to engage with citizens.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Development of cross border Local Authority Strategic Area Plans to support tourism, skills development, rural development- East Birder Region, ICBAN , North West etc. Note: Funding will cover the cost of the development NOT delivery of these Plans. ○ Development of tourism initiatives such as joint cross border, collaborative, Marketing plans ○ R and D for developing cross border solutions on border issues/challenges.

The International Relations Manager explained that the Programme was due to begin in 2021, but might experience a slight delay in commencement due to Covid-19. She advised the Programme would include local action plans and local and capital projects, however the funding allocation had not been confirmed as yet, however, the Council would be preparing a programme of work to ensure eligibility for such funding. She confirmed that Councillor Corr was the Council’s representative on the Northern Ireland Programme Development Steering Group, which was working with the Department of Finance to develop and produce the final draft

The Committee noted the update which had been provided and agreed that that the Council would organise its own event for next year’s EU week of Regions and Cities, subject to the approval of the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee for funding.

Chairperson