

Brexit Committee

Thursday, 8th October, 2020

MEETING OF BREXIT COMMITTEE HELD REMOTELY VIA MICROSOFT TEAMS

Members present: Councillor Flynn (Chairperson); and Alderman Rodgers; and Councillors Baker, Brooks, Canavan, de Faoite, Ferguson, Gormley, Hanvey, Kyle, Long, McLaughlin, McMullan, Newton, Spratt, Whyte and Walsh.

In attendance: Mr. J. Walsh, City Solicitor;
Mr. J. Greer, Director of Economic Development;
Ms. K. Walsh, Business Research and Development Manager;
Mrs. C Sullivan, Policy and Business Development Officer;
Mr. D. Connolly, City Protection Manager;
Mr. R. Connelly, Policy, Research and Compliance Officer;
Ms. E. McGoldrick, Democratic Services Officer; and
Ms. C. Donnelly, Democratic Services Officer.

Apologies

An apology for inability to attend was received from Aldermen Haire and Sandford.

Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of 10th September were taken as read and signed as correct. It was reported that those minutes had been adopted by the Council at its meeting on 1st October, subject to the amendment of the minute under the heading "UK Government Commitment to the NI Protocol" to provide that the Council writes also to Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, expressing its support for the legal action being undertaken by the European Commission against the UK Government over its intention to breach its obligations under the Brexit Withdrawal Agreement by proceeding with the Internal Market Bill.

Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were recorded.

Correspondence - Response from The Cabinet Office

It was reported that correspondence had been received from the Cabinet Office responding to concern which had been raised by Council at its meeting on 1st July, 2020

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regarding the failure of the UK Government to request an extension to the Brexit transition period.

The Committee noted the response received from the Cabinet Office. .

Presentations

Presentation from Invest NI

The Chairperson welcomed to the meeting Mr. D. Durkan (Executive Director, Strategy) and Mr. D. Roberts (Strategic Policy Manager) representing Invest Northern Ireland (Invest NI).

Mr. Roberts advised the Committee that due, in part, to Covid, the level of readiness across the business sector was highly variable and a lot of work was required in the weeks and months ahead to prepare businesses for the December withdrawal deadline.

He informed the Committee that Invest NI was focusing on keeping businesses informed and advising them on what action they could take and encouraging and helping businesses to engage with other agencies and providers out there, for example the Trader Support Service from HMRC.

He advised that Invest NI was also assessing opportunities for new investment and growth in international markets and free trade agreements with non EU countries and a potential Freeport zone in Northern Ireland.

Mr. Durkan further explained that Invest NI had been developing its own EU Exit microsite and had been holding virtual workshops and advice clinics for all businesses. He advised that an EU Exit Resilience Tool was available online to help businesses understand their current and future needs, create contingency plans and take key actions to prepare for their future.

The Committee was informed that Invest NI had developed a Brexit Preparation Grant to assist with up to 50 percent of one year's salary to a maximum of £20k, to engage a new or existing member of staff in Brexit preparation and provide assistance for rental costs for a market research office located outside the UK for a maximum period of 12 months, travel and accommodation costs outside Northern Ireland, and specialist consultancy support.

In response to a Member's question regarding pursuing opportunities before disruption from a no-deal Brexit occurred, Mr. Durkan informed the Committee that Invest NI had opened up ten more global offices over the previous 18 months and many of those offices had desk space available for businesses to go and position themselves within the international markets. He added that Invest NI had substantially increased its resources in trade and foreign direct investment over the previous two years and increased its trade missions, exhibitions and conferences.

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After further discussion, the Chairperson thanked Mr. Durkan and Mr. Roberts for their attendance and they retired from the meeting.

Invitation to The Executive Office - Brexit Stakeholder Event

The City Solicitor advised the Committee that an invitation has been received from the Committee for the Executive Office which had agreed to hold a Brexit stakeholder event to provide local councils with an opportunity to brief Committee Members on any issues and concerns they might have as a result of the UK's exit from the European Union.

A Member asked for the Committee's concern regarding the lack of detail with regard to the Shared Prosperity Fund to be raised at the Brexit stakeholder event.

The Committee agreed that the Chair of Brexit Committee and the City Solicitor would attend the Brexit stakeholder event on 4th November, 2020 at Parliament Buildings, Stormont.

Restricted Item

Update on Brexit Preparedness (Verbal Update)

The Policy and Business Development Officer explained that officers were continuing to monitor ongoing developments and had commenced the process of reviewing the Brexit readiness arrangements for the Council's critical services and that an update would be presented to the Committee at its meeting in November on potential issues that had been identified and contingency preparation that had been put in place.

The City Protection Manager gave an overview of the current status of delivery programme at Belfast Port. He advised that up to 16 Environmental Health Officers and eight Technical Support Officers were being recruited to carry out checks.

He further reported that it was unlikely that the facility would be fully prepared for 1st January, and that DAERA was assessing contingency arrangements.

The Policy and Business Development Officer advised that she was working with the Foreign Office in Dublin to arrange a virtual tour of both the Belfast and Dublin Ports and an opportunity for discussion with Port officials, and a provisional date had been scheduled for 16th October, 2020.

The Committee thanked the Policy and Business Development Officer and the City Protection Manager for their continued work and noted the presentation.

Chairperson