

Brexit Committee

Thursday, 24th October, 2019

MEETING OF BREXIT COMMITTEE

Members present: Councillor de Faoite (Chairperson);
Aldermen Haire and Rodgers; and
Councillors D. Baker, Brooks, Canavan,
Michael Collins, Flynn, Hutchinson, Long,
Magennis, McAteer, McLaughlin and Walsh.

In attendance: Mr. N. Grimshaw, Strategic Director of City and
Neighbourhood Services;
Mr. J. Greer, Director of Economic Development;
and
Ms. E. McGoldrick, Democratic Services Officer.

Apologies

Apologies were reported on behalf of Councillors Graham, Harvey, McAllister and McKeown.

Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were reported.

Presentations

Restricted Item

The information contained in the presentation associated with the following item is restricted in accordance with Part 1 of Schedule 6 of the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 2014.

Resolved – That the Committee agrees to exclude the members of the Press and public from the Committee meeting during discussion of this item as, due to the nature of the items, there would be a disclosure of exempt information as described in Section 42(4) and Section 6 of the Local Government Act (NI) 2014.

Belfast Harbour

The Chairperson welcomed to the meeting Mr. M. Bullick and Mr. D. Knott, representing the Belfast Harbour.

Mr. Bullick presented an overview of Belfast Harbour's operating model which included information on its usage and the development of the Harbour. He stated that around 70% of Northern Ireland's seaborne trade was handled at the Harbour each year.

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He summarised the cargo handling data such as container traffic, freight vehicles, and bulk goods services. He explained the Harbour's Business Model, together with the different aspects of the business and advised that the Harbour had its own eco-system with operators within the port.

During discussion, Mr. Bullick and Mr. Knott answered a range of questions in relation to export traffic from East to West and the onward travel of goods, port checks, potential effects of a border in the Irish Sea, data on the final destination of goods, investment plans for the Port and the potential entry of 'at risk' goods to the port.

Mr. Bullick advised that, in relation to the Northern Ireland Protocol regulation process changes, it was up to the Government Working Group to set the regulations and processes for future importing and exporting of goods. He stated that there would be a transition period of 14 months so that businesses could align processes. In terms of potential delays at the port, he suggested that there should not be an issue with a backlog of Lorries as each truck was allocated and booked in advance, however, contingency plans were in place to manage this risk.

The Chairperson thanked the representatives for attending and they retired from the meeting.

The Committee noted the information which had been provided.

Department for Communities

The Chairperson welcomed to the meeting Mr. C. Boyle and Mr. P. Rooney representing the Department for Communities.

Mr. Boyle advised that the the Department's Work and Health Group was responsible for delivering services to working age customers, both in Northern Ireland and in Great Britain, on behalf of the Department of Work and Pensions and comprises, Social Security Policy, Legislation and Decision Making Services, Universal Credit Operations, Universal Credit Programme, Working Age Services and Work and Wellbeing. He stated that the Group also had the lead role in delivering social security and employment programmes in Northern Ireland.

He summarised the Service Delivery Network and the Group's key priorities during an economic downturn as follows:

- To protect the core business to ensure that it could continue to pay its customers the right money, at the right time, every time;
- To target support effectively, ensuring that the Jobs and Benefit offices had the capacity to maintain job search and maximize the number who could still take up work in a recession;
- Support for the long-term unemployed and those on inactivity benefits would be prioritised, including those Universal Credit customers with a health condition/disability; and

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- Maintain services to employers – key to this would be the Redundancy Service provided to companies which faced closure or found they needed to reduce their workforce. The Department would continue to meet the needs of employers, providing a vacancy taking and advertising service and ensuring vacancies and opportunities were shared with customers to help them move into work. This included delivery of regional and local Job Fairs and tailored recruitment exercises for employers.

He provided an overview of the work of the Rapid Response Service and explained the work of the redundancy clinics and front office staff. He stated that there was a proven response time for dealing with redundancies of 1-2 days which included the mobilisation of all staff and delivery partners.

Mr. Rooney advised that future challenges for implementing the Rapid Response Service included: Multiple large scale employment failures; High number of SME failures; Sectoral failure; Insufficient staff; Lack of employability programmes; and Funding.

He confirmed that they could mitigate such challenges by the following actions:

- Proven staff complementing model to deal with fluctuating workloads;
- Operational delivery levers, such as extended opening hours, reprioritisation of service delivery, including client interventions and redeployment of staff from non-priority areas;
- Immediate recruitment of circa 100 staff to Universal Credit and Discretionary Support;
- Ability, due to its size and scale, to quickly mobilise with Councils, Colleges and other Partner providers at sub regional level; and
- Procure work ready employment services.

During discussion, the Representatives confirmed that the contingency responses had been planned for the worst case scenario of a 'No Deal' Brexit. He advised that 100 new staff had already been trained for the implementation of the Department's contingency plans. He pointed out that there was uncertainty in relation to the effect Brexit would have on the economy of Northern Ireland, where future job opportunities might emerge and the potential for sectors to grow.

In relation for further funding, such as Cold Weather Payments and the expansion of existing programmes, Mr Rooney advised that the Department was in discussion with the Treasury to develop employment programmes and that a Bid had been submitted by the Department of Finance. He advised that any changes to the regulations of schemes such as the Cold Weather Payments Scheme would be difficult and the Department would have to discuss any further assistance required with the Treasury.

He reported that, in terms of the requirement for the Universal Credit Advance before claimants could access the Universal Credit Contingency Fund, the Westminster Committee had recommended that this requirement should be removed by the 1st January, 2020.

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He highlighted that Redundancy Services were open to all Businesses in need, regardless of their size and explained the importance of job fairs and the different approaches to assist the unemployed back into work.

The Chairperson thanked the representatives for attending and they retired from the meeting.

Noted.

Update on Day 1 Preparedness

The Strategic Director of City and Neighbourhood Services provided an update on the Civil Contingency Arrangements which included the following:

- All regional training and exercises were now complete;
- Department for Communities funding was confirmed for Brexit Out of Hours reporting and co-ordination;
- National/NI co-ordination commenced on 22nd October (small scale);
- The Council's internal business continuity monitoring/reporting mirrored this – no issues raised to date;
- Confirmation of funding for any Brexit/concurrent civil contingencies emergencies was still to be confirmed; and
- Multi-agency plans were in place to co-ordinate the response to any local impacts.

The Director of Economic Development highlighted that research was ongoing to scope potential city impacts and reported that officers had been engaging with the small number of businesses in Belfast that would be impacted by the new export regulations. In relation to the potential slowdown of the macro economy, the Council was unable to mitigate against, however InvestNI, the Department for Communities and the Department for the Economy had requested funding from the Treasury in this regard.

The Strategic Director of City and Neighbourhood Services confirmed that the manufacturing and distribution businesses in Belfast had received advice in relation to the forthcoming importing and exporting requirements and the Council continued to engage with DAERA on the matter.

In relation to the Council's Critical Services, the Strategic Director reported that Officers continued to monitor the ongoing developments in relation to the various scenarios around exit and update Business Continuity Plans as required.

During discussion, in relation to future presentations, the Strategic Director advised that the Council would continue to liaise with the Executive Office to confirm their attendance.

The Committee noted the information which had been provided and agreed that the following be invited to attend a future meeting in order to discuss their views on Brexit:

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- The Tánaiste, Simon Coveney, together with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, The Rt. Hon Julian Smith MP; and
- Representatives from the Federation of Small Businesses.

Chairperson