

Brexit Committee

Monday, 14th October, 2019

MEETING OF BREXIT COMMITTEE

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

In attendance: Mr. N. Grimshaw, Strategic Director of City and
Neighbourhood Services;
Mr. J. Greer, Director of Economic Development;
Ms. K. Walsh, Business, Research and Development
Manager;
Ms. C. Sullivan, Policy and Business Development Officer;
and
Ms. E. McGoldrick, Democratic Services Officer.

Apologies

Apologies were reported on behalf of Alderman Haire and Councillors Dorrian, Graham, Long, McAllister, McKeown and Newton.

Minutes

The minutes of the meeting of 12th 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.

Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were reported.

Update on Day 1 Preparedness (Verbal Update)

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

- The Council continued to participate in regional training and exercises;
- Department for Communities funding had been confirmed for Brexit Out of Hours reporting/co-ordination;
- National/NI co-ordination would now commence on 21st October and the Council's internal business continuity monitoring/reporting would mirror this;

- Confirmation of funding for any Brexit/concurrent civil contingencies emergencies was being considered; and
- Multi-agency plans were in place to co-ordinate the response to any local impacts.

He highlighted that work was ongoing to scope potential city impacts and identify any further mitigation possible and that confirmed deputations for future meetings included the Belfast Harbour. He advised that the Council had met with the Department for Communities and The Executive Office in relation to support for vulnerable people.

He confirmed that the EU Settlement scheme information day, which took place on 3rd October, had been well attended.

He pointed out that communication leaflets had been issued to all households in Northern Ireland and Frequently Asked Question responses were being developed by the Council for frontline staff to use.

The Director of Economic Development confirmed that reports in relation to the impact of custom regulatory changes on Businesses, and the impact of Brexit on Leisure and Business Tourism, would be submitted to a future meeting of the Committee.

In relation to the Council's Critical Services, the Strategic Director of City and Neighbourhood Services reported that the business resilience templates continued to be updated and actions from the Committee Workshop, which took place on 3rd October, were being progressed.

He reiterated that the Food Standards Agency (FSA) had allocated £145,000 to Belfast City Council for food safety delivery functions. He advised that discussions were underway with DAERA in relation to the certification arrangements and the Chief Executive had written to the Permanent Secretary to obtain further information on the issue.

During discussion, Members raised concerns in relation to the impact the new certification process might have on small and medium businesses and the capacity of veterinary practices to facilitate the additional work.

During further discussion, in relation to funding, the Strategic Director advised that the additional funding confirmed from FSA would be used to fund 2 additional Environmental Health Officer posts, together with some agency staff, to meet with the expected demand of processing fish and egg produce certification.

The Committee noted the information which had been provided and agreed that the 'Our Future Our Choice Northern Ireland' organisation be invited to attend a future meeting in order to outline its views on the impact of Brexit.

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.

Presentation

Department for Communities

The Chairperson welcomed to the meeting Ms. B. Wall and Mr. M. Donnelly representing the Department for Communities.

Ms. Hall presented an overview of the preparations that the Department had made in advance of Brexit and the key areas for consideration, such as welfare capacity, support and advice for potential unemployment, housing rights, local government preparedness and vulnerable individuals and households.

She summarised the continued engagement which had been taken place between Government Departments. She provided information in relation to Department's work plan to help mitigate those people who would be adversely impacted by Brexit under the following 3 categories: financial, economical, and workforce.

She highlighted the media campaign 'Brexit and You' and the letters which had been sent to Councils sign posting NI Direct information.

During discussion, the Members raised concerns in relation to the impact of Brexit upon the workforce, job losses, access to additional funding, affordable warmth cuts, universal tax credit application process, increased usage of foodbanks, mental health, homelessness and access to services.

During further discussion, Ms. Wall answered a number of questions from the Members in relation to Day One Readiness and the measures which had been put in place to deal with the potential increase in welfare claimants. She confirmed that the Department would respond in relation to the following:

- The need for programmes for vulnerable groups and the potential to provide further funding under the Neighbourhood Renewal Programme or other existing programmes;
- the distribution of Affordable Warmth Scheme allocations;

- Trigger points of rising fuel costs and additional Winter Fuel Payments for those eligible (Department for the Economy's remit); and
- Preparedness for the impact of Brexit on homelessness and the linking of services across the island of Ireland (Northern Ireland Housing Executive remit).

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

The Committee noted the information which had been provided and that the Department for Communities would provide an update on the issues which had been raised in due course.

The Committee also agreed that, in relation to the potential job losses in Northern Ireland in the event of a 'no deal' Brexit, to write to the UK Government to urge it to cease the 5 week assessment period for the application of Universal Credit, so that claims could be processed sooner.

Update on Visit to Brussels

The Policy and Business Development Officer tabled the following report:

“1.0 Purpose of Report or Summary of main Issues

The purpose of this report is to provide a summary update to Members on the recent visit to Brussels.

2.0 Recommendations

Members are asked to note the update provided.

3.0 Main report

Key Issues

Members are reminded that, it was agreed that 'That the Committee agrees to an all-party deputation plus appropriate officers from the Council be appointed to visit Brussels in relation to the ongoing Brexit developments and noted that the upcoming European Week of Regions and Cities from 7-10th October has been identified as an appropriate time to attend'.

The delegation consisted of Councillors De Faoite, Mc Laughlin, Hanvey, Flynn and Hutchinson and an officer. A delegation from NILGA was also in Brussels over the same period and both delegations jointly attended a number of the meetings.

The European Week of Regions and Cities is an annual four-day event during which cities and regions showcase their capacity to create growth and jobs, implement European Union cohesion policy, and prove the importance of the local and regional level for good European governance. To ensure that we gained as much learning as possible, members of the delegation attended as many different events as practical. Among the events that members of the delegation attended were:

- NI Executive Office Event - 'Urban Policy and locally led strategies in a new financial perspective'
- NI Executive/Department of Health Event - 'Achieving Award Winning Healthcare Transformation'
- Galway Capital of Culture Launch
- Fighting Food Waste
- Social media breakfast for young elected politicians
- Building regional skills ecosystems
- Better evidence on cross-border regions and INTERREG impacts
- Regions and Cities catalyse social innovation
- Understanding the economic impact of cultural heritage in European regions
- Hacking Growth - boosting entrepreneurial ecosystems in European regions
- How to engage local stakeholders in policy and decision-making

Over the course of the visit the delegation also met with the following:

- Andrew Elliot, Head of Office, NI Executive Office in Brussels – this meeting was also attended by an officer from the UK's Permanent Representation to the European Union who provided an update in relation to the position around funding
- Nina Obermaier, Adviser to Taskforce 50
- Rory O'Donnell, Director EU Trade Policy at the UK's Permanent Representation to the European Union
- Gunnar Selvik, Director Oslo Region European Office

The delegation also had the opportunity to attend the UK Delegation to Committee of the Regions' pre-plenary meeting and had the opportunity to contribute to their discussion around Brexit. The delegation also attended an informal

networking dinner organised by the Local Government Association's office in Brussels. Members of the English, Welsh and Scottish Associations and NILGA also attended this dinner.

Members of the delegation also took the opportunity to have side meetings and attend events organised by their affiliated party groupings.

Grainia Long, Commissioner for Resilience was also in Brussels during the European Week of Regions and Cities event and spoke at several events including, the NI Executive Office Event - 'Urban Policy and locally led strategies in a new financial perspective' and the DEEDS workshop (Dialogue on Decarbonisation) which is part of a new strategic approach by the EU to help cities decarbonise.

A key theme within all the discussions was that it was important that views from all the different perspectives in Belfast and the wider region were presented in Brussels and that ongoing engagement would be welcomed. Key points to come out from the various meetings were:

- Importance of partnership working both at the city/regional level with other stakeholders and with other cities/regions
- Working with other cities/regions provides opportunities to learn from their experiences, share best practice and collaborate on developing solutions to common problems
- There are potential opportunities for us to develop city to city relationships but these will require further exploration
- The NI Executive Office in Brussels are keen for the Council to continue to engage with them and to use their experience and insight to build partnerships
- The meeting with the Oslo Region European Office provided a good insight into how a region not in the EU, but in the EEA effectively exercises soft power
- In relation to the ability to access future EU funding programmes this will depend on the type of exit and the agreements that are reached; Peace funding will continue as separate legislation exists

Financial & Resource Implications

A budget of up to £10,000 was approved by the SP&R Committee to enable the visit to take place, which would be

covered from the existing Place and Economy departmental budget.

Equality or Good Relations Implications/Rural Needs Assessment

There are no implications relating to this report.”

During discussion, the delegation gave thanks to the Policy and Business Development Officer for her assistance on the visit and reported that it had been a useful learning experience.

Members raised concerns in relation to the access of regional funding and reported that the next round of Peace Funding was for the period 2021-2027 and that Erasmus student programme would be run via Dublin.

Several Members questioned the potential to work with other cities to maximise opportunities and reported that links with other UK Council's had been made via the Local Government Association in relation to the Council's work on resilience and climate change. The Director of Economic Development reported that work was ongoing in relation to the 4 Cities - 3 Strings Music Programme (Galway, Boston and Nashville) and the Galway European Capital of Culture 2020.

One Member also reported that, during one of the conferences, research into the potential to fight food waste had been presented, such as how to increase the usage of 'doggy bags' in restaurants to change behaviours. The Strategic Director of City and Neighbourhood Service noted that this research could be considered as part of wider discussions on tackling food waste.

The Chairperson advised that there was the potential for one more plenary session of the European Cities of the Regions, that the UK delegation would be able to attend, however, the two Northern Ireland seats had not been filled.

After discussion, the Committee noted the contents of the report and agreed to write to the European Committee of the Regions to enquire why the allocated seats for Northern Ireland Representatives on the Committee had not been filled and to clarify the process for appointing Northern Ireland delegates.

Chairperson