

CCBS – LEGISLATIVE AFFAIRS

22/01/2016 - 29/01/2016



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Monday 25 January 2016

Agricultural Crime: Cross-Border Discussions

Summary: Mr Hussey asked the Minister of Justice to state what discussions he has had with his counterpart in the Republic of Ireland in relation to cross border agricultural crime.

Mr Ford: When I meet the Irish Justice Minister, which I do formally on a twice yearly basis, we discuss a range of issues, more around the issue of organised crime and certain aspects of the way in which we can better learn lessons. For example, the last meeting had a significant presentation from those running victims' services, North and South. We then, under "any other business", discuss a range of key topical issues. Something like agricultural crime might well feature in that. I do not think that it has formally featured in the agenda at any point, though it is, of course, an issue that is being addressed by the new cross-border task force. I have passed on a request from the Minister of Agriculture that the DARD veterinary service be added to the operational group because it clearly is an issue, alongside things like food standards, food safety and environmental crime. We need to ensure that that work is done, covering not just the pure criminal justice system but a range of other issues.

Source: <http://data.niassembly.gov.uk/HansardXml/plenary-25-01-2016.pdf>

Tuesday 26 January 2016

North/South Ministerial Council: Special EU Programmes

Summary: Mr Storey (The Minister of Finance and Personnel) made a statement on the eighteenth meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in special EU programmes sectoral format, which was held in Armagh on Friday 11 December 2015. Minister Foster, in her capacity as Minister of Finance and Personnel, represented the Northern Ireland Executive and was accompanied by junior Minister Jennifer McCann. The Government of the Republic of Ireland were represented by Richard Bruton TD, Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation.

Mr Storey (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): The Council noted that the two sponsor

Departments will consider the current governance structures and reporting arrangements in place for the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) and report back at a future meeting. The chief executive of the SEUPB then updated the Council on progress since the previous special EU programmes sectoral meeting in May 2014. The Peace III programme is 99% committed, with expenditure of 94% of the programme value incurred. Remaining expenditure to be achieved by the end of 2015 is €21.4 million. The INTERREG IVa programme is fully committed, with expenditure of 91% of the programme value incurred.

A further €21.4 million needed to be spent by the end of 2015.

It was noted that all previous years' expenditure targets have been met, and the importance of maximising full EU funding allocations was highlighted. The Council was advised that Northern Ireland was successful in securing an additional £8.9 million from the INTERREG IV transnational and interregional competitive funding programmes in the 2007-2013 funding period. It was confirmed that a number of key targets for the Peace III and INTERREG IVa programmes had already been achieved and surpassed.

The Council noted that the 2014-2020 INTERREG Va cooperation programme was adopted by the European Commission on 13 February 2015, and the SEUPB had issued five funding calls under the INTERREG Va programme. It was noted that the 2014-2020 Peace IV programme was adopted by the European Commission on 30 November 2015, and the Council approved the agreed Peace IV cooperation programme. The Council was informed that there is an expectation that Peace IV and INTERREG Va would be publicly launched in January 2016, with calls opening shortly thereafter.

The Council approved the SEUPB business plan and budget 2016, noting cumulative 4% year-on-year savings during 2014-16. The main priorities for SEUPB for 2016 were outlined; namely, to achieve closure of the 2007-2013 Peace III and INTERREG IVa programmes; ensure effective implementation of the 2014-2020 programmes; ensure that SEUPB services are delivered efficiently and effectively; and to maximise uptake in the transnational and interregional programmes.

The Council was advised that the SEUPB annual report and accounts for 2014 have been certified by the Comptrollers and Auditors General in both jurisdictions and were to be laid before the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Houses of the Oireachtas. The documents were subsequently laid on 16 December 2015.

The Council approved an amendment to the North/South pension scheme and noted a protocol on the handling of further amendments to the scheme. It also approved the 2016 business plan and budget provision for Waterways Ireland, Tourism Ireland and Safefood. The Council agreed to hold its next special EU programmes meeting in spring 2016.

Source: <http://data.niassembly.gov.uk/HansardXml/plenary-26-01-2016.pdf>

Wednesday, 27 January 2016

Written Answer

Summary: Helen McEntee asked the Minister for Justice and Equality her efforts to combat criminality by paramilitary organisations in the Leinster and Ulster Border region, further to the agreement of A Fresh Start - The Stormont House Agreement and Implementation Plan; and if she will make a statement on the matter.

Frances Fitzgerald: The talks leading to *A Fresh Start - The Stormont House Agreement and Implementation Plan* included a focus on tackling cross-Border organised crime as part of the series of measures to support a culture of lawfulness and bring an end to paramilitarism in Northern Ireland.

The Agreement includes out a new structure to enhance and intensify North-South co-operation in tackling cross-Border organised crime, including that linked to paramilitarism. The Agreement establishes a Joint Agency Task Force to enhance efforts to tackle cross-Border organised crime and to facilitate the investigation and prosecution of those involved in it. The Joint Agency Task Force proposal was designed by the parties to the Agreement to build on the excellent North-South law enforcement co-operation that is taking place already.

A trilateral ministerial meeting was held on 21 December last to finalise the Joint Agency Task Force proposal. Along with the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, I was happy to welcome the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Theresa Villiers MP, the Northern Ireland Justice Minister, David Ford MLA, the then First Minister, Peter Robinson MLA and deputy First Minister, Martin McGuinness MLA, to Dublin for the meeting. This trilateral meeting fulfilled the commitment under the Agreement to hold such a meeting of the Irish and British Governments and the Northern Ireland Executive. All Ministers were at one on the need to maintain a priority focus on tackling cross-Border organised crime between the jurisdictions.

The new Joint Agency Task Force will step up and intensify that co-operation at both the strategic and operational levels. Building on the current successes, I expect the agencies involved to further improve overall co-ordination in terms of strategic direction against the priority areas of organised crime identified and also in terms of the co-ordinated and joint deployment of front line operations aimed at disrupting, prosecuting and reducing cross-border organised crime.

The Task Force will be led by the police and revenue services and will be jointly chaired at a very senior level by a Deputy Commissioner of An Garda Síochána and an Assistant Chief Constable of the PSNI. This is essential to providing strong strategic direction and oversight to the front-line operational side.

The Task Force will integrate representatives from not only the police and revenue services, but also from other law enforcement agencies, including the Criminal Assets Bureau and the UK National Crime Agency, who can bring a particular expert focus on targeting and seizing the assets of those involved in organised crime. We know from our experience that seizing the proceeds of crime is a key means of undermining organised crime. The relevant law enforcement agencies with a remit to tackle, for example, environmental crime, such as illegal waste dumping, or immigration offences such as human trafficking for forced labour will be integrated into the Task Force.

The Task Force will provide a report on its work to the Justice Ministers North and South at their six-monthly Ministerial meetings under the framework of the Inter-Governmental Agreement on co-operation on criminal justice matters. It is the intention that these reports will be made public.

The joint chairs of the Task Force have already had a scoping meeting and the arrangements are being made for a meeting of the full Strategic Oversight Group in the near future.

Source: <https://www.kildarestreet.com/wrans/?id=2016-01-27a.14&s=border#g15.g>