

CCBS – LEGISLATIVE AFFAIRS

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Northern Ireland
Assembly

Monday 12 September 2016

Ministerial Statement: North/South Ministerial Council: Special EU Programmes

Summary: Mr Ó Muilleoir, Finance Minister made the following statement on the nineteenth meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in special EU programmes sectoral format, which was held in Dublin in the offices of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade on Friday 7 July 2016.

As Minister of Finance, I represented the Executive and was accompanied by junior Minister Ross. The Irish Government were represented by Paschal Donohoe TD, Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform. We had a broad discussion on the implications of the EU referendum and reiterated the joint commitment of the Executive and Irish Government to work together to ensure that our interests are protected and advanced and that the benefits of North/South cooperation are fully recognised in any new arrangements that emerge as regards the future relationship with the European Union. We also reiterated the recent NSMC plenary commitment to the successful implementation of the Peace and INTERREG programmes and agreed to consider the issue of securing the European regional development fund (ERDF) funding for Monday 12 September 2016 3 Peace and INTERREG, including through engagement with the European Commission. The Council noted that the two sponsor Departments are currently considering proposals relating to the governance structures and reporting arrangements in place for the Special EU Programmes Body and will report back at a future meeting. An excellent presentation was provided by the INTERREG IVa higher attainment through cross-border hubs (HATCH) project. This initiative received €1 million in funding and was designed to support SMEs in the construction and engineering sectors, to maximise the economic contribution of the migrant workforce and to encourage female entrepreneurs. As this was the first meeting in SEUPB sectoral format for all Ministers attending, the chief executive of the Special EU Programmes Body, Gina McIntyre, provided a high-level overview of its work and its forward plans. She updated the Council on progress since the previous special EU programmes sectoral meeting, in December of last year. Following the result of the EU referendum, the SEUPB noted that it would work closely with my Department and with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform to address the issues arising, particularly its impact on EU programme implementation and spend. The chief executive reported that all INTERREG Va programme themes

for 2014- 2020 have opened for calls: research and innovation, environment, sustainable transport and health. Eight stage-1 steering committee meetings had been held, progressing 38 projects to stage 2. Four elements of the 2014- 2020 Peace IV programme — shared education, building positive relations through regional projects, local authority action plans and the victims and survivors element of shared spaces and services — had opened for project applications. Two stage-1 meetings had been held, advancing five projects to stage 2. The PEACE III programme, for 2007-2013, had provided funding to 215 projects with a commitment level of 99%. The INTERREG IVa programme for the same period funded 88 projects, committing 101.5% of its allocation. Closure is now being undertaken for both the Peace III and INTERREG IVa programmes by the SEUPB. The Council was advised that the North was also successful in securing an additional £8.9m through 53 projects from INTERREG IVa transnational and interregional competitive funding programmes in the 2007-2013 funding period. For the 2014-2020 programmes, 18 projects have been approved to date, with a value of €4m. Remaining project calls and assessment will continue for the programmes during 2016 and 2017. The Council noted that both the draft 2017 SEUPB business plan and the 2017-19 corporate plan are currently being prepared by the SEUPB with a view to obtaining sponsor Department and NSMC approval by the end of this year. The annual accounts for 2015 received an unqualified audit opinion from the Comptrollers and Auditors General and will be laid before the Assembly and both Houses of the Oireachtas in due course. In closing, the Council approved the appointment of Barra Ó Muirí — fear uasal — to the board of Foras na Gaeilge, the North/South language body, with effect from 7 July 2016 until 12 December 2016. The Council agreed to hold its next special EU programmes meeting in autumn 2016.

Monday 12 September 2016

Brexit: Impact on Border Areas

Summary: Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for the Economy what works his Department has carried out to evaluate the impact that the potential Brexit will have on border areas such as the West Tyrone constituency. (AQT 136/16- 21)

Mr Hamilton: Clearly, we are dealing with a range of issues as a result of the referendum in the UK and the democratic will expressed by the people of the UK to leave the European Union. This is another example of nothing but negativity. People must have had a very bad holiday across the way: there is nothing but negativity and talking down Northern Ireland and the opportunities for our economy. I believe that a huge number of opportunities for our economy flow from Brexit. What I am focused on, and what the whole of the Executive is now focused on, is getting the best deal for Northern Ireland. We are seeking to influence, and are influencing, Her Majesty's Government's position. I had the good fortune over the summer to meet not one but three Cabinet Ministers, not including the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. I had good engagement with the Secretary of State for International Trade, Dr Liam Fox; the new Business Secretary, Greg Clark; and, as I mentioned before, David Davis. We are working with them directly, and with their officials at official-to-official level, to ensure that they are well aware of and very familiar with the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland and the issues that we want them to have to the forefront of their minds as they enter into negotiations in the weeks, months and years ahead. I personally, and the officials in my Department, continue to consult with business, particularly through a liaison group

that Invest NI has set up. We have been meeting sectors and individual companies. We have commissioned analysis and, as I mentioned before, are working directly with Her Majesty's Government to ensure that we can get and will get the best possible deal for Northern Ireland.

Mr McCrossan: Maybe the Minister will visit West Tyrone to see whether I am reflecting simple negativity or the reality on the ground. Minister, I assume that you will not agree with what I am about to ask, but are we seeing an increase in cross-border trade as a result of the devaluation of the pound, or do you believe that it is quite simply because we have pulled out of Europe? What is your view, and what are you going to do to instil confidence in the people of my constituency of West Tyrone?

Mr Hamilton: I will be very pleased to visit West Tyrone in the next couple of days as the result of an invitation from Tom Buchanan. Tom, quick out of the traps, has invited me down to the constituency. I know that the Member is new to the House, but that is perhaps a lesson for him to learn from the veteran Mr Buchanan, who has got me down for a very busy day's work. He is working me doubly hard on the day that I will be down in the constituency. I was very pleased to accept that Monday 12 September 2016 30 invitation to go down to see the many successes that there are in the West Tyrone constituency. I am terribly sorry for the Member that all his predictions of doom and gloom, which he was not alone in making, are not coming to pass. We see the Ulster Bank's latest purchasing managers' index (PMI) today. People were trying to jump all over the last PMI to say that it backed up everything that they had predicted. That was not the case. Our economy has bounced back. We saw an increase in and a growth of the private sector in Northern Ireland in August. Yes, there are a range of factors, such as the weakening of sterling, a boost in exports and cross-border shopping, but the Member seems to be talking down the benefits that are accruing for our economy. However they have accrued and whatever the reason for them, let us take advantage of them. It is one of the very many opportunities that we have as a result of leaving the European Union. I and Executive colleagues are absolutely determined that we get the best possible deal for Northern Ireland and that we have Northern Ireland perfectly placed to seize the opportunities that leaving the European Union present.



The Houses of the Oireachtas are in their Summer Recess from 21 Jul until 27 Sep 2016.