

CCBS – LEGISLATIVE AFFAIRS

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Summary: Mr McPhillips asked the Minister of Education whether he can reassure the pupils and families connected to St Mary's High School, Brollagh, Belleek that the school will not close in the foreseeable future, given that he will be aware that, in June last year, St Mary's ranked tenth for GCSE results out of all the schools across the North, albeit that it has been threatened with closure for a number of years, with plans to merge it with a school in Donegal seeming to have stalled. (AQT 239/16-21)

Mr Weir: In speaking directly on potential development proposals, there is a legal restriction on what I can say. The Member says that I will be aware of the situation at St Mary's: I would say that if I were not aware of it, the Member would be quick to remind me. I know that he has been very proactive on behalf of the school. I understand that the previous Minister asked CCMS to look at the options and the possibility of a cross-border delivery model as an alternative to closure. At that stage, work was developed by CCMS. I think that there was analysis at that stage, dated from 2014 into 2015, that the cross-border approach would neither be cost-effective nor its quality threshold assured. That clearly did not appear to be a runner. What I think is the case is that the proposal simply does not appear to be doable. What is important is that the first level of engagement is with CCMS, as it is essentially the provider body. I have asked that it engages with the school, particularly on future provision. Clearly a conversation needs to be held to see what other options or alternatives are there.

Mr McPhillips: I thank the Minister for his response. Obviously the concerns about closure have been looming for the last number of years. I am aware that he is relatively new to the post. In that context, with closure looming — I was made perfectly aware of that when I visited a board of governors meeting recently with my party colleagues Councillors Coyle and Gallagher — will the Minister give a commitment to visit the school with me and meet the board of governors to hear their concerns?

Mr Weir: I am happy, sir, to go to the ends of the earth with you with regard to school visits. Seriously, if an invitation comes in, I would be more than happy to consider it. I am happy to visit schools. Again, simply visiting a school does not mean either the kiss of death or alternatively some

level of revival for that school. Initial discussion of any possibilities cannot be on the basis of what was there previously. I think that that was explored very thoroughly by CCMS and by officials and was found not to be a runner. We probably need some level of fresh thinking. As CCMS is the managing authority, that discussion probably needs to be concentrated between CCMS and the school in the first instance. I am sure that I would be happy to accommodate visiting St Mary's as part of my general tour of schools in Northern Ireland. I am sure that, if the invitation comes through him, the Member will ensure that he is invited on that visit as well.

Source: <http://data.niassembly.gov.uk/HansardXml/plenary-27-09-2016.pdf>



Declan Breathnach TD asked the Minister about the importance of the INTERREG IVA and PEACE funding to the Border region.

In the current round of which in excess of €550 million is available, with a potential sum of €1.6 billion being available into the future. The matter being raised in this Topical Issue debate is probably the first major hurdle we have to cross in the context of Brexit. It is important that we get this right and secure the money being provided by the European Union, the Northern Exchequer and in the South for the continued development of projects and programmes post-Brexit. Up to July this year, 17 projects with a total value of €120 million had been approved for funding, but letters of offer have not yet issued. At a meeting earlier this week of the Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement the Northern Ireland Minister for Finance, Máirtín Ó Muilleoir, indicated that he had signed off on the matter but that there was a log-jam elsewhere. In a response I received on 16 September to a parliamentary question the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Paschal Donohoe, indicated that he was dealing with the issue. However, it has come to my knowledge that the delay centres on two major issues from a Southern perspective: the insertion in the letters of an offer of a break clause for two years to coincide with the possible timing of a Brexit and an assurance from all partners that EU rules and regulations will be followed for the duration of the projects, irrespective of when the United Kingdom leaves the European Union. This is to avoid any potential claw-back of funding. Local authorities, communities and those involved in the 17 projects are waiting for this money. If we do not get it right, there is no doubt in my mind that the additional moneys due to come down the track will not be forthcoming. This presents a huge challenge.

Brendan Smith: I thank the Ceann Comhairle for selecting this matter for discussion.

Deputy Declan Breathnach and I attended the meeting earlier this week of the Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement, during which alarm bells rang for all of us in

respect of the full roll-out of the INTERREG IVA and PEACE IV programmes. As the Minister will be aware, the PEACE and INTERREG programmes were put in place in the mid-1990s following on the success achieved in advancing the peace process.

The funding provided by successive Irish and British Governments and the EU Commission has been particularly important in building communities and bridges between communities. We are very well aware that many business enterprise and social enterprise projects have been funded through the INTERREG and PEACE programmes. As my colleague, Deputy Breathnach, said, a huge amount of preparatory work has already been undertaken by voluntary organisations and local statutory organisations in putting together applications and projects that would meet the criteria to draw down under the new PEACE and INTERREG programmes.

We want a clear assurance from the Government that there is a commitment to the full roll-out of the PEACE IV and INTERREG programmes that were agreed some time ago between the Irish and British Governments and the European Commission. The uncertainty setting in now is creating extreme problems for groups working on bringing applications to finality and groups that have already completed the application process and are awaiting the funding approval to enable them to proceed with projects that are necessary for local communities, which will help to provide employment in many disadvantaged areas and will provide facilities that have not been provided by the statutory authorities in Northern Ireland or Southern Ireland. We need the Minister to give a clear assurance the Government is absolutely committed to the full roll-out of these programmes as agreed a considerable time ago.

Richard Bruton: I am taking this matter on behalf of the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Deputy Pascal Donohoe, who is before a committee.

The Irish Government remains firmly committed to the full and successful implementation of the PEACE and INTERREG programmes. I am aware of the Deputies' interest in the issue and the Minister and I share their commitment to this important area of North-South co-operation. Just yesterday, the Minister's officials met representatives of the east Border region and gave them a full briefing on the work that we have been doing to protect the PEACE and INTERREG programmes from the consequences of Brexit.

The Government is proud of its role in securing EU funding for a fourth PEACE programme. Along with its sister INTERREG programme, it will see investment of more than €500 million in the region over the period from 2014 to 2020. The programmes have made an enormous contribution to cross-Border co-operation and remain important drivers of regional development in a cross-Border context. More than this, support for the programmes is a key element of the European Union's continuing commitment to the process of peace building and reconciliation over the last quarter of a century. This is a key point that should not be lost sight of.

Earlier this month at the British Irish Association in Oxford, the Taoiseach put the role of the EU in supporting the peace process, including through the Special EU Programmes Body and EU funding, at the top of his list of issues that need to be addressed to protect the Good Friday Agreement. The UK's decision to leave the EU will obviously have implications for two programmes that are 85% funded by the European Union, just as it will have implications for all programmes supported by the EU budget. This has created huge uncertainty for everyone involved in the programmes, and the solutions will be neither simple nor easy. The risks to the programmes were identified by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform as a result of the contingency planning undertaken prior to the referendum, so that starting on day one, 24 June 2016, officials began working with the Northern Ireland Executive, the Special EU Programmes Body and the European Commission to establish the basis on which the programmes can continue to be implemented. The Minister, Deputy Donohoe, has discussed the matter with the Minister, Mr. Ó Muilleoir, at the North-South Ministerial Council. They have been in correspondence and I understand they plan to speak in the coming days.

The Minister is aware of assurances given by the Treasury on a whole range of EU-funded projects as a response to widespread concern in the UK about the consequences of Brexit. In the case of Structural Funds projects, however, these assurances only relate to projects approved in the normal course prior to the Chancellor's autumn statement in this coming November. As I am sure the Deputies will agree, we would be concerned at any suggestion that it would not be possible to continue to approve projects beyond then. We appreciate there is an anxiety to see letters of offer issue to applicants as soon as possible, but the UK's decision to leave the EU has, as we predicted, raised all sorts of uncertainty. It would be foolhardy to proceed before everyone concerned, including programme beneficiaries, funding Departments and the Commission itself, all understand the nature of the financial commitments they are being asked to enter into for projects that may extend beyond the UK exit from the EU.

The personal commitment of the Minister, Mr. Ó Muilleoir, to the programmes is well known, but we will nevertheless be looking for assurances from him that approval for projects will be able to continue beyond the Chancellor's autumn statement. It is important that his officials work with ours to address the complex problems thrown up by the referendum result, so that project beneficiaries can be made robust offers of funding that will survive the consequences of Brexit.

While there are complex financial, technical and legal issues that need to be worked through, let there be no doubt about this Government's commitment to the successful implementation of the programmes. The programmes are a long-term project and we are in this for the long haul.

Source: <https://www.kildarestreet.com/debates/?id=2016-09-29a.205&s=Border#g209>