

CCBS – LEGISLATIVE AFFAIRS

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Northern Ireland
Assembly

Tuesday 29 November 2016

British-Irish Council: Summit

Mrs Foster (The First Minister) made the following statement on the twenty-eighth summit meeting of the British-Irish Council, which took place in the Vale Resort in Wales on Friday 25 November 2016

Mrs Foster (The First Minister): The deputy First Minister, Minister Weir and I attended the summit, and they have agreed that I make this statement on their behalf.

The Welsh Government hosted the summit, and the heads of delegations were welcomed by the First Minister of Wales, the Rt Hon Carwyn Jones AM. The Irish Government delegation was led by the Taoiseach, Enda Kenny TD. The UK Government delegation was led by the Secretary of State for Wales, the Rt Hon Alun Cairns MP. The Scottish Government delegation was led by the Rt Hon Nicola Sturgeon MSP.

The Isle of Man Government delegation was led by the Chief Minister, the Hon Howard Quayle MHK. The Government of Jersey delegation was led by the Chief Minister, Senator Ian Gorst, and the Government of Guernsey delegation was led by the Chief Minister, Deputy Gavin St Pier. A full list of delegates who attended the summit is attached to the copy of the statement provided to Members.

This was the first meeting of the Council since it convened in Cardiff in July 2016 for an extraordinary summit to discuss the outcome of the UK's referendum on membership of the European Union. Ministers used the discussion to reflect on developments since that meeting. Ministers updated the Council on their activity with regard to the UK's exit from the European Union, particularly on relations between member Administrations and arrangements that have been put in place to facilitate and strengthen engagement. They further discussed some of the themes identified in July, Tuesday 29 November 2016 2 including specific sectors such as the agriculture, agri-food and fisheries industries, economy and trade, free movement of goods and people, the common travel area and relations with the European Union. Ministers noted an update on implications for the Council's work sectors of the UK's exit from the European Union. They mandated officials to keep this under review and to report back to the Council.

In concluding its discussions, the Council reiterated its commitment to facilitating harmonious and mutually beneficial relationships among the people of these islands, as set out in the 1998 agreement. Ministers agreed that the forthcoming developments underline the importance and value of the Council as a unique forum to share views, enhance cooperation and strengthen relationships.

Ministers with particular responsibility for early years policy met in advance of the summit meeting to consider a paper prepared by the Council's early years work sector. The discussion was subsequently taken forward by heads of Administration, who welcomed the progress made by member Administrations in taking forward the early years agenda since the 2012 summit. The Council agreed that early years play a critical role in creating strong foundations for children and families to thrive. It also recognised the importance of investment in early years to generate better value for money in the public sector by moving from curative to preventative models of service delivery and supporting social mobility.

Responding to the paper prepared by the work sector, Ministers had a detailed discussion about the key challenges and opportunities ahead. All Administrations affirmed the significant benefits gained from their collective participation in this work sector and endorsed proposals for future collaboration, particularly on the following priorities: the workforce; supporting families; parenting; and quality assurance and assessment of developmental progress.

The Council noted progress on a review of its activity, including analysis of emerging and established Programmes for Government across member Administrations. A number of areas and emerging topics, such as public health and raising attainment, are under review, and a further report will be provided to the summit in June 2017.

Ministers also welcomed the implementation by the existing work sectors of the task-and-finish approach adopted at the Glasgow summit and endorsed the forward work plans proposed by the environment, early years and transport work sectors. Work on the final stages of the review will now be progressed in advance of the next summit, which will be hosted by the Northern Ireland Executive.

The Council noted the BIC secretariat's midyear report and welcomed the relaunch of the Council's website. As the final item of business, the Council noted that the next BIC summit will be hosted by the Northern Ireland Executive in June 2017.

Mr Nesbitt: I note that Ministers took the opportunity to reflect on developments on the UK's exit from the European Union since the extraordinary summit in July. In the First Minister's assessment, what are the main developments?

Mrs Foster: We were very interested to hear, for example, from the Crown dependencies — the Isle of Man, Guernsey and Jersey — about how their negotiations have been going with the UK Government. Their access to the customs union comes, of course, under protocol 3. They reported that they were having very good discussions with Minister Robin Walker, who is responsible for the Crown dependencies, and hope that those good discussions continue.

At the meeting, the Council agreed that the main issues for the other Administrations were accessing the single market, having minimal disruption to the ongoing discussions, particularly with

the UK Government, and having no hard border between the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom.

Finally, it was noted that the British-Irish Council was a very valuable place for the eight Administrations to come together to discuss matters and hear how the other Administrations were tackling the issues in front of them. It was a very worthwhile engagement.

Source: <http://data.niassembly.gov.uk/HansardXml/plenary-29-11-2016.pdf>



Tuesday 29 November 2016

Department of Education and Skills

Thomas Byrne asked the Minister for Education and Skills the discussions he has had with his counterparts in Great Britain, the Northern Ireland and Scottish Assemblies and in the EU with regard to the education issues following Brexit.

Richard Bruton: Both I and the Secretary of State for Education in the UK have corresponded on the likely Brexit impacts on our respective education systems in terms of a range of areas affecting students, academics, research and others. It is our intention to meet to explore these issues further on a mutually suitable date.

I had a bi-lateral meeting with the Northern Ireland Minister for Education, Peter Weir MLA, on the margins of the North South Ministerial Council Plenary Meeting in Dublin Castle on 4th July 2016. While the meeting was mainly of an introductory nature, Brexit matters were discussed. This NSMC Plenary Meeting provided the new Irish Government and the new Northern Ireland Executive with the opportunity to meet formally for the first time and exchange views on a wide range of issues of mutual interest and concern, especially in light of the UK referendum result.

At the North South Ministerial Council Education Sectoral meeting in Armagh on 21st September I had a preliminary discussion with Minister Weir on the possible implications of Brexit and we agreed to have further discussions on the matter at future NSMC Education meetings. The next meeting is scheduled to take place in March 2017.

I attended the NSMC Plenary Meeting in Armagh on 18th November 2016 when further discussion on the implications of the UK Referendum took place. The meeting agreed that Ministers will continue their discussions at NSMC sectoral level in the coming months and that bilateral discussions will continue, as required, between relevant Ministers and officials.

At official level, the Secretary General of Department attended the UK/Ireland Permanent Secretary/Secretary General Summit in London on 5th and 6th October. The Summit discussed a wide range of areas concerning proposed post-Brexit arrangements. In this context I have asked my officials to build on their contacts with counterparts in Britain and across the devolved administrations to ensure a common understanding of the issues and priorities affecting our respective education systems in a post-Brexit scenario.

So far I have not had discussions with my counterpart in Scotland, and look forward to an opportunity to do so.

Source: <https://www.kildarestreet.com/wrans/?id=2016-11-29a.472>