

CCBS – LEGISLATIVE AFFAIRS

20/01/2017 - 27/01/2017



Northern Ireland
Assembly

The Northern Ireland Assembly was dissolved at 00:01 on Thursday 26 January 2017.

The elections will take place on Thursday 2 March 2017.



Tuesday 24 January 2017

**Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
Northern Ireland**

Micheál Martin asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade if he will report on the latest developments on the Fresh Start agreement.

Full and timely implementation of the Good Friday Agreement and successor agreements, including the 2015 Fresh Start Agreement, is a key priority for the Government, as reflected in the Programme for a Partnership Government.

The forthcoming coming election in Northern Ireland will obviously impact on delivery of Fresh Start by the devolved institutions. Effective devolved Government, underpinned by a genuine spirit of partnership, is what the people of Northern Ireland voted for in 1998 and what they expect their politicians to deliver and the Government will work with all parties in support of this in the post-election period.

In the fourteen months since the Fresh Start Agreement was signed there has been sustained progress with implementation, with each administration actively pursuing the necessary work to fulfil the respective commitments.

Progress on implementing the provisions of both the Fresh Start and Stormont House Agreements are considered at periodic review meetings. These are co-convened by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and I, who attend them along with the First and deputy First Ministers and, where relevant to her portfolio, the Northern Ireland Minister for Justice. These review meetings are important in providing political direction and momentum for the full implementation of the Agreements. The last review meeting was held in Belfast on 14 December 2016.

The Fresh Start Agreement provided for the establishment of the Joint Agency Task Force on cross-border crime. That Task Force was launched in Dublin in December 2015, and has quickly become fully operational and is progressing its work to tackle cross-jurisdictional organised crime and bring to justice those involved in it. The Task Force builds on existing operational arrangements to tackle organised crime, including that linked to paramilitarism, on a cross-border basis. The Task Force reports on its work to the two Justice Ministers within the framework of their regular meetings under the Inter-Governmental Agreement on Criminal Justice Co-operation, as provided for in the Fresh Start Agreement.

The Government is also meeting its commitments as regards infrastructure projects under the Fresh Start Agreement. This includes a contribution of €25 million from the Irish Government in 2019 for the upgrading of the A5 Western Transport Corridor road project, which is in addition to the €50 million previously committed. The Government's committed funding of €2.5 million to the North West Development Fund has been provided and is to be matched by the NI Executive. Discussions are continuing at senior official level with the Northern Ireland Executive regarding co-operation on other infrastructure projects, including the Narrow Water Bridge project and the Ulster Canal and exploring financing options for future border infrastructure projects.

A key element of the Fresh Start Agreement relates to the ending of the legacy of paramilitarism and there was substantive progress on this front in the second half of 2016.

Following on from a report by an Expert Panel, the Northern Ireland Executive published its Action Plan on Tackling Paramilitary Activity, Criminality and Organised Crime in July. On 13 September, I signed an international agreement with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to establish the Independent Reporting Commission (IRC). The IRC will report annually on progress towards ending continuing paramilitary activity connected with Northern Ireland. These reports will inform future Northern Ireland Executive Programme for Government commitments through to 2021. The Government will shortly bring forward legislative proposals before the Oireachtas to establish the IRC in law, with the aim of getting the IRC legally established as soon as possible.

Following the December review meeting, both Governments and the Northern Ireland Executive announced the appointees to the Independent Reporting Commission. These Commissioners bring a wealth of experience and a broad range of skills. The Government has appointed Mr. Tim O'Connor a former Secretary General to the President and former senior official of my Department, with considerable experience of the peace process.

The Northern Ireland Executive and the British Government have also proceeded with implementation of their respective commitments under the Fresh Start Agreement. The Executive signed off on the 2016-17 Budget last December and the Welfare Bill implementing the relevant provisions in the Agreement passed into UK law on 25 November 2015. The UK Treasury has also approved the release of monies from the Stormont House Agreement funding to support integrated education.

The institutional reforms provided for under the Fresh Start Agreement have also been implemented, including the reduction in the number of Executive Ministries from 12 to 9 and the option for parties entitled to a place in the Executive to instead designate as part of the formal opposition in the Assembly.

In June, the Co-Chairs and members of the Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition Commission were appointed by the Northern Ireland Executive and the Commission is now progressing its work, as foreseen in the Stormont House Agreement and reiterated in Fresh Start.

On 6 December, the then First and deputy First Minister announced the formation of a civic advisory panel, which was provided for under the Stormont House and Fresh Start Agreements. The 6-person panel will consider specific issues relevant to the Executive's Programme for Government and engage with civic society stakeholders. Reporting to the Executive, the panel may also propose subjects it wishes to consider.

With regard to the establishment of a framework for dealing with the legacy of the past, as envisaged in the Stormont House Agreement but on which final agreement could not be reached during the Fresh Start Agreement talks, the Government remains committed to the full implementation of these commitments. I will continue to engage with the Secretary of State and with the parties in Northern Ireland, to see how we can find a route to a final agreement on legacy issues. There has been positive work and discussions ongoing over the last number of months. There remain a number of outstanding issues, but there is an urgent need to achieve progress - so that the institutions can be established and start working to meet the needs of victims and survivors and support broader societal healing. The Government will continue its engagement to achieve the establishment of these legacy institutions at the earliest possible opportunity following the Assembly election.

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