

CCBS – LEGISLATIVE AFFAIRS

8 December 2017 – 15 December 2017



Northern Ireland
Assembly

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



Tuesday 12 December 2017

Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

David Cullinane asked Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade the definition of the all-Ireland economy as used by his Department; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

Simon Coveney: The term “all-island economy” stems from a Comprehensive Study on the All-Island Economy, which was launched by the British-Irish Inter-Governmental Conference in October 2006. This Study set out an ambitious range of strategies and collaborative actions aimed at maximising the competitive advantages of the island of Ireland, developing initiatives designed to boost economic activity on the island, and eliminating market distortions arising from the existence of the border.

These included intervention in the education and training systems to enhance human capital; intervention to support research and innovation and the development of the knowledge economy; co-ordinated provision of key infrastructure; enhanced co-operation in the provision of health and

educational services; enhanced co-operation in the provision of electricity and telecommunications infrastructure; and an improved regulatory environment.

It was also envisaged in the Study that, in the area of infrastructure, more joined-up planning and delivery would give better outcomes for people throughout the island.

In the intervening years, significant progress has been made in these sectors, including through the work of the North-South Bodies such as InterTrade Ireland and Tourism Ireland, and there are also strong business linkages between North and South.

I believe that the potential for trade and economic activity across the island of Ireland has not yet been fully tapped and that there is scope for increasing the levels of trade in both directions. In support of this, and particularly in view of the challenges presented by the UK exit from the EU, we clearly need to assist our SMEs in whatever ways we can. This in turn can safeguard jobs, and encourage cross-border investments. InterTrade Ireland, for which the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation has responsibility in this jurisdiction, is doing excellent work in this area.

It is clear that it is more mutually beneficial to work together rather than separately, and the development of an all-island economy is in everyone's interests.

An all-island approach has already proved very successful in the Tourism sector, where Tourism Ireland has successfully marketed the island throughout the world. In the energy sector, the successful joint venture between Eirgrid plc and System Operator Northern Ireland (SONI) Limited has led to the Single Electricity Market – a wholesale electricity market operating across the island.

With the continuing absence of a functioning Northern Ireland Executive, the North South Ministerial Council cannot operate and bring together the Government and the Executive to oversee ongoing North/South work and further develop co-operation, as provided for under the Good Friday Agreement. This is a most serious absence, and particularly so at a time when the Council should be continuing the work it commenced last year to deal with the challenges of Brexit. Common Principles were agreed at the Plenary meeting of the NSMC in November 2016, to coordinate engagement by the Government and the Executive to deal with the challenges that are raised on an all-island basis by the UK exit from the European Union. We should be working together on this through the North South Ministerial Council.

In this regard, the Government is continuing to work with the British Government, as co-guarantors of the Good Friday Agreement, to support the effective operation of all of its institutions, including the NSMC.

Source: <https://www.kildarestreet.com/wrans/?id=2017-12-12a.147&s=cross-border+2017-12-08..2017-12-15#g149.r>

Thursday 14 December 2017

Department of Justice & Equality

Declan Breathnach asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality the status of the cross-Border crime agency; the number of staff involved and agencies engaged; the annual budget; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

Charles Flanagan: I take it that the Deputy is referring to the Joint Agency Task Force which is led by police and revenue services in Ireland and the Northern Ireland and brings together the relevant law enforcement agencies in both jurisdictions to better co-ordinate strategic and operational actions against cross-border organised crime. It involves senior officers from An Garda Síochána, the PSNI, the Revenue Commissioners and HM Revenue and Customs; it also includes the Criminal Assets Bureau and UK National Crime Agency (who have the primary role in criminal assets recovery) as well as other appropriate law enforcement services (such as environmental protection agencies and immigration services) when required by the operations of the Task Force. The establishment of the Joint Agency Task Force was a commitment of the Irish and British Governments in the 2015 Fresh Start Agreement and the Task Force has been operational since early 2016.

The Joint Agency Task Force consists of a Strategic Oversight Group which identifies and manages the strategic priorities for combatting cross-jurisdictional organised crime and an Operations Co-ordination Group which co-ordinates joint operations and directs the necessary multi-agency resources for those operations.

As the Joint Agency Task Force is a multi-agency coordination structure it does not have a defined staffing complement or budget. Personnel from the participating agencies in both jurisdictions are assigned for specific operations. Similarly, budget resources are deployed from the various elements of an Garda Síochána, the Criminal Assets Bureau and other agencies as necessary for particular operational requirements.

I am very satisfied with the operation of the Joint Agency Task Force in the two years since its inception. There have, for example, been specific operations targeting rural crime, child sexual exploitation and human trafficking for labour exploitation that have resulted in a number of arrests, the seizure of stolen vehicles, equipment and other goods, cash and drugs and the identification by the Revenue services of unregistered business interests. In respect of rural crime, there was also a specific focus on awareness-raising and providing crime prevention advice at community level on both sides of the border.

The Joint Agency Task Force is just one example of the extensive co-operation that is undertaken between police and criminal justice agencies in the State and in Northern Ireland. I commend the work of all of the agencies involved in combatting cross-border criminal activity.

Source: <https://www.kildarestreet.com/wrans/?id=2017-12-14a.616&s=cross-border+2017-12-08..2017-12-15>

Thursday 14 December 2017

Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation

Niall Collins asked the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation the details of each specific EU Competitiveness Council Ministers meeting in which she or her predecessors made the case for the need for a revision of State aid rules to protect Irish enterprises and related jobs during the UK's two-year exit phase from the EU and subsequent transition phase; the date of each meeting in which this was raised, in tabular form; the progress made at EU level to increase state aid thresholds to support Irish enterprises from a hard Brexit; and if she will make a statement on the matter.

Heather Humphreys: Since the Brexit Referendum, my predecessor, Mary Mitchell O'Connor, attended meetings of the Competitiveness Council on 29th September 2016, 28th November 2016 and 20th February 2017. State Aid rules did not feature on the agenda of these meetings. The Competitiveness Council is a consultative committee and is not a forum for direct representations from Member States. Nor does the Council propose changes to State Aid rules.

Brexit was a central part of the discussions at meetings my predecessor, Frances Fitzgerald, had with both EU Commissioners and Ministers from other Member States. This included a meeting with the EU's Chief Brexit Negotiator, Michel Barnier in July 2017 where the difficulties Ireland is facing as a result of Brexit were discussed.

In addition, Officials of my Department have had discussions with senior officials from DG Competition to sensitise them to the potential difficulties to be encountered by Irish businesses in the UK market arising from the Brexit referendum result. Furthermore, in November 2017, the then Tánaiste met with Commissioner Vestager. An outcome from this meeting was the establishment of a Working Group comprising representatives from DG Comp, the Department of Business, Enterprise & Innovation, Enterprise Ireland and Department of Agriculture. The objective of the Group is to scope and design schemes to support enterprise impacted by Brexit in line with current applicable State Aid rules. The work of this Group has already commenced and will continue into 2018. Should issues arise that require an approach that does not fit within the existing State Aid rules, this will be raised as part of the Working Group discussions.

A lot can be done within the existing EU State Aid Framework. In October 2017, the then Tánaiste announced a Brexit Loan Guarantee scheme for SMEs and in November 2017 the EU Commission approved a Rescue and Restructuring scheme for Ireland. Both these schemes will operate within existing State Aid rules.

Source <https://www.kildarestreet.com/wrans/?id=2017-12-14a.701&s=brexit+2017-12-08..2017-12-15#g702.q>