

# CCBS – LEGISLATIVE AFFAIRS

---

20/03/2015-27/03/2015



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

**Monday 23 March 2015**

**Plenary Chamber**

## **Ministerial Statements: North/South Ministerial Council: Trade and Business Development**

**Summary:** The Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Investment Arlene Foster highlighted some of the key areas of discussion during a recent NSMC meeting in sectoral format held on Thursday 5 March 2015.

The Council noted the positive performance of InterTradelreland during 2014, including creating and maintaining 1,881 jobs; delivering a 10:1 return on investment; assisting 64 first-time innovators; assisting 127 first-time exporters; delivering 4% efficiency savings; and delivering a total business value of £67 million.

It was also noted that InterTradelreland had continued to carry out business and economic research activities, including production of a report entitled 'SMEs, Credit constraints and Growth — A Cross Border Study', the production of InterTradelreland's quarterly business monitor survey, and undertaking research into the issue of mapping the potential for cross-border clusters and clustering. The Council approved InterTradelreland's 2015 business plan and recommended that the 2015 budget/grant provision for InterTradelreland should be £8,746,440.

The Council noted that both jurisdictions had agreed a joint target of €175 million for drawdown under Horizon 2020 and welcomed the support structures that have been put in place to deliver on this target, including the continued work of the all-island Horizon 2020 steering group, which is chaired by InterTradelreland; the launch of the Horizon 2020 strategic action plan; and the work of the contact point networks in each jurisdiction.

The Council was encouraged by the early results from Horizon 2020, including 45 crossborder applications submitted to the programme, with seven being successful. Those seven projects will have an economic value of €8.8 million for successful cross-border Horizon 2020 collaboration.

**Ministers welcomed the work being undertaken by the partnership to expand its scope to include agrifood research. Minister Foster invited InterTradelreland to liaise with the Agri-Food Strategy Board (AFSB) and seek its views on potential areas of research of interest to the industry.**

**Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment):** *With your permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement in compliance with section 52 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 regarding a meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council in trade and business development sectoral format. This meeting was held in the offices of the North/South Ministerial Council, Armagh, on Thursday 5 March 2015. The Executive were represented by me in my capacity as Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment and by John O'Dowd MLA, Minister of Education. The Irish Government were represented by Richard Bruton TD, Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation. This statement has been agreed with Minister O'Dowd.*

The Council received a presentation from Martin Cronin, the chairperson, and Thomas Hunter McGowan, CEO, on InterTradelreland's performance and business activities, including information on performance against its 2014 business plan target. The Council noted the positive performance of InterTradelreland during 2014, including creating and maintaining 1,881 jobs; delivering a 10:1 return on investment; assisting 64 first-time innovators; assisting 127 first-time exporters; delivering 4% efficiency savings; and delivering a total business value of £67 million.

The Council noted that there was strong demand across all InterTradelreland's programmes during 2014. It was also noted that InterTradelreland had continued to carry out business and economic research activities, including production of a report entitled 'SMEs, Credit constraints and Growth — A Cross Border Study', the production of InterTradelreland's quarterly business monitor survey, and undertaking research into the issue of mapping the potential for cross-border clusters and clustering. The Council approved InterTradelreland's 2015 business plan and recommended that the 2015 budget/grant provision for InterTradelreland should be £8,746,440.

The Council noted that both jurisdictions had agreed a joint target of €175 million for drawdown under Horizon 2020 and welcomed the support structures that have been put in place to deliver on this target, including the continued work of the all-island Horizon 2020 steering group, which is chaired by InterTradelreland; the launch of the Horizon 2020 strategic action plan; and the work of the contact point networks in each jurisdiction. The Council was advised that InterTradelreland had identified, and will be taking forward, additional activities in conjunction with the all-island steering group to deliver on this target.

The Council was encouraged by the early results from Horizon 2020, including 45 crossborder applications submitted to the programme, with seven being successful. Those seven projects will have an economic value of €8.8 million for successful cross-border Horizon 2020 collaboration. The Council noted the high level of demand for Horizon 2020 funding from across Europe, but was encouraged by the fact that the success rate for cross-border proposals of 16% was higher than the average EU rate of 14%.

The Council noted that officials were continuing to investigate opportunities for cooperation on EU business and enterprise funding, including under Horizon 2020, INTERREG Va, and possibly the Juncker initiative and the competitiveness of enterprises and small and medium-sized enterprises (COSME) programme. It was noted that €71 million of the INTERREG Va programme is to be allocated to research and innovation and that officials are looking closely at opportunities for cooperation in this area.

Ministers recognised the benefits to be gained through participation in collaborative European projects, welcomed the collaboration between bodies and officials in each jurisdiction, and encouraged officials to continue to seek new opportunities for European funding for projects.

The Council received a presentation on the US Ireland R&D partnership, which reflected the world-class nature of the ongoing work. It was noted that, up to January 2015, a total of 19 projects had been awarded £23.7 million and had brought together over 60 investigators from universities and institutes in Northern Ireland, Ireland and the United States. Ministers noted that the research undertaken through the partnership meets the gold standard of the United States' National Science Foundation (NSF) and the National Institutes of Health (NIH) peer review system. In this regard, the projects supported were recognised internationally as world-leading.

The collaborative research projects involved are subject to the highly competitive National Science Foundation and National Institutes of Health peer review systems. The Council was particularly impressed that, for proposals submitted to NSF, the success rate for projects involving institutions in Ireland and Northern Ireland was 38%, compared to the standard success rate of 18% for projects from within the United States.

Equally, although the success rate for proposals submitted to the NIH was 14%, slightly lower than the standard success rate of 16%, that represented a significant achievement. The success rates for the partnership projects are testament to the international standard of research carried out in both jurisdictions.

I and Minister Bruton recognise the benefits that participation in the US-Ireland R&D Partnership brings. InterTradelreland was asked to track how many of those post holders end up supporting or working in industry in order that they can transfer the knowledge and experience gained. I welcome and support the partnership's expansion into research collaboration at a centre-to-centre level.

Ministers welcomed the work being undertaken by the partnership to expand its scope to include agrifood research. I invited InterTradelreland to liaise with the Agri-Food Strategy Board (AFSB) and seek its views on potential areas of research of interest to the industry.

The Council received an update on InterTradelreland's strategic priorities and key activities planned for 2015. Those include increasing joint applications to Horizon 2020; assisting SMEs to access finance for growth; exploring the use of additional funding streams to increase SMEs' capacity; and assisting SMEs to access the public-procurement market.

The Council recognised the importance of public-sector contracts to SMEs in both jurisdictions and was encouraged to hear that 66% of public-sector contracts in the Republic of Ireland and 80% of those in Northern Ireland went to SMEs from both jurisdictions. The Council heard that the complexity and scale of public-sector contracts was increasing and was supportive of the work being undertaken by InterTradelreland through its consortia facilitation service. The body works closely with SMEs that are considering collaboration as a means of taking advantage of the opportunities and that support the development of successful partnerships. By supporting indigenous SMEs to exploit that market, InterTradelreland will promote public tendering as a route to export markets.

Colleagues will be interested to note that InterTradelreland's business monitor survey for the fourth quarter of 2014, which reflects the views of the SME community in both jurisdictions, found that

energy costs had dropped down the order of issues exercising businesses. There had been no significant change in the energy prices at the time of the survey, so that would indicate the impact that fuel costs have on businesses in both jurisdictions.

The Council noted InterTradeIreland's annual report and accounts for 2013, which were certified by the Comptrollers and Auditors General and laid before the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Houses of the Oireachtas.

The Council agreed that the next trade and business development meeting should be held in autumn 2015. I commend the statement to the Assembly.

\*

**Mr Dunne:** I thank the Minister her statement. Can she elaborate on the impact that the strong pound against the euro has on our ability to export to the Republic of Ireland and, indeed, countries throughout Europe? I think that we all recognise the need to increase our export targets within this financial year.

**Mrs Foster:** Absolutely. Exporting has been a struggle during the downturn. We looked at new developing markets for Northern Ireland to try to deal with that, but certainly the strong pound in the eurozone has been a disincentive over the past period of time. You can see that through some of the export market figures that are coming out. I am hopeful that we will continue to work with our colleagues in the Republic of Ireland to try to show them the value of the goods and services coming from Northern Ireland. Indeed, I hope that they will recognise that the short supply chain compensates a little for the increased price that they are having to pay for it, given the exchange rate that we are having to deal with. We have to deal with the realities of the situation. The pound is strong, the euro is a lot weaker now, and we need to look to other markets, as well as to our close neighbours.

\*

**Ms McGahan:** Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Minister for her statement. Can she explain why there has been a relatively small number of successful cross-border projects through Horizon 2020 in comparison with the high number of applications?

**Mrs Foster:** I think that it is the very nature of the programme. We are ahead with successful projects in Horizon 2020. The European average is, I think, about 14%, and we are at 16%. It may appear that we are not very successful, but that is the nature of Horizon 2020 across Europe. It is hugely competitive and, therefore, we must ensure that we take all measures to make sure that we can benefit from it. There has been €80 billion allocated to the project. I am quite pleased that we have as high a number as 45 in place at this early stage in the programme, and we will certainly work very hard to make sure that we benefit even more.

\*

**Mr Frew:** I am very interested to hear more detail around discussions on the continuing pressure on energy costs and on what is being done to bring down the costs of bills for business, especially in my constituency of North Antrim, which has a very high level of manufacturing and is a good

manufacturing base. Minister, given that we are in a shared single electricity market across the two countries, what discussions were had regarding the North/South interconnector and the implementation of the integrated single electricity market (ISEM) getting up and running?

**Mrs Foster:** Those last two matters are, of course, not matters for InterTradeIreland but are energy policy matters, so we did not have any discussions about those. On the issues for businesses, I was interested to see the fact that energy costs had dropped back, particularly in Northern Ireland. At its height back in quarter 2 of 2012, that was the top concern of 47% of the businesses. In quarter 4 of 2014, that had dropped to 7%. That is quite a significant drop back, albeit that that has happened over two and a half years. In the Republic of Ireland, rising energy costs is again an issue of concern. Where it is 7% for our companies, it is 10% for companies in the Republic of Ireland. It still is an issue, and I think that the falling fuel costs will have had an impact on energy costs. I continue to share his concerns about the high energy costs for large manufacturers, and I continue to work with the regulator on those issues. If all goes according to plan, I am having a meeting with the regulator, NIE and SONI at the end of this week on grid connections. We will be able to have discussions around grid connections, which, again, have caused a lot of concerns to consumers and those wishing to connect to the grid. I referred to that in my last Question Time. That meeting is happening, and I am hopeful that we can make some progress.

\*

**Mr Hazzard:** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the Minister's statement, and I welcome specifically the emphasis by InterTradeIreland on assisting SMEs to build partnerships in the context of public procurement. Perhaps the Minister will provide further clarity on how she proposes to ensure that SMEs can fully benefit from island-wide procurement opportunities.

**Mrs Foster:** This is something that I take a particular interest in, and I always say that the Go-2-Tender programme works very well. There was a bit of a kickback at one stage when some of the Northern Ireland companies were being successful with Republic of Ireland government contracts. I am glad to say that that concern has disappeared, and now some of our companies are competing and competing very well for those government procurements. Go-2-Tender is a very important part of what InterTradeIreland does. As I indicated to the Chair of the Committee, I hope that we can make more of an impact with the smaller microbusinesses, as Europe calls them, so that they can benefit as well as some of our larger companies.

Link: <http://data.niassembly.gov.uk/HansardXml/plenary-23-03-2015.pdf>

#### **Ministerial Statements: North/South Ministerial Council: Tourism**

**Summary:** Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Investment Arlene Foster highlighted some of the key areas of discussion during a recent NSMC meeting in sectoral format held on Thursday 5 March 2015. Ministers noted the support that had been provided to tourism projects under the EU funded INTERREG IVa programme. Minister Foster updated Ministers on the Hunter review of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and wider tourism structures. She advised that she will be working with the industry to bring forward a new strategic plan for tourism, which will coordinate the work of key partners in the industry and in central and local government. Ministers also approved Tourism Ireland's 2015 business plan and recommended the budget provision for 2015 of €53.885 million.

**Mrs Foster (The Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment):** *With your permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement in compliance with section 52 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, regarding a meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in tourism sectoral format. This meeting was held in Armagh on 5 March 2015.*

*Minister Carál Ní Chuilín MLA and I represented the Northern Ireland Executive. The Irish Government were represented by Paschal Donohoe TD, the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, who chaired the meeting. This statement has been agreed with Minister Ní Chuilín, and I am making the statement on behalf of us both.*

*Ministers noted the support that had been provided to tourism projects under the EU funded INTERREG IVa programme. They also noted the current position regarding EU funding programmes and agreed that the relevant tourism stakeholders, in both jurisdictions, would closely monitor developments at EU level to ensure that tourism would benefit from all suitable collaborative funding opportunities.*

*The chairperson, Mr Brian Ambrose, and the CEO, Mr Niall Gibbons, updated Ministers on the work of the Tourism Ireland board over the previous year. The Council noted progress on implementing the corporate plan 2014-16. It also noted progress on delivering Tourism Ireland's SMART objective performance goals for 2014, which include growing promotable revenue and promotable visitors to Ireland and Northern Ireland; maintaining our high competitive interest ranking in GB, US and France, and improving it in Germany; achieving 500 million social connections by the end of 2014 and delivering 1.8 million commercial referrals to trade and industry from digital activity; and driving the delivery of Tourism Ireland's corporate plan objectives.*

*Ministers were updated on the nine board meetings that have taken place at various locations since the last NSMC tourism meeting. Presentations at board meetings included assessments of the North American, Australian and developing markets. The board also reviewed and noted the high level of cooperation between Tourism Northern Ireland, Fáilte Ireland and Tourism Ireland on hosting the Grande Partenza of the 2014 Giro d'Italia.*

*Ministers received a presentation from the CEO, Mr Niall Gibbons, on Tourism Ireland's performance throughout 2014. Ambitious targets have been set for growth in 2015, from all main markets, and it was agreed that strong collaboration across the industry was crucial to deliver on these targets. It was noted that Northern Ireland's distinctiveness has a very important role to play in attracting overseas visitors, and I stressed that one of my key priorities is to see standout for Northern Ireland. As one of Tourism Ireland's objectives is to help Northern Ireland achieve its tourism potential, I highlighted the importance, where the market or event lends itself, for the potential visitor to see positive, specific messaging for Northern Ireland. I also emphasised the vital role of direct air access in developing tourism into a billion-pound industry by 2020, and I encouraged Tourism Ireland to continue its ongoing work with Invest Northern Ireland to attract new air services to Northern Ireland in 2015, particularly from Germany and Canada.*

*The Rugby World Cup 2023 was also discussed, as was the bid by the IRFU to host the Women's Rugby World Cup in 2017. The opportunities presented by sporting events, which put Northern Ireland on a world stage, were noted.*

*I updated Ministers on the Hunter review of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and wider tourism structures. I advised that I will be working with the industry to bring forward a new strategic plan for tourism, which will coordinate the work of key partners in the industry and in central and local government. Ministers approved Tourism Ireland's 2015 business plan and recommended the budget provision for 2015 of €53.885 million.*

\*

**Mr McGlone (The Chairperson of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment):** The Minister's statement refers to the role of air passenger duty in attracting: "new air services to Northern Ireland in 2015, particularly from Germany and Canada." Has the Department done an impact study, independently or in cooperation with the Irish Government, on our ability to attract passengers and, consequently, additional trade from overseas?

**Mrs Foster:** Absolutely. You will know that the Department commissioned the then Northern Ireland Centre for Economic Policy to carry out a study of the economic impact on Northern Ireland of short-haul air passenger duty, and it recently published its report. The report's central conclusion is that, when the cost to the public finances in Northern Ireland is taken into consideration, APD on short-haul flights is not a strong economic development tool. We, of course, set the air passenger duty for band B long-haul flights at zero; we have already dealt with that. The Finance Minister and I have continued to stress that there is an urgent need for central government to look at APD as it affects the UK as a whole, and we will push for that on behalf of industry here, because it is set in a way that is unfair to the regions of the UK. We need, therefore, to deal with the issue at Westminster, and I hope that my colleagues who are returned to Westminster will be able to assist me.

\*

**Mr Kinahan:** I thank the Minister for the statement, and I congratulate both the ladies' and male teams of Ireland for their terrific success at the weekend. Does the Minister recognise that there is more than a perception that Tourism Ireland is not delivering for Northern Ireland in line with the amount of money that we put into it? Is she satisfied with Tourism Ireland's performance and, if not, will she instigate a review?

**Mrs Foster:** Of course, any review would have to be instigated jointly because it is a joint body. The Member is correct in saying that Tourism Ireland needs to have regard to the distinctiveness of Northern Ireland. Indeed, its terms of reference in the legislation have specific regard to that. It is important that Tourism Ireland gives a distinctive standout, particularly in the Great Britain market, where there are very natural synergies between the rest of the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland. That point was made at the North/South Ministerial Council sectoral meeting, and I will continue to make it with the board and with the CEO. However, I point the Member to the fact that our visitor numbers from Great Britain have continued to rise. I welcome that, and I think that it is a positive step forward.

\*

**Mr Lunn:** Again, I thank the Minister for the statement. My question is really a repeat of the one that I asked on the previous statement. The statement notes the progress in delivering Tourism Ireland's performance goals for 2014, and it lists them in bullet points, but it does not actually say whether

Tourism Ireland has met targets or make any comparison with previous years. Can the Minister comment?

**Mrs Foster:** Unfortunately, I cannot be as definitive as I was in relation to InterTradeIreland, because it is over a different period of time. I only have the January to September 2014 figures; I do not have the full year as yet. But I have to say that, in most sectors, it is looking very positive. The one area where we need to see an improvement is in relation to Republic of Ireland visitors. Again, that is probably a lot to do with the euro during this year. We need to pay concern to that. Domestic visitors are up, GB holidaymakers are up, and external visitors are up as well, so things are going in the right direction, but we just need to watch the Republic of Ireland visitor numbers. Again, that is to do with the exchange rate.

\*

**Mr Humphrey:** . I agree entirely with the Minister's comments about standout for Northern Ireland, and, following the Hunter review of tourism, what standout does the Minister hope Tourism Northern Ireland will be able to deliver, working with Tourism Ireland in marketing Northern Ireland internationally to tourists?

**Mrs Foster:** The idea behind the Hunter review of tourism was to build on relationships within the tourism sector in Northern Ireland to allow Tourism Northern Ireland to develop strong relationships with Invest Northern Ireland, particularly in relation to tourist accommodation and grant making, and that Tourism Northern Ireland would work closely with Tourism Ireland. I hope that that will happen. I think that everybody will benefit from it, if we take that collaborative approach. I should, of course, mention that the new councils will have a role to play in tourism in the future. I hope that they will play their part in building up our strong tourism sector.

**Link:** <http://data.niassembly.gov.uk/HansardXml/plenary-23-03-2015.pdf>

### **Committee Business Cycling: Benefits to the Economy**

#### **Summary:**

Here a motion called for the Assembly to approve the report of the Committee for Regional Development on its inquiry into the benefits of cycling to the economy; and called on the Minister for Regional Development, in conjunction with Executive colleagues and other relevant bodies, to implement the recommendations of the report. During the debate a number of members voiced their support for DRD to focus on an all-island strategy as being crucial to unlocking EU funding to get the investment required.

**Mr. Lyttle:** I support the DRD vision of focusing on linking the Belfast greenways to Newry canal through Portadown up to Derry, through Omagh and Strabane and down through Enniskillen to the west as an all-island strategy that is crucial to unlocking EU funding to get the investment that we need to really move cycling forward

**Mr Lynch:** The Committee supported the Department in calling for a larger budget for cycling within the INTERREG programme, and saw at first-hand the desire for cross-border cycling projects. He

highlighted the potential for opening greenways across the island of Ireland, citing the Great Western Greenway project at Mulranny.

Link: <http://data.niassembly.gov.uk/HansardXml/plenary-23-03-2015.pdf>

**Tuesday 24 March 2015**

**Ministerial Statements: British-Irish Council: Social Inclusion Work Sector**

**Mr Bell (Junior Minister, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister):** In accordance with the requirements of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, I wish to make the following statement on the sixth ministerial meeting of the British-Irish Council (BIC) social inclusion work sector, which took place in Edinburgh on 11 March 2015. The First Minister and deputy First Minister were unable to attend, and, in accordance with the provisions of the Act, they nominated junior Minister McCann and me to attend in their place.

The Scottish Government hosted the ministerial meeting, and the heads of delegations were welcomed by Shona Robison MSP, the Cabinet Secretary for Health, Wellbeing and Sport. The Welsh Government were represented by Mark Drakeford AM, the Minister for Health and Social Services, who was unable to be present but joined the meeting via telecon. The UK Government were represented by Jon Rouse, the director general for social care, local government and care partnerships at the Department of Health. The Irish Government were represented by Ann Phelan TD, a Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government. The Isle of Man Government were represented by the Hon Howard Quayle MHK, the Minister for Health and Social Care. The Government of Guernsey were represented by the Chief Minister, Deputy Jonathan Le Tocq, and the Government of Jersey were represented by Senator Paul Routier MBE, the Assistant Minister at the Chief Minister's Department.

At the meeting, the joint chairs of the work sector — the Scottish and Welsh Governments — gave a presentation of the work of the sector, which included visits to all eight jurisdictions, and highlighted the models of good practice that were visited. Following the presentation, we discussed and reviewed the final report of the work sector, 'Spend to Save: Innovative Approaches to Preventative Spend'.

We noted the many different, creative and, importantly, community-based approaches to supporting older people to optimise their independence and help them to remain in a place that they call home, in a community that they feel connected to, for as long as they possibly can. The report was unanimously welcomed and approved for publication on the British-Irish Council website, [www.britishirishcouncil.org](http://www.britishirishcouncil.org).

Turning to the future work programme, at the meeting, we discussed the proposal to have carers as the next topic for the work sector. After discussion, it was agreed that carers should be the next topic and that our officials, working closely with the BIC secretariat, should begin to consider how we can support carers by looking at best practice, new and creative policy responses and community actions across the eight Administrations. Given that the policy for carers lies with the Department for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, it will be for DHSSPS to represent the Northern Ireland Executive on the work sector. The BIC secretariat will confirm the arrangements for the first meeting, which is likely to be in May 2015 in Edinburgh.

To allow the work sector to complete its work on carers, it was agreed that the next ministerial meeting for the social inclusion work sector will take place in Wales in late 2017 or early 2018.

Link: <http://data.niassembly.gov.uk/HansardXml/plenary-24-03-2015.pdf>

#### **Ministerial Statements: North/South Ministerial Council: Agriculture**

**Summary: Minister for Agriculture and Rural Development Mrs O'Neill made a statement to the house regarding an NSMC meeting in the agriculture sector on Wednesday 25 February. The Minister reported that the Council welcomed the ongoing collaboration and cooperation in this area and agreed that every effort should be made to maximise the drawdown from these funds where it is mutually beneficial to do so.**

**Mrs O'Neill (The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development):** Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. With your permission, a Cheann Comhairle, I wish to make a statement in compliance with section 52 of the 1998 Act regarding the 24th meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in the agriculture sector held in Armagh on Wednesday 25 February. The Executive were represented by Minister Jim Wells MLA and me. The Dublin Government were represented by Simon Coveney TD, Minister in the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM), and Ann Phelan TD, Minister of State at the Department of Environment and Local Government. Minister Coveney chaired the meeting on this occasion, and I have agreed my statement with the accompanying Minister Jim Wells.

Ministers had a discussion on the opportunities that exist for the agriculture sector in various EU funding streams. The Council welcomed the ongoing collaboration and cooperation in this area and agreed that every effort should be made to maximise the drawdown from these funds where it is mutually beneficial to do so. The Council noted the recent developments in plans for implementation of the common agricultural policy reforms agreed in 2013, including administrative measures for direct payment schemes. Ministers also welcomed the ongoing cooperation between the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and DARD on these issues.

The Council welcomed the continued work on the delivery of the all-island animal health and welfare strategy action plan since the last NSMC agriculture meeting. Key points of note in the action plan include: the ongoing high level of cooperation between both jurisdictions as manifested by participation in a successful and useful epizootic disease contingency planning exercise dealing with African swine fever in November 2014 and a whole-house poultry gassing exercise in October 2014; parallel applications to the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) for classical swine fever disease-free status; the introduction of a common chapter in the event of an outbreak of African horse sickness on the island; and progress made by DARD on its goal of submitting an application for officially brucellosis-free status to the Commission in March 2015. DAFM is maintaining a cow cull monitor, abortion notification and post-abortion sampling, and will liaise with DARD colleagues on the timing of the removal of the premovement test requirement.

Our improving animal health status and mutual contingency preparations contribute towards our reputation for the production of quality agriproduce for sale to export markets. I am pleased to note

that China and Australia have confirmed their intention to visit pork establishments here in the near future, with a view to agreeing export protocols.

Ministers noted that, in October 2014, the DARD and DAFM plant health subgroup commissioned a scientific appraisal of further actions to implement the policy to contain and eradicate ash dieback in both jurisdictions. The scientific group concluded that the eradication of ash dieback was still possible and recommended a continued programme of surveillance and eradication. The Council also noted that the plant health section of the EU Standing Committee on Plants, Animals, Food and Feed met on 19 and 20 January and that both Britain and Ireland secured agreement from member states and the Commission for ash dieback measures to remain in place for 2015 while efforts continue to eradicate the disease.

Ministers agreed that, in addition to the planned proactive support by DARD and DECLG for LEADER cooperation activities, including the provision of appropriate staff resources, there should also be a focus on wider opportunities for accessing support from other EU funding programmes, not including the European agricultural fund for rural development. They also agreed the provision of funding for 2015- 16, initially to support the further development and promotion of social farming, and welcomed the ongoing cooperation of officials in closing their respective current rural development programmes, preparing for the 2014-2020 programmes and developing rural recreation. The Council agreed that the next meeting in the agricultural sectoral format will take place in autumn 2015.

Link: <http://data.niassembly.gov.uk/HansardXml/plenary-24-03-2015.pdf>



**Wednesday, 25 March 2015**

**Thirty-fifth Amendment of the Constitution (Age of Eligibility for Election to the Office of President) Bill 2015: Second Stage**

**Summary:**

**During the second reading of an amendment bill to the Constitution, which would lower the Age of eligibility for Election to the Office of President from the current position of 35 to 21, Sinn Fein made the point that this motion was a missed opportunity to extend voting rights to Irish citizens, both diaspora and citizens fo Northern Ireland.**

**Brian Stanley (Sinn Fein):** Voting rights in presidential elections could also be extended to members of the diaspora and people in the North. Doing so for the latter would be simple. Ms Mary McAleese was nearly as popular on the Shankill Road as she was on the Falls Road. President Higgins is popular in the North. People of both traditions in the North respect the Presidency. We have an opportunity to extend the right to vote on an all-Ireland basis. The Government might not be ready yet to extend full voting rights, but we want to see a united Ireland. Ensuring that people in the North who wish to

do so - there is nothing compulsory in this - can vote in presidential elections would be a positive step towards bringing the two parts of the island together.

**Link:** <https://www.kildarestreet.com/debates/?id=2015-03-25a.131&s=island#g140>