



The Centre for
Cross Border Studies

LEGISLATIVE AFFAIRS

05/05/2015 - 11/06/2015



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Monday 8 June 2015

Environment: Environment Crime Unit

Summary: Mrs Overend asked the Minister of Environment if he fully agrees with the finding, contained within the Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland's review of the Northern Ireland Environment Agency's environmental crime unit, that it has delivered considerable gains with evidence of capability and capacity with regards to fuel smugglers and polluters operating along the border. Minister Durkan advised the Member that fuel smuggling and fuel laundering are crimes that require collaboration, between the NIEA, the ECU and other agencies on both sides of the border. Furthermore, Mr Durkan advised that this issue was raised at the recent NSMC plenary meeting which demonstrated a consensus on both sides of the border that there needs to be an escalation or intensification in how the issues is dealt with.

Mrs Overend: Does the Minister fully agree with the review's finding that the ECU has delivered considerable gains with evidence of capability and capacity, given the apparent impunity with which fuel smugglers and polluters can operate along the border?

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for that question. Indeed, fuel smuggling and fuel laundering are a source of some very serious environmental crime. It is a crime that, in particular, requires collaboration between the NIEA, the ECU and other agencies on both sides of the border. Up here, you have the HMRC, which is responsible for enforcement, in collaboration with the PSNI, the National Crime Agency and, indeed, the Environmental Protection Agency, the revenue commissioners and the Garda Síochána in the South. The seriousness of the issue is such that it was

actually raised as an agenda item on the NSMC plenary meeting on Friday in Dublin. There is agreement on both sides of the border that there needs to be an escalation or intensification of how the issue is dealt with. It has huge consequences for the economy and the Exchequer, and I am equally concerned about the consequences it has for our environment.

[Link](#)

Finance and Personnel: Peace IV: Update

Summary: Mr Easton asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to provide the house with an update on the development of the Peace IV programme. Minister Foster advised the house that subject to Commission approval, she anticipates that the programme will be open for applications in late 2015. The Minister advised that the programme will bring additional benefit to Northern Ireland and to the Republic of Ireland.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for an update on the development of the Peace IV programme.

Mrs Foster: The draft Peace IV programme was submitted to the European Commission on 22 September 2014 in line with our regulatory deadline. The Commission has provided formal comments on the draft programme. Most are requests for clarification, and officials are working to address those. When that work is complete, the Executive will consider the final draft programme. Subject to Commission approval, I anticipate that the programme will be open for applications in late 2015.

Mr Easton: I thank the Minister for her answers so far. When will the new programme be open for applications for youth projects?

Mrs Foster: I hope that the general applications will be open late this year. The Member is right to talk about youth projects because they form a key element of the new Peace IV programme. We are, of course, delighted that there will be a Peace IV programme. A lot of hard work has gone into ensuring that we have it. It will certainly bring additional benefit to Northern Ireland and, indeed, to the Republic of Ireland. We very much welcome the fact that, hopefully, the Peace IV programme will roll out at the end of this year.

[Link](#)



Tuesday, 9 June 2015

Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation

Here Mr Adams asked the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation to detail the progress made in boosting competitiveness and productivity and supporting innovation, research and development. In his response, Minister Burton advised that *“Enterprise Ireland recognises the strategic importance of the development of an all-island economy on the basis that, in taking on the global market challenge, we can be more than the sum of our parts and extensive links have been forged with various agencies and bodies in Northern Ireland and with the UK.”* Moreover, Minister Burton noted that *“the inter-agency 2015 work programme between Enterprise Ireland, the UK Trade and Investment Agency and Invest NI includes a project to explore options for collaboration related to our national contact point Horizon 2020 activities, which has the potential to be beneficial to all.”*...

.... Minister Burton also advised that *“the all island Innovation Voucher initiative continues and this assists small firms to access innovative solutions available in the higher education sector north and south of the border, with the vouchers of €5,000/£4,000 giving these companies the financial support to get them on the first rung of the innovation ladder.”* Likewise, it was noted by the Minister that *“Horizon 2020 represents a significant opportunity for North South cooperation. Increasing successful applications and funding awards from Horizon 2020 is an important objective not just of the Irish Government but also of the Northern Ireland Executive. The international collaborative nature of Horizon 2020 makes it ideally suited for Ireland and Northern Ireland to work together for mutual benefit. The importance of North South collaboration is recognised by both Administrations and the alignment of our Horizon 2020 support structures, North and South, means that there is now a strong basis on which to grow this cooperation.”*

Gerry Adams: To ask the Minister for Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation the progress that has been made in boosting competitiveness and productivity and supporting innovation, research and development, arising from the joint statement by the Irish and British Governments in March 2012; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

Richard Bruton (Minister, Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation): Since 2012, Ireland’s relative international competitiveness as measured by a range of international indices improved. We have moved from 20th to 16th in the IMD’s World Competitiveness Yearbook and from 29th to 25th in the WEF Global Competitiveness Report. In addition, the World Bank’s most recent “Doing Business” report shows Ireland is now ranked 13th out of 189 countries, up 3 places since 2012.

A key objective of the Action Plan for Jobs process which this Government commenced in 2012 was to rebuild our competitiveness and provide a solid foundation for future growth. The recovery in jobs and exports to date is in large part due to the considerable improvement in competitiveness that has taken place in recent years. Prices and labour costs have grown less in Ireland than in our trading partners. Combined with the recent depreciation of the euro, this has seen Irish competitiveness - as measured by the real effective exchange rate - recover most of the deterioration recorded during the boom years.

As noted in the Government’s Spring Economic Statement, this recovery in competitiveness has facilitated a reallocation of resources towards the tradable sectors of the economy. In the longer term productivity performance must be the vehicle through which we must improve our competitiveness and grow the economy. Relentlessly pursuing cost competitiveness which remains

vital to us as a small, export oriented economy is important but we must also sustain our focus on productivity growth across all sectors of the economy. Structural reform, as championed through the Action Plan for Jobs, is essential to deliver the necessary productivity gains and improvements in competitiveness. Such reforms are recognised as essential to improving the competitiveness of our exporting sectors, which will be at the heart of delivering on our ambition of having full employment by 2018.

There are a number of initiatives underway in the research, development and innovation space that entail significant cooperation with the UK.

Science Foundation Ireland (SFI) researchers are engaged with 145 companies in the UK. These include British Sky Broadcasting, BT, Smith and Nephew, AstraZeneca, Cambridge Chemicals, Eli Lilly and many more. This represents about 12% of overall SFI funded researcher collaborations with industry partners. Eight of the top 10 international partner institutes for collaborations with SFI researchers in 2014 are UK based. These collaborations amount to just under 9% of all international academic collaborations. SFI and the Biotechnology and Biological Research Council (BBSRC) plan to launch a formal partnership in late Q3 2015. The BBSRC, one of seven Research Councils in the UK, is the largest UK public funder of non-medical bioscience with key priorities in the areas of agriculture and food security, industrial biotechnology and bioenergy and bioscience for health.

Enterprise Ireland recognises the strategic importance of the development of an all-island economy on the basis that, in taking on the global market challenge, we can be more than the sum of our parts and extensive links have been forged with various agencies and bodies in Northern Ireland and with the UK. Work in this context is focused on liaison with, and participation in, cross border bodies, close cooperation between Invest NI (INI) and Enterprise Ireland and close cooperation with UK agencies. The inter-agency 2015 work programme between Enterprise Ireland, the UK Trade and Investment Agency and Invest NI includes a project to explore options for collaboration related to our national contact point Horizon 2020 activities, which has the potential to be beneficial to all. Elsewhere, the all island Innovation Voucher initiative continues and this assists small firms to access innovative solutions available in the higher education sector north and south of the border, with the vouchers of €5,000/£4,000 giving these companies the financial support to get them on the first rung of the innovation ladder.

Horizon 2020 represents a significant opportunity for North South cooperation. Increasing successful applications and funding awards from Horizon 2020 is an important objective not just of the Irish Government but also of the Northern Ireland Executive. The international collaborative nature of Horizon 2020 makes it ideally suited for Ireland and Northern Ireland to work together for mutual benefit. The importance of North South collaboration is recognised by both Administrations and the alignment of our Horizon 2020 support structures, North and South, means that there is now a strong basis on which to grow this cooperation.

The work of InterTradeIreland, the North South Trade and Business Development Body, has stimulated a move towards a more focused, coherent approach to co-operation that will be mutually beneficial. This work is paying dividends and the number of North/South collaborations has been rising steadily. To ensure that we build on this success and maximise the level of co-operation for the Horizon 2020 programme, a Strategic Action Plan for North South Cooperation in Horizon 2020 was launched in December 2014. This Strategic Action Plan sets out the rationale for a North/South

target of €175million and actions for co-operation which will support the achievement of both Administrations' internal priorities in respect of participation in Horizon 2020.

[Link](#)

Tuesday, 9 June 2015

Department of Social Protection

Summary: In response to a question regarding the free travel pass for pensioners, Minister Burton advised that under the current scheme free travel is available on cross border journeys to and from Northern Ireland and within Northern Ireland for customer aged 66 years and over.

Willie O'Dea: To ask the Minister for Social Protection her plans to extend the free travel pass to include pensioners from other European Union countries; and if she will make a statement on the matter.

Joan Burton (Minister, Department of Social Protection): The free travel scheme is available to all people aged over 66 living permanently in the State. Applicants who are under age 66 must be in receipt of a qualifying payment in order to qualify for the scheme. The qualifying payments for those aged under 66 are invalidity pension, blind pension, disability allowance, carer's allowance or an equivalent social security payment from a country covered by EC Regulations or one with which Ireland has a Bilateral Social Security Agreement. Accordingly, there are currently approx. 828,000 customers with direct eligibility with an annual allocation of €77 million.

The current scheme provides free travel on the main public and private transport services in Ireland for those eligible under the scheme. These include road, rail and ferry services provided by companies such as Bus Átha Cliath, Bus Éireann and Iarnród Éireann, as well as Luas and services provided by over 90 private transport operators. Free travel is also available on cross border journeys to and from Northern Ireland and within Northern Ireland for customers aged 66 years and over.

Any decision to extend the free travel scheme would have budgetary consequences and would have to be considered in the context of budget negotiations.

[Link](#)