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*Committee on Regional Development*

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10.4.2018

## MISSION REPORT

following the fact-finding mission to Northern Ireland from 21 to  
23 March 2018

Committee on Regional Development

Members of the mission:

Joachim Zeller	(PPE) (Leader of the mission)
Martina Anderson	(GUE/NGL)
John Flack	(ECR)
Ivan Jaković	(ALDE)
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Derek Vaughan	(S&D)

## Introduction

The fact-finding mission of the Committee on Regional Development of the European Parliament to Northern Ireland took place from 21 to 23 March 2018. The purpose of the fact-finding mission was twofold: firstly, to gather information for the committee's implementation report on the impact of cohesion policy in Northern Ireland; and secondly, to gain a general overview of the operation of cohesion policy in a relatively disadvantaged region of the EU as a way of preparing for the new, post-2020 cohesion policy. During the mission, the Members visited a series of EU-funded projects across Northern Ireland. These included urban projects funded as 'shared spaces' in Belfast under the Peace Programme and cross-border projects in the Derry/Londonderry area under the Interreg Programmes. MEPs also visited the EU-funded Giant's Causeway Visitor Centre, where they heard about some local projects funded under the ERDF, ESF and EARDF. Meetings were also held with the government departments responsible for cohesion policy, and with the Special EU Programmes Body.

## Summary account of meetings

The first point on the programme was a meeting at the European Commission Office in Belfast, where Members were welcomed by Karen Morrison (Information and Communication Officer). Ms Morrison gave Members a general overview of cohesion spending in Northern Ireland, including the ERDF, ESF, EARDF and EMFF funds. The importance of the programmes specific to Northern Ireland was stressed, namely the Peace and Interreg Programmes. These had assisted the peace process since 1989. Overall spending through these programmes amounted to EUR 1.2 billion since the creation of the first Peace Programme. EUR 270 million had been dedicated to the Peace IV Programme for the 2014-2020 period.

The impact of the Peace Programmes was clear with regard to how it encouraged the two communities to come together, by funding the creation of shared spaces and joint education programmes. Finally, the work of the Northern Ireland Task Force was addressed. That task force had the purpose of helping Northern Irish bodies to access EU funding.

The second visit was to the Victims and Survivors Service, an independent body linked to the Northern Irish Executive, where Members were welcomed by the Chairman, Oliver Wilkinson, and the CEO, Margaret Bateson. The service was overseen by a Commission for Victims and Survivors and was part-funded through the Peace IV Programme (and earlier programmes). Its purpose was to improve the health and well-being of those who were victims of violence during the Troubles. The service was a community-led service, as much of the care was provided by voluntary sector bodies. In some cases, financial support was also provided directly to the families affected by the violence.

The service operated on a stepped care model, with the level of support offered to victims and their family depending on their needs. In some cases, help was needed to ensure social

reintegration. In the most severe cases, medical or psychiatric help was provided. Care provision had been stepped up with the increased funding available under the Peace IV Programme. 6300 people were currently receiving payments or assistance in some form or another, including family members of people killed or otherwise affected by the violence and persons injured themselves. The need for continued services over a long period of time was partly because many victims took a long time to come forward - particularly female carers of injured men.

The third visit was to the Skainos Centre in East Belfast, a community centre funded as a 'shared space' under the Peace Programme. The site included classrooms, rooms for activities, social housing, a café and a Methodist chapel. The site was open to people from both communities, and acted as a neutral space where people from different groups could come together. The mission heard from Gary Robb, the Development Manager of the site, and Linda Ervine, who was well known for her work encouraging and organising Irish language courses for people from the Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist community, who traditionally rarely learnt Irish. Those courses were organised for people for both communities through the Turas organisation.

The fourth visit was to the Girdwood Community Hub, located in north Belfast, where Members were welcomed by the Belfast City Council staff in charge of the centre, including Nigel Grimshaw, Catharine Taggart, Paula Irvine and Karen Treanor. Members were given a tour of the facility, which included classrooms, activity spaces, a community space, a gym and spa, and a youth centre. These facilities were accessible to people from both communities, and the management of the centre was determined to avoid any sign of sectarianism on the premises. The facility had also been funded as a 'shared space' under the Peace Programme and had opened in 2016. At the end of the visit, Members heard a presentation from a young woman who explained how the centre had enabled her to make friends across the community divide, and then they held an exchange of views with the community representatives involved in the management of the centre. One of the key benefits brought about by the centre was the major increase in the number of locals who felt comfortable taking part in cross-community activities.

The first day of the mission concluded with a dinner hosted by Kevin Conmy, the Irish Joint Secretary of the North-South Ministerial Council, and Gina McIntyre, the CEO of the Special EU Programmes Body.

On the second day of the mission, Members travelled to Derry/Londonderry, where they visited the North West Regional Science Park. The Science Park was operated by Catalyst Inc., a not-for-profit, independent company, which was represented by Philip Maguire (Director of Finance), Darren Ross (Innovation Broker) and Eliza Harvey (location manager). It was part of a cross-border project part-funded through the Interreg Programme. The Irish partner institution, the Letterkenny Institute of Technology, was represented by John Andy Bonar.

The Science Park essentially provided a space for small business start-up to commence their operations. Businesses were selected to be given space by an academic committee, rather than in line with commercial criteria. The Derry/Londonderry site had been a great success, as all

available space had been filled within a few months of completion, giving a boost to the knowledge-based economy in the area and thus having a positive impact on productivity and wages. With regard to the campus of the Letterkenny Institute of Technology, which contained a smaller facility of the same nature, the mission heard that 40 start-up companies had taken up residence, providing 150 jobs.

Whilst the construction of the Derry/Londonderry site had been part-financed under the Interreg IV A Programme, the Science Park was now involved, under the Interreg V A Programme, in the setting up of the North West Centre for Advanced Manufacturing, a project allowing small businesses to cooperate with academics in order to promote research and innovation in the health and life sciences sector. Members also had the opportunity to visit one of the tenants of the complex, a small business called Modern Democracy, which specialised in providing digital electoral services for local governments in the United Kingdom.

While at the Science Park, Members also heard a presentation by Edel O'Doherty and Sadie Bergin on behalf of CAWT (Cooperation and Working Together), a cross-border health and social care programme. This scheme had received money under the Interreg Programmes in order to foster cooperation between the health and social care bodies of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. This had allowed, for example, the creation of a radiotherapy unit in Derry/Londonderry which was also open to patients from the surrounding rural areas in the Republic of Ireland. The importance of cross-border cooperation in this field was stressed, as it helped to alleviate the problems in accessing health and social care related to the area's relatively peripheral location.

The Deputy Mayor of Derry City and Strabane District, Councillor John Boyle, hosted a lunch in the Mayor's Parlour in the Guildhall in Derry/Londonderry for the participants of the fact-finding mission. During lunch, Members were able to talk to the Deputy Mayor and Councillors about the impact of cohesion policy on the city, as well as ask questions surrounding its border location. At the end of the lunch, Members were given a brief tour of the Guildhall and then walked over the Peace Bridge, one of the city's iconic sights funded through the Peace Programme.

In the afternoon of the second day of the mission, Members visited the Giant's Causeway Visitor Centre, the biggest ERDF project in Northern Ireland (under the European Sustainable Competitiveness Programme for Northern Ireland). Members were given a tour of the modern facility, which had proven its value by attracting tourists and stimulating the local economy. The number of staff at the Visitor Centre had increased from 14 to 64 persons on permanent contracts, plus 150 on seasonal contracts, since the construction of the new centre. There was also time for a brief visit to the Giant's Causeway itself, which is a short journey away from the Visitor Centre.

Whilst at the Giant's Causeway Visitor Centre, Members also heard presentations from three small and medium-sized enterprises which had kindly agreed to explain to the Members how they had benefited from EU cohesion funding. The first of these was the Cedar Foundation, represented by Kieran Molloy, which had received funding from the ESF in order to assist people with disabilities to enter the labour market. This assistance could take the form of regular courses, but also the teaching of basic life skills such as how to use public transport, allowing individuals to take up employment. This assistance was provided through a number

of community associations across Northern Ireland. The second of these was Hampton Conservatories of Portrush, represented by Sophie Caddoo, which was a small business making wood conservatories. A grant under the Rural Development Programme (EARDF) in 2017 had allowed the business to purchase a specific machine for the production of window frames and allowed the hiring of two additional staff, allowing the company to expand into that new area of business. The third presentation was by Seating Matters Ltd, represented by Ryan Tierney and Jemma Irwin. This was a family-owned business from Limavady specialised in the development and production of bespoke chairs for people unable to move or sit upright of their own accord. The development of the different types of chairs required for this purpose had required intensive research in a clinical setting. The business had obtained ERDF funding for that development process.

On the third day of the fact-finding mission, Members attended a meeting with Gina McIntyre, the CEO of the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB). Mark Feeney (Director of Managing Authority) and John McCandless (Communications Manager) were also present. The SEUPB operated as a public sector, intergovernmental cross-border body set up under the Good Friday Agreement, with the task of managing the Peace and Interreg Programmes in Northern Ireland and the border areas of the Republic of Ireland. Because of the delicate political situation in Northern Ireland, EU spending in Northern Ireland required a more complex governance structure, allowing decision-making to be as transparent and community-neutral as possible. EU funding was indeed perceived to be neutral, meaning that there were fewer objections to EU-funded projects on community grounds than there might otherwise be.

Members were presented with examples of cross-community and cross-border projects in addition to those they had been able to visit in the preceding days. These included cross-border social and sports installations, academic cooperation and medical research (in the last case, involving Western Scotland also). It was explained to Members that the Peace Programme in particular had an important role to play in the Peace Process, as it was focused on bringing people from the two communities together, involving as many stakeholders as possible in the decision process.

The final meeting of the fact-finding mission was with officials from the Department of Finance and the Department for the Economy. The officials Members spoke to included Frank Duffy (Head of European Division, Department of Finance), Bill Pauley (Head of Strategic Policy and Reform, Department of Finance), and Maeve Hamilton (Managing Authority for ERDF and ESF, Department for the Economy). Discussions focused on the decision-making and control processes for European spending in Northern Ireland.

The officials stressed the fact that it was difficult to take new policy decisions in the absence of a Northern Irish Executive, which was compounded by the fact that the continuation of EU funding in Northern Ireland post-2020 was uncertain, despite a number of political declarations made by the UK and EU authorities. In the context of the Peace Process, the importance of EU funding was stressed owing to its 'neutral' origin. Other specificities of Northern Ireland included the much greater importance of the agricultural sector compared to the remainder of the United Kingdom.

## **Conclusions**

The fact-finding mission was useful to Members, as it gave them a good overview of the importance of cohesion funding to Northern Ireland, with a special focus on the Peace and Interreg Programmes. Members also were able to see the impact of the ‘general’ cohesion spending in Northern Ireland, thus providing food for thought for the post-2020 funds. As for the political assessment of cohesion funding in Northern Ireland, this will figure in the committee’s implementation report on the impact of cohesion policy in Northern Ireland, to be adopted by the committee on 20 June 2018.