



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for the Office of the First Minister
and deputy First Minister

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

European Work: Northern Ireland Local
Government Association

16 May 2012

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mike Nesbitt (Chairperson)
Mr Chris Lyttle (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Danny Kinahan
Mr Francie Molloy
Mr George Robinson
Ms Caitriona Ruane

Witnesses:

Mr Derek McCallan	Northern Ireland Local Government Association
Ms Karine McGuckin	Northern Ireland Local Government Association

The Chairperson: We welcome Karine McGuckin and Derek McCallan from the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA).

Mr Derek McCallan (Northern Ireland Local Government Association): Thank you, Chair. We are inside the tent, but, with our MLA colleagues and through you, Chair, we hope to think outside the box in respect of Europe. I do not wish to elongate your session. I think that we are at the end, and I am very aware that you want to interact with the environment that we are in.

The Chairperson: I think that we are doing that already.

Mr McCallan: I am beginning to get that impression.

I do not want to go through a script; I do not think that that is beholden to a Committee such as yours. The Local Government Association fundamentally believes that Europe does, and must, begin and end in its regions and cities. We applaud and support key principles, such as subsidiarity, which is the localisation of decision-taking, and the role of communities, not only in place-shaping but in sweating the asset of the EU. With our colleagues in the Assembly and, as was the case just yesterday, with our ministerial and local government leader colleagues in Wales, we are working towards getting that asset of Europe sweated. I believe, as does the association, that our relationship with Europe should be transactional and value-based. In other words, the transaction is getting the most out of it, by way of understanding and investment for local people in these times of austerity — the greatest we have faced since the 1930s. It should be value-based in so far as we can provide information and knowledge up to the institution that is the European Union and down from it. We can gain from the European Union by way of more things than money, just as we can inform Europe at the lowest level of democracy, which, of course, is the municipalities that we have.

There are some terms of reference in the briefing that your members have been afforded. Processes are mundane but necessary. We have constituted the association since the most recent election on key constituent-driven political leaders' issues. One of those corporate mechanisms is our EU working group, which is a cross-party, cross-council member body that has a work plan. That group is fully integrated and fully mandated, and its work plan is reported on. We would like to ensure that this Committee and the other Departments are informed and inform the work of that group, simply because we believe that it has a role.

I will not go into the microdetail of the terms of reference, because I do not think that I would be thanked, even by my colleague. However, among the key terms of reference are, first, building member capacity on EU issues, including members who are not on monitoring committees. Therefore, those who do not have the privilege should be aware of the benefits and pitfalls of Europe. A second key term of reference is better joint working with our counterpart associations. That is the reference I made to the family of local government associations working throughout Europe, but, specifically, our colleagues in Ireland, Scotland and Wales. That is not to discount the work of the Local Government Association in England; but proportionally and in terms of the requirements of regions, we are finding a very good synergy in sweating the asset of our local government family in Cardiff, Dublin and Edinburgh. We believe that the same exists with NILGA.

I mentioned that we have a work plan, so we know what we are doing and why we are doing it. We report on that, and we have key principles that govern our work. Those include some of the underpinning legislation, such as Europe 2020, the Programme for Government here in Northern Ireland and our own corporate plan. To misquote one of your previous contributors: we do exactly what we say on the tin. We know why we are doing it, how we are doing it and what resources we require to do it.

Fundamentally, we are seeking to refresh the two-tier relationship between central government and local government. In other words, how can we, with convergence and the avoidance of duplication, really get transaction and value from Europe? There is an opportunity to do that, not in the existing spending round but in the period 2014-2020. We welcome the work of our colleagues in, for example, Belfast City Council and Derry City Council, and we bring the rest of the local councils to boot on that.

My colleague Karine wants to make some reference, if she may, to some of the compelling detail of what we have done. I will then finish by telling you what we propose to do, if that is to your satisfaction.

Ms Karine McGuckin (Northern Ireland Local Government Association): Thank you, Chairman. I would like to bring to your attention some of the activities that we have carried out over the past six months. In October, I started to look at the work of the EU interregional practice and policy working group. We work in synergy with our NILGA members and have involved the chief executive officers of some of the councils. We work in close co-operation with the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE), the local economic development (LED) forum and the business sector. We want to make sure that it is an all-inclusive view on Europe and something that is very concrete. We work on the principles of subsidiarity, looking at the lowest level, which is the councils, and at what we can do better at a local level by using European funds. We have provided capacity-building programmes for elected members and have trained 99.6%, I think, of our elected members. I do not know who the 0.4% is, but, never mind, I would not name him — or her.

We provide a very good resource for members to understand the intricacies of Europe. It is complicated; it is not something that people can grasp easily. The 26 councils are members of NILGA. People have been trained in dealing with Europe. We have four monitoring committees, with four members on each of those committees and four substitutes. Usually, those people get a briefing prior to the meetings so that they can intervene and ask the right questions in order to get answers as to why the programme is, for example, stalling or underspending. It is quite important to address that at a time when something can be done. We want members to be active and proactive, to look for solutions and ask questions, and to make sure that they contribute to life at a local level by bringing their knowledge of that.

I will not take you through the whole submission, because you will, I am sure, have already read it. It is very important for us to raise awareness of what is happening with the current round of European funding. This is a structure that has caused a lot of concern at a local level. Some of the programmes and the way that they are delivered could definitely be improved. We cannot go on with the system that we have. As my colleague Derek said, we are looking at the next round of funding and working in

close co-operation with the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) to ensure that we discuss and look at models that would be more streamlined, bring benefit at a local level and clear the logjams that we have. We want to ensure that the money hits the ground in a timely manner, without the over-bureaucracy that we face at the moment.

I will not take you through anything else at this time. You should be aware that we are not only addressing the needs of members but informing them through a number of information tools that we have created. We are having some engagement events, specifically for the sector, to make sure that people can always address very specific issues. For example, we had a specific engagement event on the EU in February, which looked at creating a platform for discussion, not only to solve the current problems that we have with the programmes but to look at the next programmes. That is the kind of thing that we are doing at this time. We want to make sure that we deliver our funds more effectively and efficiently in the next round and that the local government has a strand and can actually deal with it.

I will pass over to Derek, because I am sure that he wants to conclude.

Mr McCallan: I am sure that you want me to conclude.

Looking ahead briefly, we have a very dynamic and constructive relationship with DFP. We are driven by the predatory media, sometimes, when it comes to issues of dysfunctional government, disintegration and cross-party disturbances. We have an excellent relationship with DFP officials, who have afforded us equal space to plan the future and consult across the public sector on improving a way of doing things.

One thing we have in common here is that we are committed public servants. We want to serve the public, and in order to do that we have to engage with communities and the private sector. So, we have solutions to bring forward. For example, on procurement, if our colleagues in Wales and their Minister for finance have a community clause in their procurement for all tenders that allows a £185 million contract in Merthyr Tydfil to deploy unemployed people as security guards and pass every EU compliance, procurement, legislative and audit rule, there is a way in which we can think outside of the tent, if you will excuse the pun. Procurement, therefore, can enable the private sector in a way that definitely refashions our somewhat labyrinthian procurement and tender processes, not within Northern Ireland but within the regime that is risk averse. We need to be accountable, but we can also be innovative in a way that secures work for local people.

Lastly, it would be important and more than symbolic if Northern Ireland applied to the European Entrepreneurial Region 2014. I say that simply because we have Our Time, Our Place in 2012, the Olympics, and the World Police and Fire Games. We have the Causeway Coast, and we have excellent activities and economic generation from visitors, and so on, in 2012-13. To have, like our colleagues in the Netherlands and north-west France, a brand that says we are an enterprising region would create a tangible legacy. How do we do that? We do it in partnership with the private sector and the Northern Ireland Assembly. As an association, we are prepared to get our sleeves rolled up, to harness the evidence and the data and to bring it to MLA colleagues, such as yourselves, to champion that brand. Northern Ireland is enterprising. Its industrial heritage will be a precursor to its contemporary future, but we need to do that in partnership, and we need campaigns of that kind to take us beyond the Olympic Games.

Chair, I hope that that was at least a reflection and a reasonably compelling part of what has probably been a long meeting. I am happy to take any questions that you or your colleagues may have.

The Chairperson: Derek and Karine, thank you very much. It has not been a long meeting; it has just been challenging in certain ways.

Mr Molloy: Distractions.

The Chairperson: Yes, distracting.

I am very taken by your point about procurement, Derek. We must stop blindly or lazily saying, "Our hands are tied because of European regulation." The Opening Doors charter in Wales and what has been done in Scotland gives us a road map that says, "We can do a lot within the constraints of the European regime."

Do the 26 councils that make up your membership get Europe? Do they really understand it?

Mr McCallan: The situation is similar to that in other regions. If councils have, in a discerning way, gone in and put something into Europe — I mean more than match funding; I mean resources — they will have gained knowledge through experience. There are many councils where the resources are just not there. They are competing for limited funds and consider Europe to be somewhere to find match funding. However, the awareness is growing, and, through the role of an association that is an umbrella body, we are making sure that that information is provided to all councils equally, in English or in Irish or Ulster Scots for that matter. We will do whatever is required so that people can do as you say, Chair, which is to understand Europe and not to fear it — to access Europe rather than to feel that it is something with major foreboding.

I will give you one example. Through multilingual translation and the benefit of video conferencing, at a meeting of the Committee of the Regions, about four months ago, a piece of legislation was put forward that would have meant more process, lots of paperwork and no end product for citizens who use public sector buildings where energy managements audits were going to be required, which potentially could have cost a lot of money and may have gathered dust on a shelf. A vote was taken by the Committee of the Regions to influence that legislation, and there was a strange alliance between the Dutch, Irish, Welsh, English, and I am not sure what the other region was. It was voted down. Now, that did not change the legislation, but it showed that local councils and local elected members are becoming increasingly aware. Whether they are urban or rural or large or small, councils have got something important to say. Therefore, we can influence, even though we are a dot in the wider programme. That proves the point that we are not seeking institutions and processes; we are seeking results and outcomes. An elected member on the Causeway Coast, with respect, is just as important and as informed — or will be with our work plan — as someone in the city.

The Chairperson: I may follow up on that point later, if we do not touch on it on route.

Mr Molloy: I welcome the NILGA representatives. What you said is important, particularly your reference to the Committee of the Regions vote. I think that it was voted down by one vote. We have only two members in it, and we sometimes wonder how much say we have across Europe. However, when you get that combination, each vote can count. I have said in this Committee that, very often, we do not have any real direction for that and we are very much dependent on the collective view.

With regard to subsidiarity, it would be important for NILGA and this Committee to work together to identify those issues and decisions that should be taken at local council level that are being taken at Westminster or even the Assembly. The whole issue around subsidiarity is important, and we need to monitor it continuously to ensure that decisions are not being taken over our heads.

NILGA has an important role to play in the European committee that Belfast City Council and Derry City Council have in place, because all councils do not have the resources to have a similar committee at this time — at least until the new councils come in. NILGA should ensure that it is not dominated by Belfast and Derry and that smaller councils have an input through NILGA into the whole issue.

In relation to the design of the programme for the new round of funding, how can we identify those other funds that the Barroso task force has identified — not just along the lines of Peace and rural funding — that are not being tapped into at present? Very often, we find that community groups are trying to fit their project into a programme that has been designed without any real consideration or thought. The next round of funding has to be based on needs and on asking how we design the programme to meet the needs instead of it being the other way round. The Committee and NILGA can do a lot of work to ensure that that actually happens.

Mr McCallan: As a sleeves-rolled-up organisation, we are happy to provide solutions. We cannot provide them all, but we can complement the work of the Committee and make an effective contribution. We are not a business, but, as an association, we intend to be very business-like on behalf of the communities we serve.

Mr Kinahan: I want to follow up on what Francie said. As the Assembly is desperately short of being able to cover everything that happens in Europe, can you, whilst in Europe, look outside your field to help the Assembly and keep us briefed? The best brief that we can get in Europe is the Irish brief, because the split of the UK nations means that there is not a united one. We need help with that. I wonder how you fit in with the four bodies that are being set up? Are they the same four that you were talking about?

Then, conversely to all this, there is always the concern that NILGA is building itself up to be a big *[Inaudible.]* You have to keep that going all the time so that people do not feel that, because it is very valuable that we have your input.

My last comment addresses your point about red tape. Please, work really hard on that, because what really slows up INTERREG funding is all the extra rules we have added into it all the way through. There is good stuff coming, and we just somehow make it more difficult.

You probably could not hear me up there.

The Chairperson: Pardon?

Mr McCallan: I was going to say that we need to drum it into people that we need less bureaucracy.

My short and, I hope, audible response to Mr Kinahan's comments — through you, Chair — is that we have the resources of Cardiff and Edinburgh working in Brussels. That covers two of your points. We are not there to employ more resources; we are here to harness the information of other people and our colleagues in Ireland as well. So, we are pivoting on getting the information and bringing it down into Northern Ireland level, and we can help to inform as a result of doing that.

The Chairperson: Good luck, Caitríona.

Ms Ruane: I will keep it very short. Can you hear me?

Mr McCallan: Yes, we can hear you.

Ms Ruane: Thank you for your presentation. I am trying to work out your accent. It is French. I congratulate you on your new President. Everyone is watching what is happening at the moment. I read an interview —

Ms McGuckin: He got soaked yesterday.

Ms Ruane: He was on a plane and was delayed and all the rest of it.

Ms McGuckin: The first day was bad.

Ms Ruane: It is interesting. I live on the southern side of the border. I work on the northern side, but I used to work in the South. What really struck me — it strikes me every day — is the difference that one mile inside a border makes in terms of how you look at Europe and the European Union; not in political terms, just in how you access it and how much it is in the local papers. In the North, I do not believe that we are using Europe enough at all. I do not think that we even understand the institutions to the extent that we should. So, I welcome the work that you do in training.

Ms McGuckin: Thank you.

Ms Ruane: I think that it is really important.

In the South, a debate about Europe is raging at the moment. There is a referendum at the end of the month, which we are all going door-to-door on. So, it is very interesting and that debate is happening. It is a very real debate, and it is happening in every household in the Twenty-six Counties.

As to the bureaucracy, I agree with Danny about the spending of money. It frustrates me, for example, that there is not a bridge between Louth and Down, yet there is European money to build it. Because of bureaucracy and slow timescales, we have not got it yet. There is an appeal going on at the moment. That is what I want to focus slightly on. I know that you mentioned the South of Ireland. I think that building links, North and South, is so important because on the one island, in European terms, we are counted as two states. So, the potential for building projects is phenomenal, but we are not reaching that potential at all.

Ms McGuckin: A lot of work is being done through some of the European programmes, for example, INTERREG and Peace. That is why we want to improve the way in which they are working. The border areas could be a great beneficiary of some of those projects. That is why we were slightly worried about the INTERREG programme in particular.

You talked about the legislation and simplification, as well. Let me give you an example. For procurement in the South, the threshold for going out to tender is €5,000. Here, it depends on the programme. For example, under INTERREG, the threshold for having to get three quotes for something can be £300 or €300. It totally deters people from applying, whereas it should be a programme that people access and benefit from. So, we need a kind of harmonisation. We need simplification. We need to look at that very clearly. Europe is just on our doorstep. We have the opportunity to access it. It is there, and we need to be able to benefit from it. There is a lot of work to cover. NILGA is there ready to do it and is very proactive. That is what we are trying to achieve with you.

Mr McCallan: Perhaps, Chair, we could get some funding for lip-reading from the European Union.

The Chairperson: I look forward to reading your comments in the Hansard report, Karine.

Ms McGuckin: Sorry. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson: We have been here a long time, have we not? We started in May and finished in July. I have a couple of questions that I would like to ask Derek, but there is nothing that will not keep. We are descending into an untenable position. Karine and Derek, thank you very much.

Mr McCallan: Thank you all very much.