



Northern Ireland
Assembly

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

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

International Relations Strategy:
OFMDFM Officials

26 March 2014

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 Alex Attwood
Mr Leslie Cree
Ms Megan Fearon
Mr Alex Maskey
Ms Bronwyn McGahan
Mr Stephen Moutray
Mr George Robinson
Mr Jimmy Spratt

Witnesses:

Mr Tim Losty	Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister
Mrs Debbie Sweeney	Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

The Chairperson: We are joined by Debbie Sweeney and Tim Losty. Tim, are you opening the batting?

Mr Tim Losty (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): Yes, Chair. First, we thank the Committee for the opportunity to come along and talk in a bit more detail about the Executive's international relations strategy. The Committee wrote to us some time ago and asked us to come up earlier, but we wanted to wait until we had the Executive paper approved.

It is important to stress that this is a high-level strategy, and it complements and cooperates with the work of the other Departments and other organisations. It also builds on the significant international relations activity that we have experienced here over the past couple of years with the G8 summit, the World Police and Fire Games, the City of Culture and the Global India conference.

It also builds on a lot of the work that we have been involved in over the years through the visit programmes that Debbie manages. We have had high-level visits from Japan, China, Brazil, Spain and Croatia. We average about 30 high-level visits a year, and they usually involve ambassadors or senior political figures from the respective Governments.

Our Ministers have also been involved in a number of significant international events, including recent overseas visits to Japan, China, the United States, India and the Middle East. We are starting to see a lot of the positive developments from those. There has also been a lot of international activity in

other Departments and organisations. From our experience, one of the things that we needed to do to get a strategy together was to coordinate and join up government a lot more, not only how we cooperate on international activities coming in but how we build on the connections and relationships made through those international visits.

As I said at the outset, it is a high-level strategy. It works with the other organisations, such as Invest NI, and we also work closely with the Assembly's Outreach team here. We work with the universities and the likes of NI-CO. We want the strategy to develop a joined-up approach to achieve our mutual international objectives and complement the strategies of the other organisations. It will also ensure that some of the contacts that we make individually are shared with other organisations so that we are better able to capitalise on international visits.

As a result of the strategy, we will seek to develop an international relations action plan, which will clearly target regions and organisations that will help us to achieve our objectives under the Programme for Government. We will liaise with other Departments more regularly. We will also liaise regularly with the Assembly and other organisations. We will build on the connections that we have made with the honorary consul networks in Northern Ireland.

Ministers have announced the intention to open a Northern Ireland Executive office in Beijing. We hope to open that some time in the autumn. Plans are progressing. There have been a number of discussions with the Foreign Office, the embassies in Beijing and the Chinese Government. We are making progress and may come back to the Committee at a later stage to provide an update.

That was a very brief overview of some of the activities. We are happy to take any questions.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much. You mentioned partnership working with a number of organisations. If I am correct, I do not think that you mentioned the Northern Ireland Tourist Board or Tourism Ireland. Is there a role for either?

Mr Losty: If I did not mention them, it was only for the sake of the brevity of my introduction. They are detailed in the strategy and the action plan. We will work very closely with the tourist boards. Increasing the number of tourists here is one of the primary objectives.

The Chairperson: I see mention of building international connections in culture, arts, sport and entertainment.

Mr Losty: Yes.

The Chairperson: Have a location and physical office been identified in Beijing?

Mr Losty: It will take a while to establish the physical office. Once we are accredited over there, we have to make an application to the protocol Department in the Chinese Government. It can take up to 12 months to get the agreement. Debbie was in Beijing recently. We have narrowed down a number of the options for where we will have a short-term facility, which will enable the officer going over there to identify the office we want for a longer-term period. We will have a physical office when we open in Beijing later this year.

The Chairperson: Will that complement the Office of the Executive in Brussels? We have the bureau in the States. Are they all shadows of one another? Are they mirror images? Are you learning from one when building the next?

Mr Losty: There will be a lot of similarities in structure and in how they operate. The intention is that all offices will be very proactive and operate almost like a development agency by going out to sell a lot of the things that we are good at here and making contacts with organisations and individuals of benefit to us. They will operate in the international environment in which they are housed. They will have to acclimatise to the local culture, the way of doing things, the way Governments operate and also the networks that exist. In the US office — I was there for some time — we have strong networks that we can build on. We also have some strong relationships with organisations and states. The Brussels office has very strong connections with many of the EU departments and organisations, and it will develop closer connections with European countries. In the China office, we are starting off from a small base of contacts, connections and knowledge of what we are about, so we will spend a lot of

time raising awareness and promoting what we are capable of doing. There will be similarities, but the offices will be tailored to the environment in which they operate.

The Chairperson: Does the strategy envisage any changes for the office in Brussels?

Mr Losty: Each office will have responsibility for its own strategies, and staff will develop them to reflect the future operating environment there. We also want to build on a lot of the good connections made through international relations activities here. G8 was very successful for us. We had a number of visits from the embassies in France, Germany and Italy. Our offices and our people will try to strengthen relationships with those countries.

The Chairperson: Barroso has been around for a while, but we do not expect that it will be with us forever. Does the Brussels strategy look at the post-Barroso task force era?

Mr Losty: The international relations strategy is the high-level strategy, and that will encourage the Northern Ireland Bureau in Washington and the Office of the Executive in Brussels to develop their strategies to meet the future operating environments there. That will include where there are changes in the Government and heads of Departments, the priority themes that may be identified in Europe under the 2020 plan and what the Government here may decide are the priorities under the next Programme for Government. Their individual plans must reflect that.

The Chairperson: Will there be specific devolved strategies, or implementation plans, for the US, Canada and each of the BRIC nations?

Mr Losty: Each office will have its strategies for the area in which it operates. The bureau, for example, has a strategy for North America. The officer responsible for opening the office in Beijing will develop a strategy for China and possibly also for wider south-east Asia.

The Chairperson: With the high-end strategy, do you think that, in some sense, you are reinventing the wheel or are you simply coordinating what is already happening on the ground in those various countries?

Mr Losty: The strategy is not completely new. People will not look at it and say that we have never done this before. It is important to build on much of the success that we have had, not just in government but in the other organisations. It is about sharing that information, joining up government and taking a much more proactive approach to promoting a more positive image and to developing relationships and building on them internationally. As I said, we get a lot of visits here. People come and have a look at the place, and there is some follow-up. However, I do not think that we really capitalised on those connections in the past, and we hope to do that under the strategy.

Mr G Robinson: Thanks to Tim and his colleague. My point is about the strategy. It would be useful for all Departments to ensure uniformity in their presentation of Northern Ireland abroad.

Mr Losty: We will be working with colleagues on developing a corporate message and asking what are the key sales points that we want to get across when officials make overseas visits or we have overseas visitors here. There will be key messages. Each Department and organisation will have a specific message that it wants to get across, but we want to ensure that we have a common corporate message on our economy, our education system, the tourism product that we have to offer, and so on, to help to attract people and to enhance our credibility overseas. We are very good at many things here, although we may not be very good at selling ourselves abroad, but we hope that the strategy will start to address that.

Mr G Robinson: I think that the two Ministers are doing a wonderful job of going out to attract as much inward investment as possible to Northern Ireland. Officials are also doing a very good job, and I would like to commend them. That is my point of view.

Mr Cree: Tim, I was intrigued by the last few comments that you made in response to the Chairman. I was in Brussels with the Assembly Business Trust recently, and we were informed by the Irish delegation that the secret is to get in on the ground when things are being thought about because, if you wait until a White Paper is produced, it is, invariably, too late. Bearing in mind that we were with businesspeople, we asked the same question of our team and were told that, as soon as the White Paper is received, they get going on it. It is very important to have the right sort of relationships with

people on the ground, but we have to change some mindsets. That means going out and pushing yourself rather than reticently sitting there waiting for something to happen. Can you give us any encouragement that that will improve?

Mr Losty: Yes, but let me put that into context. As a devolved Administration, we adhere to the fact that the UK Government have the main area of responsibility for foreign policy. However, in devolved areas, it is our role and responsibility to try to get in on the ground floor in order to help to shape policies that will impact on us. That is about building the networks, being proactive, being a bit more aggressive and getting our messages out.

In Washington, Brussels, Beijing, Tokyo and other key places, international relations is a very competitive environment in which many countries and regions are trying to get their face in front of the decision-makers. We have to play that game now, and we have to get in a lot sooner.

Mr Spratt: I have just a couple of brief points. Tim, I notice that agrifoods is mentioned under trade and research in America. Invest Northern Ireland is doing work on that. What is the ongoing promotion there? Agrifood is one of our growth industries: the last figure that I heard was that it was growing by about 8% a year.

The Washington bureau promotes a Canadian strategy in North America. Is there not already a strategy for Canada? It seems to me that Canada would be one of our strategic partners, certainly from a tourism point of view, given the number of people from the island who live in Canada today. What work is being done and what work will continue or be increased in promoting that North American line?

Mr Losty: First, agrifoods is one of our international success stories. Invest NI and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) are very heavily engaged in the promotion of that sector. The First Minister and deputy First Minister have gone on a number of overseas visits with the particular aim of promoting agrifoods, particularly in China and Japan, where there are the issues of sorting out the accreditation and the checks and inspections so that our products can be sold more widely into those markets. Our Ministers go in and spearhead the operations, and DARD and Invest NI will back that up. Sometimes it can take time to get from where you have got people interested to moving the product through the door, onto the shelves and out to the consumer. However, all the Departments, including OFMDFM, are working on that. We have had very positive feedback from all the people whom we have been talking to about agrifood. We see that increasing a lot in the future.

The Northern Ireland Bureau has a Canadian strategy that has included our Ministers visiting a number of the Canadian provinces. That will happen again. Canada was represented by Ministers at the G8 here, so strategies for the North American market, including Canada, will capitalise on not just trade and investment but the cultural connections between families here and people who live in Canada. So, there will be a lot more of those connections in the future.

Mr Spratt: Finally, after the substantial work that has been done in China, India and Japan, I notice that Thailand and South Korea are now on the agenda. What work has been done there so far? What are the future prospects for advancing that work?

Mr Losty: We had three visits last year from senior people in Thailand, including its deputy prime minister and crown prince. They came to look at a number of sectors here that interested them, including the economy, tourism and post-conflict reconstruction. There have been a number of discussions there. Now that we have the international relations strategy approved, we will be putting people into positions where they will follow up with embassies on those initial contacts with us to see what else we can do. We have also had visits from the embassy and ambassador from South Korea. There is an outstanding invitation to visit South Korean and Thailand. So, we want to narrow down that relationship by identifying a number of areas that would benefit us and South Korea.

Mr Spratt: If you allow me, Chair, I will pick up on the post-conflict reconstruction. Mr Maskey and I were involved in an exercise in Thailand. In the three or four years before we were across, almost 5,000 people had been murdered. Is assisting with post-conflict issues high on the agenda? I do not know what the numbers are now, but, two or three years ago, the death toll was heading towards 5,000 people being murdered in three years.

Mr Losty: It was certainly high on the agenda of the government people that we met when they came here. So, that is something that I think that we have to follow up on. We recognise that there are

issues in Thailand, so we would be working on that follow-up with not just the Thai embassy and government but the Foreign Office. As I said, it was an area that featured highly when they talked to us and to Ministers.

Mr Maskey: Thanks, Tim and Debbie, for your presentation so far. I will ask a wee bit about the international development contributions. Clearly, most of the focus has been on what we can do for the people that we represent by increasing investment and trade, sporting and cultural links and so forth. However, we also have an important responsibility for international development contributions. It is like everything else in life: we are bad, but an awful lot of people are worse off than us. It is important for us to consider how we can contribute. Will you give us an update on where we are with any projects? I understand the constraints on what we might do, but I think that it is incumbent on us to do something. At the very least, we have key experiences that we can share with and other contributions that we can make to people in the international community who are much worse off than we are.

Mr Losty: Absolutely. The international relations strategy also has an objective of developing an international development strategy and actions. In taking that strategy forward, we will be in discussions with the all-party group here as well as with some of the aid agencies and other organisations.

It is important that we are seen to be global citizens. Many organisations from many countries have visited here in the more recent past and have also asked for senior political and business figures to go overseas to help out. I think that it is important that, if we aspire to have a credible international image, we are also seen to be helping out in many of those regions and countries.

We have had a number of discussions with aid agencies and representatives from the all-party group to try to narrow down regions that we could perhaps have an impact on. We are going to have to continue with those discussions. Some of the organisations and government representatives who have come over here on behalf of some of those developing countries and regions have talked about trying to access the expertise that we may have in agriculture, conflict resolution and health issues. Although we may be constrained in the amount of financial support that could go overseas, we certainly have an expertise that would be of benefit. We just need to narrow it down to the regions in which we could operate and have an impact on and then work out how we do that.

We work with organisations such as Northern Ireland Co-operation Overseas (NI-CO) and Invest NI, as well as with some of the overseas aid organisations and the Department for International Development (DFID) and Irish Aid. So, we think that it is important to have a strategy that we can translate into actions so that we can target those regions with the sorts of services and skills that we have that will have an impact.

Mr Maskey: Thanks for that; it is good to hear all that. I think that we have all agreed that it is important that we give as much as we get when it comes to international relations. Are you satisfied with the networks through which you are having discussions at the moment? I am presuming that people who came here have a specific request, because they have identified a resource here for themselves. So, that is nearly like a no-brainer, and we may be able to help them in some shape or form.

Every Member around this table — in fact all 108 MLAs — might have a good idea about some country in the world or some particular issue, but we still have to find a strategic way to dovetail people's general interests with our needs and mutual benefits in the international community. Are you happy enough that the way in which you are working will eventually focus on where we should deploy whatever resources that we might need to wherever they will have the best impact both ways?

Mr Losty: I think so, yes. We have also discussed international development with the devolved Administrations in Scotland and Wales as well as with the Foreign Office and the British Council in the context of being a small region here and being able to make sure that whatever support we can give will have the sort of impact that we would want, rather than just being seen to be part of an overall mix. So, it is going to be important to try to identify those regions, as well as the organisations, that will help us to have that impact. You are absolutely right; it is important that we are seen to be giving something back.

Mr Maskey: Are those discussions also taking place with the Irish Government and other Irish-based agencies? There is a whole range of agencies in Ireland that have a big footprint across the world. There are clear synergies there that would be beneficial.

Mr Losty: A lot of organisations have a lot more expertise in this field than us. Some of them have come to talk to us and have said that they would like our help in some of these areas. So, we will take that forward to see how we can get that help to the organisations.

There are other international organisations that maybe set out priorities and then provide funding to enable organisations, or cooperation between regions, to go into a developing area to provide support. We are also talking to those potential funders. If we cannot provide the funding but can provide expertise, we may be able to partner up with organisations that can put in money to back up our work.

The Chairperson: Paragraph 9.3 in the strategy says that the Scottish Government have identified Malawi as their area of particular interest and focus. It goes on to say:

"We are working to identify suitable partnership options for us."

I take it that, when you talk about suitable partnership options, you are talking about a region or a country, in the same way as Scotland has identified Malawi.

Mr Losty: Yes. Half the Scottish Government's international development activity is targeted at Malawi. That is because of a strong historical and cultural link between Malawi and Scotland, given the people and the missionaries who have gone over there. So, those connections were made, and that type of relationship benefited both parties. We hope that we can do something similar by identifying a region where there are such historical and cultural connections or a connection relating to having to deal with issues that are similar to ours. That kind of relationship would have a better chance of success.

Mr Lyttle: I am a member of the all-party group on international development. On 1 March 2011, the Assembly resolved on a cross-party basis to agree the report from the all-party group on international development and called on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to incorporate the report's findings into the international relations strategy and to implement its recommendations. I welcome your positive comments about international development. Would it be possible to provide the Committee with a written response on how those recommendations are being, or will be, implemented?

Mr Losty: We have the international development activity here as an objective. We will have a strategy for international development, and that is where we will start to re-engage with the all-party group, as well as with other organisations, not just to take forward the recommendations from 2011 but to look at how things have changed, the future operating environment and how we can have an impact, not just from the Executive's perspective but from that of NI plc, by targeting the right regions. Over the past couple of years, we may have looked at a region that is similar to ours, but, because of developments there over recent years, that region is no longer seen as an area where we could have an impact. So, we need to see where we can go from here. We hope to start engaging with the all-party group, aid agencies and others over the next few weeks. We can write to the Committee to outline a timescale for when we can start that engagement.

Mr Lyttle: I welcome that, and I think that it would be useful to get an OFMDFM response to those recommendations to assist that re-engagement.

Mr Attwood: I am sorry that I missed your earlier comments. This is obviously worthwhile and potentially useful.

You said in reply to an earlier question that you were putting people into position to follow up contacts. Could you explain that? If there is going to be an international relations unit in OFMDFM, what resources will go into that office, given the scale and ambition of the international relations strategy?

Mr Losty: The final figure is still to be determined, based on budgets. However, at the moment, the international relations team in OFMDFM, or the Executive, involves me, doing that work along with my other activities. The team also involves Debbie and her colleague Ann-Marie McCoy, who manages the internal visits. Managing 30 inward visits a year, many of which are high level, means that the

focus is on what we do with people when we get them here. So, I need additional resources and perhaps another manager in OFMDFM, who could then do the follow-up with the embassies and consulates in London or with some of those organisations that come over here. That will require additional resources. However, we do not see that as a huge resource. We have identified that work is already taking place in other Departments and other organisations, and people will continue to do that work. Our job is to coordinate, gather information, collate it, regurgitate that information across Departments and, by having an overall look at that information, to identify where there are opportunities, either for us collectively or for individual organisations, to get further benefits from those international relations. So, there will be a virtual team across the Executive, the Assembly and Invest NI that will be working on this.

Mr Attwood: My sense is that two or three people in a team in OFMDFM fulfilling your functions is somewhat small, given the overall ambition. Why would you be convinced that the resource that exists, and that has existed for some time, across all other Departments will be adequate to live up to the ambitions of your six or eight priorities and the four or five regions in the world for which you named quite specific ambitions and goals? That is probably rhetorical, because it is a question that is all around this paper. Is there an implementation plan with performance indicators for each and every conclusion in the report?

Mr Losty: You asked about the resources that would go with this. Given that this is a high-level strategy, it builds on the work that other organisations and the people in those organisations are doing. So, where good work is going on, we will not try to reinvent the wheel. However, we want to build on that success. It may be that, once we have all that information collated, we will identify that there are opportunities that require a certain level of resources to fully exploit them. That decision will be taken at that time. However, the decision may also be that there are sufficient resources across the network, which, if we use in a slightly different way, will mean that we can still get all the benefits that we need in the strategy. So, I think that we can do that to start off with. We will have additional resources in OFMDFM to help with that coordination and to then turn the information into a proactive approach.

Mr Attwood: That suggests to me that, although there is great ambition, an implementation plan to realise the ambition is still a work in progress.

Mr Losty: We have an action plan.

Mr Attwood: Is that available to us?

Mr Losty: The action plan will be available in due course. We are taking it round the other Departments so that we can fill in all the gaps. The action plan identifies, for example, a region where Invest NI may be very active and tourism may be very active but where we may want to do more work on education, students or health. So, we are filling in the gaps there, and, when that is available, we can send you copies of it.

Mr Attwood: I will go back to Mr Maskey's point, which was a very fair point, that we have to give as well as receive. Why are we not giving by making a financial contribution to international aid? The Scottish Government do.

Mr Losty: First, we have not had the international relations strategy to take forward a policy enabling us to do that. Secondly, I do not think that we are able to spend money outside Northern Ireland unless it is for the benefit of people in Northern Ireland.

Mr Attwood: The Scottish Government make a contribution to international aid from its Treasury budget.

Mr Losty: Each devolved Administration has slightly different policies and powers.

Mr Attwood: I do not think that those are slightly different powers when it comes to making contributions to an international aid budget.

Mr Losty: It may be in connection with spending their budget. If they can spend their budget outside their boundaries, they can do that under international development activities. My understanding is that, at the moment, we can spend money outside Northern Ireland for the benefit of people in

Northern Ireland. I can clarify that for you specifically, but that is the practice that we have operated to date.

Mr Attwood: I once wrote to the First Minister and deputy First Minister saying that 5% of the SIF budget should be spent on international aid.

Mr Losty: The SIF policy is to target areas of disadvantage in Northern Ireland. So, once you have agreed on the policy, the money has to follow it.

Mr Attwood: It would be better spent elsewhere. Advise us on this officially: is there some differential in the devolution settlement between Scotland and here when it comes to taking forward Mr Maskey's implicit idea that we should give? That could also mean giving money. Scotland does it; it is part of their Programme for Government.

Mr Losty: It is partly to do with powers, but it is also partly to do with intent, so —

Mr Attwood: I appreciate that, but if you could just come back to us on that question. Do we have the power to do that, or are we different to Scotland?

Mr Losty: We will come back to you on that. There is the power, and then there is the question of whether you can spend the money and whether the Executive believe that they should spend the money.

Another issue that I want to raise relates to governance and accountability. We are not going to put money into projects where we do not yet have the expertise or experience of how that money would be spent, particularly when you are looking outside your boundaries and you have limited control over the line of sight of where that money goes. That means that we have an expertise issue that also needs to be addressed. Again, we would take advice from those organisations that have been active in that sector for some time.

Mr Attwood: My final question concerns that issue. If you take advice from organisations that have been active in that sector for some time, have you been taking advice from the organisations in, let us say, the development world? Is this informed by their advice?

Mr Losty: We have met aid agencies, government organisations and international organisations that are involved in international development. So, yes, we have taken their advice, and we have committed some of their advice to actions. We have also said that, once we get the strategy approved at Executive level, that will give us the policy permission to go out and put together a development strategy. So, that would be the next move, and it may lead to a lot more activity in the international development field.

The Chairperson: I am just trying to check what the 1998 Act says about international obligations. Tim, it would be useful if you could come back to us with the legislative constraints on funding going abroad. I understand that that is the first part of a two-part question, the second being the will of the Executive, even if the legislation is there.

Mr Cree: If I could just ask a quickie of Tim while we have him here. You mentioned Malawi: it is my information that the Scottish Government only work in the south of the country, based down in Blantyre. The central and northern regions do not get any help. Do you know whether that is right?

Mr Losty: I am not completely certain. I will check that for you.

Mr Cree: That would be interesting to know.

The Chairperson: I think that you are confusing Tim for an executive of the Scottish Government there.

Mr Cree: He is a man of much information.

Mr Losty: We work very closely with them. They have been very helpful to us as we have taken this work forward.

The Chairperson: OK. Tim and Debbie, thank you very much indeed.