



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for The Executive Office

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Brexit: Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council

4 November 2020

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for The Executive Office

Brexit: Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council

4 November 2020

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Colin McGrath (Chairperson)
Mr Doug Beattie (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Martina Anderson
Mr Trevor Clarke
Mr Trevor Lunn
Mr George Robinson
Mr Pat Sheehan
Ms Emma Sheerin
Mr Christopher Stalford

Witnesses:

Mr David Burns	Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council
Councillor Nicholas Trimble	Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): We have the mayor, Councillor Nicholas Trimble, and the chief executive officer, David Burns. You are both very welcome. Thank you very much for making yourselves available to give us some information on your council area and the impact of Brexit. If you are happy, we will pass over to you to give us a presentation for a few minutes, and then we will move into a question-and-answer session.

Councillor Nicholas Trimble (Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council): Thank you, Chair. Can everyone hear me?

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Yes.

Councillor Trimble: Brilliant. Thank you for giving us the opportunity to address the Committee today to discuss the impact that EU exit is going to have on local government as we prepare to deal with that situation and what it is going to mean. You should already have the written submission that was sent in advance.

I think it is fair to say that, as we navigate towards a post-EU future, our council is very keen to map out a way forward that will allow us to play a full part in working for citizens. Using our unique situation to support our businesses and communities, we are very keen to help them take advantage of the new arrangements in innovative and exciting ways to support a growing and prosperous economy in Northern Ireland. However, that is not without its challenges, as might be expected from the biggest change in social policy in 40 years. I do not want to take the time today to just outline what we see as the difficulties that we are going to face; I also want to highlight how local government can play a key role in addressing this very new and unknown environment in ways that will benefit everyone.

Since the referendum in June 2016, local government has been busy building strong relationships with our partners across Departments. It is a process that has, in fairness, recently been accelerated by our joint efforts to deal with the current COVID pandemic. In developing those relationships, all sides have come to realise just how much greater an impact the public sector can have when all aspects of our local, regional and national government work together. I feel that, by allowing each of us to play to our strengths, we present a truly coherent and cohesive team that can make real and positive life changes, ensuring that no group is left behind. Progress is being made, but if we are to thrive and take full advantage of the new environment, we must build on that and develop a platform that is seen as being best in class.

To make change on that scale work, we, in effect, need your help in embedding a system-wide change across all decision-making bodies in government. If and should co-design, as an approach, be embedded in policy development, then a pathway to the real and meaningful involvement of all stakeholders will be opened. It is councils as champions of localism that are best placed to reach communities, vulnerable groupings, families and individuals, and, ultimately, it is their views that collectively inform the decisions that we make for all our futures. That approach works both ways. Allow me to give you one example to illustrate what I mean. Cast your mind back to the work undertaken earlier in the year by councils in delivering food parcels to our elderly and vulnerable residents. That demonstrated just how quickly we can deliver right down to the individual level whilst, at the same time, supporting government policy and objectives. To make that happen, we cannot afford to neglect the ways in which we communicate. As I stated earlier, a start has been made, but, if we are to construct a system that allows co-design to flourish, I feel that councils must be seen as equal partners and treated as such. It is good that structures are already in place that allow us to communicate to a degree, and I do not think that it would be difficult to build on those existing structures together. I urge the Committee not to miss this opportunity to synchronise and, in effect, synergise our efforts for the good of us all.

I am sure that many or all of you will know that, typically, at council level, through our annual estimates process and the collection of rates, we collect the funding that we require to deliver the services for the incoming year. A great deal of effort goes into ensuring that only the absolute minimum amount required to deliver for our citizens is asked for and collected. Since March this year, councils have been forced to focus, at times almost exclusively, on the response to COVID-19. The second wave has ensured that local government as a whole will continue to deal with that response phase for some time to come. Consequently, limited resources are available at short notice to prepare and position local government for the impacts that the end of the transition period will bring. You know very well that the mobilisation of new teams can take time, so I ask that the Committee be aware of such challenges as we approach the end of the transition period.

As Committee members will have already noted from our submitted report, we attempt to set out some of the existing challenges that restrict the ability of councils to play a full and important role. The Committee, however, should be aware of our commitment to supporting a successful transition and building a positive future for all citizens in Northern Ireland. In our submission, we have highlighted to the Committee six key areas of concern that centre on the following points: first and foremost, the movement of goods and services to and from Northern Ireland and the impact that change will have on traders and on trade itself; secondly, the impact on the economy at large and what that will mean for the sustainability of council funding in the longer term; thirdly, the demands for council services and how we develop to meet the challenges to come in areas such as environmental health, planning, economic development etc; and, fourthly and finally, replacing the EU funding programmes that have existed up to now.

Overshadowing all of those issues, there are still a number of key points that add to the difficulty of planning for the new environment that we are going to face come 2021. I feel that that can, firstly, be summarised by the uncertainty that we are going to face. It is not yet clear, guaranteed or certain that there is going to be a deal that will allow free trade between the EU markets and the UK. The Government has yet to provide clear-cut guidance on many of the most important areas, such as trade, enforcement activities, the procurement of goods and services, and reciprocal arrangements. Secondly, the clarity. It is just not clear to us, even in areas that are better developed, how the new arrangements are going to affect councils, what additional services we are going to have to provide, and how those additional duties are going to be funded. Thirdly, it is about that partnership working. As I said earlier, although some progress has been made in recent years in establishing the links and building relationships between Departments and local government, I believe that the need remains to develop a true partnership of equals through co-design and participatory working. Finally, shared vision. Local government can do things that, I think it is fair to say, Departments cannot. Our reach and local knowledge are invaluable. When partnered with the council's help, the Government's

resources can be properly focused, and they can do so much more than either organisation can do by itself, but much work remains to be completed before this becomes a full reality.

That brings me to the end of the presentation, Chair. Thank you for your and the Committee's time. The chief executive, David Burns, and I are here, and we are happy to take any questions that you may have.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Thank you very much, Nicholas, for that presentation. At the start, you discussed how there has been some sort of interdepartmental — or with you joining and working with various Departments and agencies, somewhat in response to coronavirus, and that being a good measure for maybe dealing with things from Brexit. Can you give us a flavour of how — maybe David will give us an answer, as well — involved you, as a council, feel in the whole process of Brexit? Are you finding out information by going onto Twitter, Facebook and newspapers, or are there regular circulars being sent through to you to give you updates as to what is happening? Do you feel that you are getting enough information and that your views are being sought as to what is taking place, and in shaping things for the future?

Mr David Burns (Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council): Thank you, Chair. I will kick off, and then Mr Mayor can maybe join in afterwards. At this time last year, we were working very closely with the Departments. The Departments had committed to supporting local government through the identification of a link officer, who was reporting in through the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE) to sit on the NI hub as a local government response. However, when COVID kicked off, that officer, who is employed by Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council, was brought back to deal with our COVID response. Things dried up within the Departments, and it has only been very recently that that has started to kick back online. SOLACE is working across all councils just now to identify an officer to take that forward. There are means of communication there, but things have been very quiet on the back of COVID. The worry just now is about how close we are to the end of the transition period and the amount of uncertainty, which the mayor mentioned, that still exists.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): So —.

Councillor Trimble: Just to supplement that, I think that what the chief said is 100%. On the outworkings of COVID, yes, I think that all of the frustrations were at their maximum at that time because we were being so reactionary. However, I think that it has shown that those lines of communication have proven vital, because we would not have been able to manage COVID in the way that we have to date. It is really about building that capacity, both at our end and also at a departmental level.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): We had a similar scenario where there was a reference to the suggestion that one of the senior officers within the Department was drafted away from dealing with Brexit to deal with COVID issues. It sparks in my head; was there not the capacity to appoint another officer and have one dealing with COVID and one dealing with Brexit? Because invariably, when they move back from dealing with COVID, they are now sitting in a scenario with 50 days until Brexit and we are only starting to focus on that workload now. That would have been something that the Department, via that hub, should have looked at much earlier and said, "Can we have two officers, one to deal with each issue?" If there are only a handful of days left, obviously you are going to feel disempowered in the ability to co-design what is going to be happening from January onwards, because it is nearly too late to prepare things. It is going to be about communication rather than co-design at this stage; would that be fair to say?

Mr Burns: Communication is crucial in all of this, Chair. There is still an element of co-design that can happen, because we all feel as if we will fall over a cliff edge on 1 January. There are so many things that will take a period of time to work through. My concern of just pushing out communication is that, through COVID, so many lessons have been learned where Departments did make errors in drafting legislation and the like that they could have avoided if they had listened to and involved local government as a key partner in that process.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): OK, that is good to be able to report that back in that it was a positive experience and to maintain that.

Trevor Lunn, you were looking to come in?

Mr Lunn: Thank you, Chair. Hello, Mr Mayor. Hello, David.

Mr Burns: Hello, Trevor.

Mr Lunn: You can say, "Hello" back.

Councillor Trimble: Hello.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): That is not awkward. Moving on. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Lunn: Thanks for the presentation, strangers. Some of the things that Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council does very well are economic development, in which it has always been very active; support for voluntary community groups; and the community planning exercise that it is now engaged in. Some of that depends on EU funding. How confident are you that you can continue at the same level in those areas of activity after 1 January?

Mr Burns: Thank you for that, Trevor. It is great to see you, and I am glad that you are keeping well. *[Laughter.]* In terms of economic development and the like, we do have a strong offering down here. Certainly, community planning is something that I have been really keen to put front and centre of everything that we are doing. You are right, Trevor. Through PEACE PLUS and INTERREG monies and the like, in our submission you will see that £230 million of funding has come to councils over the past six years. It is a big risk and a gap for our communities, in that a number of them rely on that for delivery of their programmes. Even as we talk about the shared prosperity fund or any replacement through PEACE PLUS, you are possibly talking 12 to 18 months before such a scheme could be up and running. There is a risk that people who have been employed in these projects, and, for us as a council, the project managers and programme officers — we will lose those skills as they seek jobs elsewhere. Even if a new scheme should come on board in 12 months' time, I may well have lost the skills and experience with which to run something quickly off the back of that. There is a need for that continuity and consistency, and it would really help.

Mr Lunn: OK. Thank you for that.

Mr Beattie: Very quickly, first of all, thanks, Nicholas and David, it is good to see you. Thank you for that presentation; it was really good. I am reading your written submission again. It is full of the words "clarity", "guidance" and "assurance". I am getting the sense that the information on what is going on is just not getting down to you at all. I see here that you are asking what the outcome will be if there is a no-deal transition period. That information is not getting down to you. It is something that the Committee have harped on about, pushing upwards to try to find out who is doing the planning here. Do you have anything in place to do any planning at the local level if there is a no-deal outcome at the end of the transition period?

Mr Burns: Mr Mayor, are you happy for me to take that?

Councillor Trimble: Yes, David.

Mr Burns: Doug, thanks for the question. We have been taking very much a risk-based approach to our planning. We have business continuity plans specific to Brexit, which at least allows us to think about reasonable worst-case scenarios and how we would adapt to those. When you add that to COVID and the various troubles we are facing there, we are going to have a lot of work on our plate, irrespective of what happens come 1 January. We have presented that to our members on a regular basis to keep them in the loop as to our risk register position, and we will just have to try to adapt as need be. As far as we are concerned, critical and essential services come first. That is about keeping the council's services on the road and supporting our communities and local economy. Irrespective of whether it is COVID or Brexit, that will be our critical focus.

Councillor Trimble: I will just supplement that. Hi, Doug, good to see you. Thanks for the question.

It is fair to say that the council is limited in what it can do. What has been evidenced throughout the whole COVID pandemic is that we have been able to synergise well with Departments in signposting. We were the first point of call for people seeking help on how businesses survive. If that communication and clarity are not filtering down to us, we are going to find ourselves on a sticky

wicket when people come to us again as a first port of call come Brexit, seeking guidance on what they can do.

I can highlight that difficulty. I was in a conversation earlier with the manager of one of the big haulage companies in the area. He is at his wits' end because they have both 100 border crossings, both North/South and east-west, every day. Their groupage is, on average, 20 consignments per lorryload, which is 2,000 consignments per day. The Northern Ireland protocol may cover that in terms of the clearance costs going forward immediately, but the administrative side is going to knock them for six. I am just not sure that the council has the capacity to be able to assist at that level. It really has to flow down from Stormont.

Mr Beattie: I am getting the sense, Nicholas, that there is just a drip feed of information coming down to you from Stormont. If that is the case with you, it is going to be the same with all councils, which is that you are just not getting the information.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): We have George and Martina on the StarLeaf system, and there is about two minutes left. Do either of you have a question that you want to ask? OK.

Gentlemen, thank you very much indeed for the presentation, again highlighting a number of key issues that we will want to include in any report that we make on these meetings, about the synergy and working together of regional and local government and how they can complement and help each other. There is already good practice through the response to COVID, and that might be able to be assimilated across to help with Brexit changes that may come in at short notice. That has definitely been picked up from your presentation. Thank you very much indeed, and we will leave it there.

Councillor Trimble: Thank you for having us.