



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for The Executive Office

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Brexit: Fermanagh and Omagh  
District Council

4 November 2020

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

## Committee for The Executive Office

Brexit: Fermanagh and Omagh District Council

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**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:**

Councillor John Coyle	Fermanagh and Omagh District Council
Ms Alison McCullagh	Fermanagh and Omagh District Council

**The Chairperson (Mr McGrath):** I welcome representatives from Fermanagh and Omagh District Council. We have Councillor John Coyle, the vice chair of the council, and Alison McCullagh, the chief executive officer. We appreciate your taking time to give us your perspective on the impact of Brexit on your council area.

We will pass over to you if you want to take a few minutes to explain what some of those issues are, and then we can move into a question and answer session with members.

**Councillor John Coyle (Fermanagh and Omagh District Council):** Thank you, Colin. I presume that you can hear me.

**The Chairperson (Mr McGrath):** Yes, indeed.

**Councillor Coyle:** Keeping the best till last, as always. Good afternoon, Chair and members, and thank you for this opportunity to meet. We very much welcomed the chance to provide you with our concerns arising from the UK exit from the European Union.

As you will appreciate, Brexit is a major issue and concern for the Fermanagh and Omagh district. While I appreciate that there are different political perspectives on Brexit, the corporate position of our council about the implications of Brexit is one of extreme concern. The residents of our district did not support the decision to leave the EU. The border in an inextricable part of our district, and we have received no assurances that the legitimate concerns that we have raised on behalf of our constituents have been progressed or, unfortunately, even taken seriously. We have contacted the NIO a number

of times, and it has said that it will not meet face to face or through Webex but will just receive letters from us.

By way of introduction, we are truly a border council. Our immediate neighbours are counties Donegal, Leitrim, Cavan and Monaghan. Our district has 132 miles out of the total of 310 miles of border. That means that approximately 43% of the NI/ROI land border goes through the Fermanagh and Omagh district. There are at least 85 border crossings in the council district.

The 2011 census data suggests that 1,300 people from our district go across the border to work in the Republic, mainly in Cavan, Monaghan and Donegal. Cross-border activity is a routine part of our daily lives, and people from both sides of the border share access on a joint basis for the manner of their day-to-day living, from education to healthcare, social and community activities and work. I live in Belleek, which is right on the border, and I have family ties in Donegal, Sligo and Leitrim. Social and employment links have straddled the border for generations.

In December 2018, our council established an all-member Brexit committee. Since its inception, the committee has received representations from community and civic society, trade and employment organisations, cross-border networks, and human rights and justice campaigners. All have expressed their concern for a post-Brexit future.

As of today, there are 52 days before the end of the transition period. It is extremely worrying that none of us knows, with any certainty, what will happen on 1 January. We are mindful of the time, and we want to engage in a discussion. I will ask Alison to provide a brief overview on some of the issues affecting our council, and our perspective.

**Ms Alison McCullagh (Fermanagh and Omagh District Council):** Thank you very much, Councillor, and thank you, Chair and members. I am very mindful at this stage in the proceedings that many of the issues have been well rehearsed, so I will try to focus on some of the additional elements and maybe unique aspects from a Fermanagh and Omagh perspective.

I will start by highlighting particular concerns around tourism. As many of you will be aware, we operate the Marble Arch Caves Global Geopark, which is a joint project that we manage with our colleagues in Cavan County Council. It was, and to some extent remains, the first international geopark in the world. We are particularly concerned about the perception of a border or difficulties from a tourism perspective. We are working with our colleagues in Monaghan County Council and with our other partners in the Northern councils regarding the Ulster canal. Earlier in your deliberations, you mentioned the shared island unit. That has also been highlighted as a priority project for the Executive, but in a practical sense, how will these things done post Brexit?

In terms of agriculture, as the vice chair of the council will be well aware, many of our farmers are defined as small subsistence farmers. We are particularly concerned about the impacts of Brexit on them and on their funding arrangements. We are also concerned that some of the new post-Brexit farming policy is likely to focus very much on production rather than on environmental management.

On environmental management, we have a particular concern regarding the status of existing planning approvals. Not to lower the tone in any way, but most of the planning applications — not just in our district but in many parts of Northern Ireland — that relate to intensive farm production, as part of their nitrate management plans, rely on the disposal of chicken and pig litter being brought across the border. As we understand it, from 1 January, that may not be allowed, and there is no facility for it to happen safely.

There is no clarity on how transboundary planning applications will be dealt with. Currently, there are specific statutory requirements on both sides of the border regarding consultation. We assume that those matters have been transposed into legislation, but we are awaiting formal clarity.

I appreciate that the Committee has discussed funding in some detail, but we want to highlight a couple of specific aspects from our perspective. PEACE PLUS is a welcome development. Its remit has been expanded but it is likely to be heavily oversubscribed. There is still no clarity on its spend profile and no confirmation of the full funding package.

There has been very little reference recently to the shared prosperity fund. This was really about the Westminster Government's levelling-up agenda. There is meant to be a Northern Ireland allocation in that. We hope that it will come quickly, but, if there is anything that can be done from a Committee perspective to encourage progress on that, it would be appreciated.

A specific difference between Northern Ireland and our counterparts in the Southern councils is the business funding that has been allocated. A total of €15 million has been allocated as a border enterprise development fund, specifically for businesses in the Southern border counties. It is being administered by Enterprise Ireland, and there is nothing of a comparable scale in Northern Ireland. There is a real concern that our businesses are at a competitive disadvantage, particularly when, as Councillor Coyle mentioned, we have so many immediately proximate areas along the border.

There is a significant deficit in infrastructure west of the Bann generally but certainly on a cross-border basis. Research undertaken to date, most notably by the Irish Central Border Area Network (ICBAN) and endorsed by Ulster University, has shown a disproportionate Brexit impact in the central border region, North and South.

Council services have been fairly well rehearsed by colleagues, but I specifically highlight one of the issues around waste management and disposal. Our lorries criss-cross the border every day to collect waste and dispose of it. There is considerable confusion about the mechanisms that will allow that service to continue without impediment from 1 January.

Similarly, on environmental health, there is certainly a lot of guidance about what we expect the roles to be, but there is little clarity on what it will actually involve. We are concerned about the sustainability of existing cross-border relationships. As John mentioned, so much of our day-to-day activity is based on normal living across the border. There are extensive community networks that work on a cross-border basis: arts, cultural and sporting organisations. Many of those will continue, and it is important that there are no real or perceived barriers to such relationships continuing in the future.

Another point, which may tie in with what our colleagues from Derry City and Strabane district said and with the wider discussion on infrastructure, is that there is a genuine fear about what we could describe as back-to-back development, such that Northern Ireland will take a certain development route, particularly on infrastructure, and the Republic of Ireland will take a different route. There has not really been proper joined-up spatial planning for Project Ireland 2040, which is the Irish Government's regional planning framework, or, indeed, in the previous regional development strategy for Northern Ireland. Maybe the shared island unit could in some way assist with that work, but it is a potential risk for all of us.

All our planning to date has been in the context of there being a deal. We do not know what will happen if there is no deal, and the status of our local and central government contingency plans may be adversely affected by that.

The reality is that we now have the perfect storm of COVID-19 impacts on businesses and communities and, potentially, Brexit impacts in a short number of weeks, and how we can work collectively to ameliorate that situation.

**The Chairperson (Mr McGrath):** John and Alison, thank you very much indeed for that comprehensive presentation. It is absolutely no problem that many of the issues that you wished to discuss have already been raised. Today's exercise has been very useful to see the common issues. That allows more weight to be applied in articulating those views when we pass that message on, because it is not saying that one council said this or another council said the other. We will be able to say that all councils have been raising certain issues, and that provides a great deal of weight to the argument.

It is disappointing to hear, being where you are and the unique issues that you face in a very rural area in Fermanagh and Omagh, that the NIO would not interact with you or meet you. That is irresponsible, not least because certainly the Ministers in the NIO represent many of the people and areas that caused Brexit and foisted it upon us. They represent the people who created the problem for you and then do not have the decency to meet you in order to hear your views and concerns. That is very disappointing, because you have a unique voice in the entire Brexit process. There is certainly no other part of the UK that could say that it has so many land border crossings and the impact that that will inevitably have on business, cultural, family and community life in your area. To simply ignore that is very irresponsible and maybe points to the arrogance that we often see from the British Government over the entire Brexit process.

**Mr Sheehan:** Thanks, Alison and John. Alison, in particular, talked about contingency planning in the event of a no-deal Brexit. Have you costed that contingency planning? Presumably, if there is a cost, it will have to be passed on to the ratepayers in Fermanagh and Omagh.

**Ms McCullagh:** We have costed it, but one of the difficulties, members, is that we do not know the full extent of the contingency requirements. We mentioned the funding loss. From our perspective, roughly £25 million of funding would have been drawn into the council, and that excludes our involvement with some partner organisations. That simply cannot be replaced, or the scale of that funding cannot be replaced.

For our day-to-day service provision, we have certainly costed what we think is reasonable. The difficulty is that clarity has not yet been provided on the extent of our role. That is particularly the case with environmental health. Obviously, we have seen the work, and, indeed, we have had very good support from colleagues in central government during the COVID crisis. We have seen the income loss to councils and what that has meant, and I would certainly have thought that the contingency planning in the event of a no deal would be at least as significant as that for the COVID losses that we are encountering. Until we see the detail of what we have to do, it is impossible to cost it fully.

**The Chairperson (Mr McGrath):** Alison and John, given that your area is quite heavily reliant on agricultural business, are there many farms that straddle the border, with one half of the farm on one side and the second half on the other side? As we move forward, I am thinking about how any divergence on agriculture policies will cause farms to have to decide on which side their fields are located to know which sets of rules and guidelines they will have to follow. Are there examples of that in your area?

**Ms McCullagh:** Chair, I will defer to Councillor Coyle on this. He will certainly have the detail on this area.

**The Chairperson (Mr McGrath):** I know that this is one of his particular areas of expertise.

**Councillor Coyle:** Yes, there are. I do not have a complete figure, but many farmers farm on both sides of the border. The border runs down the premises of a number of businesses in our district. On one side, they are in the North, and, on the other, they are in the South. That includes yards and everything else. It will be a nightmare. We do not know, and this is the clarity that we need for farmers and businesses. What do they have to do? Do they have to do nothing? Will there be a free trade agreement whereby we do not have tariffs? What is the paperwork? It is a legislative nightmare of paperwork after paperwork.

In the farming industry, it is mostly primary producers in Fermanagh and Omagh. We sell on weanling calves to the beef finishers. At the minute, beef prices are holding up and suckler calves are making good money. However, in the event of our having barriers east-west as well as North/South for our lamb and pigs, it is an unthinkable situation. We have our markets to which we need to put out our produce. It is top-class. We have no questions about the sourcing of animals. They are treated well and are recorded, and everything is up to EU standards. We will not diverge from that, but not getting a trade deal opens the doors for chlorinated chicken and other items like that. I know that DAERA has said that it will not do that, but you do not know. We have not got clarification, and we need to know what is going to happen. Farmers are at a disadvantage.

**The Chairperson (Mr McGrath):** John, I am not a betting man, but if I had to put money on the person who would be able to get a mention of a suckler cow into the transcript of this Committee meeting, it would be you. I will throw you a tenner for that the next time I see you, so well done.

**Mr Lunn:** Thanks, John and Alison. I have to apologise, because I was out of the room briefly during your presentation, so I may have missed something. I want to ask about your tourism product. You obviously have a terrific offer down there with boating, walking and fishing in particular. I assume that an awful of those tourists come from Europe, not just from the Republic but from the rest of the European Union because they have a big interest in Fermanagh fish. Do you see any threat to that arising out of all this? Tourism equals hospitality. How reliant is the hospitality industry in your area on migrant labour, as other areas are? Do you see any possibility of losing some of that as a result of what is going on?

**Councillor Coyle:** A lot of Europeans — German and French — come to fish in Fermanagh and Lough Erne. They have been coming for years; they keep coming back every year. If they have to get any kind of visa or have paperwork to do, it will add cost and work to the trip. Now, they can book a flight, fly into Dublin or Belfast, and come down and stay in our beautiful hotels, cabins or glamping pods. That is important to them, and we want to keep them coming. They love it here. We need to

protect that. Alison might comment on migrant workers, but it is mainly local people who are employed in our hospitality industry.

**Ms McCullagh:** We have some reliance, but not to the extent of other councils that have referenced other sectors. A relatively small percentage of foreign nationals work in the hospitality sector, but greater numbers work in the light engineering and manufacturing sector, and in food production.

We see the impact from a wider tourism perspective. A particular concern of our tourism sector is that, currently, much of our product is offered on a cross-border basis. Fermanagh Lakelands works closely with Cavan, obviously, and, with the Shannon-Erne water system, we work closely with Donegal County Council on accessing the Wild Atlantic Way. Our natural hinterland is cross-border. The old adage is that tourists do not recognise borders. As John said, most of our visitors are German, French or Scandinavian. They also have a particular interest in the geopark. The main point of entrance is through Dublin, and a smaller percentage come in through Belfast. We have also seen a particular strength in the water cruiser market, which, again, is predominantly German visitors. Our feedback from industry representatives locally is that there may not be a border. Hopefully, all the indications and assurances that we receive about no impediment to travel, North or South or east or west, will bear out, but the perception that things will become difficult will ultimately determine what tourists will do.

**Mr Lunn:** You have more confidence in the UK Government than I have, but we will see how it goes. I must go and try one of your glamping pods some time. Thank you for your answers.

**The Chairperson (Mr McGrath):** That was an excellent advertisement for Fermanagh from John. Trevor's eyes were lighting up with each element that was mentioned.

We have reached the end of questions. Thank you for the presentation and for updating us on the issues that you face. We will feed them into the report. Each of the presentations has made for an enlightening afternoon. Being at the end was of no disadvantage. We appreciate your time. Thank you.

**Ms McCullagh:** Thank you.

**Councillor Coyle:** Thank you. You are welcome to Fermanagh any time. *[Laughter.]*