

WIR 05

Senedd Cymru | Welsh Parliament

Pwyllgor Diwylliant, Cyfathrebu, y Gymraeg, Chwaraeon, a Chysylltiadau

Rhyngwladol | Culture, Communications, Welsh Language, Sport, and

International Relations Committee

Cysylltiadau rhwng Cymru ac Iwerddon | Wales–Ireland relations

Ymateb gan: Cyngor Sir Benfro | Response from: Pembrokeshire County Council

Introduction

1. Pembrokeshire County Council is pleased to have the opportunity to respond to this Inquiry, as it has a strong track record of working with local government and other organisations in Ireland to the benefit of both nations. The Council provides public services to around 125,000 people resident in Pembrokeshire, and many more who visit our county.
2. Our services include activity to promote Pembrokeshire's economy, the skills and life chances of our young people, our cultural heritage, and our environment. In all these fields, we have co-operated with and benefited from working with colleagues in Ireland. Our efforts in this regard are not just to improve the situation of Pembrokeshire today, but to lay the groundwork for a better future.
3. Regardless of Brexit, Ireland remains important to Pembrokeshire due to our location, business opportunities and transport links through Pembroke Dock and Fishguard.

Wales-Ireland relations post-Brexit.

4. Whilst Pembrokeshire County Council has a twinning arrangement with Wexford County Council, and the city of St David's is twinned with Naas, County Kildare, most of the co-operation that has taken place between Pembrokeshire County Council and Ireland since 1996 has been as a result of the various EU funded Ireland Wales "Interreg" programmes. Pembrokeshire College, the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority, the Milford Haven Port Authority and Pembrokeshire Coastal Forum have also been involved in these programmes.
5. One result of Brexit has therefore been to remove the most significant part of the architecture that supported the rich co-operation that took place between Wales and south eastern Ireland between 1996 and 2020. To date, nothing of any great significance has been put in place to replace it at an operational level. In consequence, as the Ireland-Wales programme 2014-2020 draws to a close (the final projects will complete this year) there is a risk, or even a likelihood, that many of the relationships that have been established between Welsh and Irish organisations through the programme will wither.

6. The Welsh Government has tried, to its credit, to put in place alternative structures to maintain Welsh-Irish links, specifically the Ireland-Wales Shared Statement and Joint Action Plan 2021-2025 discussed further below, and activities arising from this. There have also been a series of symposia under the Agile Cymru banner at the last of which, on 24 November 2022, an “Informal Framework for Co-operation across the Irish Sea Space” was proposed. We are unclear however as to the status of this, for example whether it is a Welsh Government endorsed proposal on which we are being consulted prior to its adoption, or whether it is merely an academic concept setting out one idea of how Welsh-Irish co-operation could take place post-Brexit.
7. Consequently, aside from the Shared Statement, there is now a vacuum in Welsh-Irish relations such that it is not at all clear how cross-border initiatives are to take place, other than at the sole initiative of individual organisations in Wales and in Ireland.
8. There are also Brexit-related matters that have an Irish dimension, on which work is still on-going to put in place the solutions necessary to minimise friction in cross-border trade. Chief amongst these is the question of the Target Operating Model for the GB border, which has implications for Pembrokeshire County Council’s port health function. This may be an area where strengthened Welsh-Irish relations could help bring progress.

Current approach to bilateral engagement between the Welsh and Irish governments and whether it is fit for purpose post-Brexit.

9. This is not a matter on which local government can comment.

The Ireland-Wales Shared Statement and Joint Action Plan (2021-2025) as an approach to international engagement.

10. We consider the Shared Statement provides a strong foundation at a national level for future Irish-Welsh engagement and co-operation, and it could act as a model for international engagement more generally. However, whilst it provides structures at governmental level it fails to offer any real support to Welsh organisations wishing to further Welsh-Irish relations.
11. There is for example only one reference in the Shared Statement to local authorities. This appears on page 17, and states “We will ... Jointly identify and promote existing connections between communities, such as twinned towns; schools; and sports clubs, by signposting interested communities to appropriate local authority and other supports.”
12. Pembrokeshire County Council is unable to offer the support this commitment appears to imply. The Authority does not provide support to twinning associations for example, because we do not have the capacity or budget provision to do so. The commitment given to local organisations interested in Welsh-Irish co-operation in the Shared Statement therefore lacks any substance.

The funding of future cooperation and collaborative projects between Ireland and Wales.

13. The main funding opportunity we are aware of is through the Agile Cymru programme, and this is limited to £5,000 for the purpose of facilitating activity that builds cross-border and international partnerships and increases cooperation. Our understanding of the programme is that it is primarily to help establish new links, rather than maintain pre-existing links. With the loss of the EU Ireland-Wales Cross-Border Programme, and the placing at risk of the partnerships it sustained, we question whether this is the right focus for Agile Cymru.
14. We are unaware of any readily accessible funding to carry Welsh-Irish co-operation forward beyond the partnership formation stage. The Symposium on 24 November referenced above included a presentation on the EU PEACE PLUS programme 2021-2028, which is intended to promote and strengthen the process of peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland and the border counties of Ireland. We understand that there is the possibility that this programme could fund Welsh-Irish co-operation activities, provided that the benefit of these activities accrued to the PEACE PLUS programme area, and were consistent with the scope of the programme.
15. Whilst this may present an opportunity for Wales to contribute to the Irish and Northern Irish peace process, it is very limiting in terms of financing cross-border activity that may be of benefit to Wales.

Priority areas for cooperation between Ireland and Wales.

16. We note that the Shared Statement includes a commitment to “Support and promote the policy priorities of our shared involvement in the British-Irish Council’s work sectors, namely collaborative spatial planning; creative industries; indigenous, minority and lesser-used languages; digital inclusion; early years; energy; environment; housing; misuse of substances; social inclusion and transport.” The only one of these that seems out of place is housing, which we do not perceive as having a cross-border dimension, at least not where a maritime border between two states is concerned.
17. The Ireland-Wales Co-operation Programme 2014-2020 had as its three priorities Cross-border Innovation; Adaptation of the Irish Sea and Coastal Communities to Climate Change; and Cultural and Natural Resources and Heritage.
18. The Informal Framework for Co-operation across the Irish Sea Space proposed at the Symposium on 24 November 2022 was based around three priorities, namely Innovation including Life Sciences; Sustainable Blue Growth; and Communities & Culture. The Symposium was informed that these were identified after consultation with stakeholders including the Welsh Government.
19. There is significant commonality between these three assessments of the priority areas for co-operation. We take the view that co-operation can usefully be structured around the priorities from the Informal Framework, i.e. Innovation (we would not specifically identify life sciences as that may be interpreted as giving that discipline more weight than others), Sustainable Blue Growth, and Communities & Culture.

Opportunities in developing parliamentary relations between the Senedd and Oireachtas.

20. This is not a matter that directly involves Welsh local government.

21. We note that the issue of sustainable development is central to the Shared Statement. The goal and challenge of achieving net zero by 2050 in both Wales and Ireland should provide plenty of opportunity for discussion between the parliamentarians of the two countries.