

Introduction to BIC

Formation of the Council

On Friday, 10 April 1998, after two years of intensive negotiations, the British and Irish governments and the political parties in Northern Ireland approved a comprehensive political agreement - the Agreement reached in the Multi-Party Negotiations, also known as the Belfast or Good Friday Agreement.

One of the institutions created under the Agreement was the British-Irish Council (BIC). It was formally established when the British-Irish Agreement (the Agreement which gave effect to the provisions of the Multi-Party agreement) signed by the two governments came into force on 2 December 1999.

Purpose

The formal purpose of the Council as outlined in strand 3 of the agreement is: "to promote the harmonious and mutually beneficial development of the totality of relationships among the peoples of these islands... the BIC will exchange information, discuss, consult and use best endeavours to reach agreement on co-operation on matters of mutual interest within the competence of the relevant administrations".

Objectives

The Council's Objectives are to:

- promote positive, practical relationships among the people of these islands, and;
- provide a forum for consultation and cooperation.

Membership

Eight (8) Member Administrations (MAs) form the BIC. It is the only international forum which these 8 MAs participate in and act in accordance with their own democratic procedures and accountability mechanisms.

The 8 MA's are as follows:

- Scottish Government
- Government of Ireland
- HM Government of the United Kingdom
- Northern Ireland Executive
- Welsh Government
- Isle of Man Government
- Government of Jersey
- Government of Guernsey

Why is BIC important?

After more than 20 years of operation, BIC continues to provide a forum to further strengthen relations between the governments of the United Kingdom, the Irish Government and the Crown Dependencies. It allows the MA's to share experience and knowledge in a wide range of policy areas to the benefit of the people of these islands. The Council demonstrated its relevance by providing a forum for the member administrations to discuss approaches to economic recovery from the Covid pandemic at the recent summit held in Scotland. BIC represents a visible and tangible demonstration of each MA's commitment to the Belfast Agreement.

Operation of the Council

The Council normally;-

- operates by consensus, and;
- aims to discuss common policies or actions in areas of mutual interest for the benefit of all

Work Sectors

There are currently 11 work sectors or thematic policy groups and each are led by a nominated MA.

- Collaborative Spatial Planning
- Energy
- Misuse of Substances
- Creative Industries
- Environment
- Social Inclusion
- Digital Inclusion
- Housing
- Transport
- Early Years Learning
- Indigenous, Minority and Lesser-Used Languages

The Scottish Government currently co-chairs the Energy work sector with UKG and the Social Inclusion work sector with Wales.

BIC Secretariat

The BIC Secretariat is independent in that it is accountable only to the Council rather than any one MA. The BIC Secretariat was established in January 2012. Based in Edinburgh and hosted by the Scottish Government, it is headed jointly by officials from the Irish and UK Governments supported by policy officers from the devolved administrations. The Secretariat's role is to provide support to BIC Summits, work sectors and Coordinators, to facilitate and support effective internal and external communications and to ensure proper and due accountability within the Secretariat and to BIC administrations.

BIC Coordinators

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Each Member Administration (MA) must appoint a Senior Coordinator to act as its formal representative on the Coordinators' Group. MAs may appoint alternate Co-ordinator(s) or Representatives to deputise for the Senior Co-ordinator.

The Scottish Government Coordinators are [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] of the UK Relations Team.

Meetings

Under the BIC umbrella, there are three(3) types, or levels, of meetings which have run since the Council was formed:

- a) **Summit Level-** Attended by Heads of Administrations, these types of meetings occur twice a year. They are chaired, on rotation, by the host administration
- b) **Ministerial Level-** Attended by portfolio ministers and occur every two years subject to agreement.
- c) **Official Level –** Work Sector officials should normally aim to meet about 3 times per year, depending on business needs

BIC Summit Meetings

There are normally two Summit level meetings each year, held in June and November, and are hosted by each administration in rotation. Scotland hosted the last summit in November 2020 and the next will be hosted by Northern Ireland on 11 June 2021. Each summit is given a theme which usually relates to a work sector that the host administration chairs. However, Recovery from Covid -19 will understandably be the focus of the NI summit, as it was for the Scottish summit in November.

Each participating administration is normally represented by the Head(s) of that administration, the Cabinet Secretary responsible for BIC and the Portfolio Minister responsible for the thematic discussion.

For physical summits held in normal times, the host administration will hold a welcome dinner on the evening before the summit which is attended by all ministers and accompanying officials.

Summit day usually begins with the thematic ministerial meeting 09.00-09.45, followed by the main summit meeting 10.00-12.00. The heads of administration will then attend a press conference from 12.30-13.00.

Given the number of Ministers in attendance from across these islands, the summit provides opportunity for Bilateral meetings to be held in the margins. These will be arranged by the coordinator group at your request.