

Note of meeting – First Minister Scotland with First Minister Wales, 1 June 2023 in Edinburgh

Present:

First Minister, FM Wales Mark Drakeford, Colin McAllister, Jane Runeckles (Special Advisor WG), David Rogers, Donald Cameron, PPS/FMW, PS/FMS

The First Minister welcomed FM Wales to Scotland and noted the good relationship between Scottish and Welsh Governments. He noted shared concern about a damaging pattern of behaviour from the UKG towards devolution which included repeated breaches of the Sewel convention, the use of a s35 Order in relation to GRR, attempts to curtail legitimate international engagement activity by devolved governments, the approach to seeking legislative consent for the REUL (while in the same breath making clear that the UKG intended to proceed irrespective of whether consent was granted), and the Internal Market Act.

The First Minister noted the UKG's eleventh hour decision to exclude glass from the partial exclusion granted for Scotland's DRS. The decision meant that the SG was in the position of having to give urgent consideration to whether the scheme could proceed given significant environmental and commercial impacts – with some large iconic brands in Scotland being disproportionately impacted. FM Wales said that he supported the SG's position in relation to the IMA generally, and noted that the UK's approach was unacceptable and had significant implications for the Welsh scheme. The joint DRS consultation between the UKG, WG and NIE had included a commitment to include glass and the UK's subsequent change of approach made the UKG acting for England as the outlier and not devolved governments. WG would give careful consideration to the impact of the UKG decision on its proposed scheme but FMW was clear that by granting a partial exclusion only the UKG had ridden roughshod over devolution and the common frameworks process.

On IGR generally, FMW remained committed to the mechanisms agreed in the IGR Review, including the as yet untested dispute resolution scheme, but noted that while the most recent change of Prime Minister may have resulted in an improved tone, that had not been matched by substantive action. The First Ministers noted the importance of raising the impacts of the UKG's approach to devolution at a further meeting of the PM and Heads of devolved government council – that would, ideally, include leaders of a re-established NIE, but given the seriousness of the issues could not be delayed indefinitely. The forthcoming British Irish Council meeting provided an early opportunity to discuss IGR issues with the Secretary of State for Levelling UP, Michael Gove.

One such pressing issue was the need for clarity about consequentialia as a result of the NHS pay offer in England so that the outcome could be properly reflected in devolved budgetary process – wider concern was also expressed about the practical impacts of decisions made very late in the financial year.

FM Wales highlighted proposals for constitutional reform made by former Prime Minister Gordon Brown which he thought represented a blueprint for positive change. He acknowledged that the proposals would not reverse the damage to devolution

overall seen particularly since EU exit. He continued to press for their implementation and for a more respectful approach – something he was confident of in the case of a future Labour government. The proposals, along with the Welsh Constitutional Convention would play an important part in stimulating debate in Wales.

The meeting concluded with brief discussion of the WG Erasmus replacement scheme (Taith). Further noting that that Scotland and Wales should be permitted to become independent members of Erasmus and Horizon (Gordon Brown proposals had recommended that devolved governments should have independent access to European schemes).

The meeting concluded.

Note of meeting – First Minister Scotland with First Minister Wales, 16 June at British Irish Council

- Short discussion took place after main Summit meeting.
- Brief discussion on increasing numbers of Welsh speakers and Welsh/Gaelic Medium Education
- Discussed Taith programme (WG replacement for Erasmus)
- Agreed need to continue to push for clarity on Barnett consequential for NHS and civil service pay deals – forthcoming meeting of F:ISC with chief secretary would be important. Finance Ministers have written joint letter setting out issues. Care was needed to ensure full transparency of funding mechanisms to avoid any risk of funding being additional being routed in a way that artificially inflates the amount to be absorbed by DHSC and that minimises consequential.
- Followed up discussion in Edinburgh about DRS, recognising continued risks to devolved decision making from approach of UKG.

Note to the First Minister of Scotland on Taith

Background

The First Minister of Wales met with the First Minister of Scotland on 1 June 2023. During the conversation, the First Minister of Scotland requested more detail on Wales' international learning exchange programme – Taith. This note outlines the context that Taith was developed in and the reasons for the intervention; the steps taken to establish the programme; and the early returns from the programme, which is now in its second year of delivery.

Context

The UK's future participation in the Erasmus+ programme became part of the negotiations between the UK Government and the European Union, leading to a protracted period of uncertainty. Contingency arrangements to protect against a 'no deal' exit in 2019 were made with collaborative working of all four UK governments. The UK Government continued to progress the development of a replacement as negotiations continued; however, as it became clear they intended to deliver the programme using the UK Internal Market Act, the engagement with devolved governments became superficial.

The Welsh Government were enthusiastic advocates of the Erasmus+ programme and consistently clear in urging the UK Government to secure future participation in the programme.

In December 2020, the UK Government announced that they had chosen not to secure the UK's future participation in Erasmus+, and instead intended to implement a replacement – the 'Turing Scheme' – on a UK-wide basis without the consent of devolved ministers.

The failure to incorporate devolved ministers' priorities in the development and implementation of the Turing Scheme created clear shortcomings when compared to the Erasmus+ programme, including: a reduction in total funding; no funding for staff; no funding for inward mobility; no funding for youth organisations; and insufficient funding for schools.

Within the wider context of COVID-19, where opportunities for young people to travel and learn as part of their studies had already been compromised to an unprecedented level, the loss of Erasmus+ therefore would have further restricted access to international experiences.

Implementation

The Welsh Government announced in March 2021 that it would invest £65m in an 'International Learning Exchange Programme' for Wales. A grant was issued to Cardiff University, who were tasked with establishing a subsidiary company and developing the policy and systems required to deliver the programme. The first year of activity for the programme was targeted at academic year 2022-23, ensuring that the progressive reduction in Erasmus+ funding, as those projects concluded, would be mitigated.

The Programme Executive team were recruited and the programme was named 'Taith' – the Welsh word for 'journey' – after a public vote. An Advisory Board of key stakeholders was assembled for the

initial development of the programme; work to expand and improve the programme's governance, now it is in the delivery phase, is ongoing.

In a similar way to Erasmus+, the Taith programme supports learners and staff at all education levels in Wales, including youth and adult education. It also embeds the opportunity for beneficiaries to support inward mobility – reciprocity – as a fundamental part of the programme.

Taith has two 'Pathways' for funding. Pathway 1 is focussed on the mobility of individuals, and accounts for the majority of Taith's activity. A second Pathway was then developed and launched in Autumn 2022. Pathway 2 invites applications for projects that are centred around strategically important themes, and concentrates more on output and dissemination. The themes in the first year were Climate Change, Developments in Education, and Diversity and Inclusivity.

Results so far

Since its announcement in March 2021, Taith has gone from strength to strength. The programme continues to be enthusiastically welcomed by stakeholders across Wales and internationally – particularly by European partners.

In 2022, Taith funded 74 projects at a combined value of £11.66m. Broken down by Pathway, there were 55 successful Pathway 1 projects, with a total value of £10.6m, and 19 successful Pathway 2 projects, with a total value of £1.06m. More detail on individual beneficiaries and funding per sector is published on the Taith website – www.taith.wales.

Results from the Pathway 1 2023 call will be published soon. Awareness of the programme continues to grow across Wales and internationally, and we anticipate applications growing year-on-year as a result.

The programme has enjoyed particular success in engaging with the Schools, Youth, and Adult Education sectors. These sectors, which are typically hardest to reach – particularly with the impact of the pandemic – have been enthusiastic in their support of Taith and will remain a key focus for the programme going forward. A refreshed programme strategy will be published later this year; the strategy will reflect Taith's emphasis on providing opportunities for young people that stand the most to gain from travelling to study abroad, and overcoming the barriers that may prevent their participation.

Welsh Government officials responsible for Taith are in regular correspondence and discussion with counterparts in the Scottish Government. If the Scottish Government plans for a similar scheme progress, the Welsh Government officials will be happy to share the lessons learned from setting up Taith and answer any questions that may prove helpful.

June 2023.