



Delyth Jewell MS
Chair
Culture, Communication, Welsh Language, Sport
and International Relations Committee
Senedd Cymru

15 November 2023

Dear Delyth,

I would like to thank the members of the Committee for their report '*Wales-Ireland Relations: Exploring an old relationship in a new age*' following the conclusion of their inquiry into Wales-Ireland relations.

Wales and Ireland are the closest of neighbours and have built a strong and positive relationship on age-old connections and a deep cultural understanding. Our modern and vibrant relationship has grown from historic links, common heritage and culture, and close people-to-people, business, cultural and sporting connections.

Since the launch of the Shared Statement and Joint Action Plan, we have supported a range of partnerships, initiatives and policy exchanges across all six areas of cooperation, as well as delivering a number of government-organised events to foster collaboration and closer working relationships across Wales and Ireland.

The Committee's report attracted interest at the Wales Ireland Forum held last month in North Wales. It was an important opportunity to continue this relationship and these partnerships. The Forum focussed on renewable energy, skills, study and language and the arts.

I have set out my response to the report's individual recommendations below. It is important to remember that the Shared Statement is an agreement between the Welsh and Irish governments. We are jointly responsible for delivery and, therefore, some of the recommendations in the report will require consultation with, and the agreement of, the Irish Government.

Yours sincerely,

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Detailed Responses to the Committee's Recommendations

Recommendation 1. *The Welsh Government should outline the potential opportunities provided by renewed Horizon participation in response to the Committee's report.*

Response: Accept

As stated in our [press release](#) of 7 September, the Welsh Government welcomes the UK's forthcoming return into Horizon Europe.

Horizon Europe offers opportunities for internationally ground-breaking researchers from all sectors, in a wide variety of themes. Welsh organisations can access the funding by applying to specific "calls". Some of these are open to any theme of research, for example the European Research Council or the European Innovation Council. Most calls require bidding consortia to deliver against specific policy or economic impacts set by the European Commission and its associated stakeholder groups and agencies.

In the Horizon 2020 programme, projects involving Wales and Ireland won, on average, around €3m for each country each year. These projects were more resilient to Brexit than the overall trend, meaning that towards the end of Horizon 2020, collaboration with Ireland formed a higher proportion of Welsh participation than at the start.

It is not a given that calls and consortia will emerge that are priorities for Irish and Welsh policy objectives. It is important for Welsh organisations to re-engage with their Irish and EU contacts, for years if necessary, in order to ensure they are in the right place at the right time for a funding opportunity.

Applicants should make use of all the support available from Wales, such as Agile Cymru, the UK and Ireland in order to increase their chances of success at this fiercely competitive programme. It should be noted however that Horizon Europe is just one avenue for co-operation and can benefit from synergies with other funds, including, bilateral initiatives.

Financial Implications

None. Any additional costs will be drawn from existing programme budgets.

Recommendation 2. *The Welsh Government should resume publishing annual reports on the achievements of Horizon participation in Wales.*

Response: Accept

Welsh Government has regularly published reports on the Horizon programmes, with the last one published in July 2022. It is our intention to publish a report on Welsh achievements in Horizon Europe so far, despite the uncertainty created by the delay in association, in the first quarter of 2024. Our commitment is to provide regular reports, rather than annually.

Financial Implications

None. Any additional costs will be drawn from existing programme budgets.

Recommendation 3. *The Welsh Government should increase the visibility of Wales-Ireland relations on its website by bringing together its strategies as they relate to Ireland in one place, to include the Irish Sea Framework, the International Strategy, the Shared Statement, and information about the role of the Dublin office, by the end of February 2024. This should be accompanied by clear explanations of how each strand relates to the others, and how this is coordinated.*

Response: Accept in Principle

Officials will look to bring together a dedicated page focussing on the Wales-Ireland relationship; however, this is subject to the agreement of the Irish Government. Information on Ireland, including the role of the Dublin Office, is readily available through our [International Relations and Development](#) webpages and [Agile Cymru](#) webpages. Welsh Government will review existing content on its webpages relating to the Ireland-Wales relationship to make sure it is clear. If the Irish Government is in agreement, an additional link can be created to cover Wales-Ireland relations.

Financial Implications

None.

Recommendation 4. *The Welsh Government should clarify roles and responsibilities of the Welsh Government in Wales and its office in Dublin, including where responsibility for: coordinating Wales-Ireland strategies; setting clear objectives and key performance indicators lies.*

Response: See below

There is no separation of roles or responsibilities between the Welsh Government in Wales and our office in Dublin. The Dublin office operates as an overseas arm of the Welsh Government delivering the activity in Ireland that is led by individual areas, such as Education, Economy, and Climate Change. The remit of the Dublin Office, and all of our overseas offices, is set out on the Welsh Government's website with the stated aims aligned to the three key ambitions in the International Strategy. The Welsh Government Office in Dublin has a clear remit and this has been further strengthened by the bilateral relationship with the Irish Government following the signing of the Shared Statement.

Financial Implications

None.

Recommendation 5. *The Welsh Government should involve relevant civil society expertise (including the Future Generations and Welsh Language Commissioners) in its future Wales-Ireland relations work and explain how this will be done in its response to the Committee's report.*

Recommendation 6. *The Welsh Government should provide more information about its activities to raise awareness of its Wales-Ireland strategies amongst Welsh stakeholders in its response to the Committee's report.*

Response to Recommendations 5 and 6: Accept

The Welsh Government's Dublin Office works closely with the Future Generations Commissioner's office and hosted 'ambassadors' for future generations at an event in October 2023. There has also been engagement with the Welsh Language Commissioner on activity to take forward future work on language preservation and promotion. We have worked closely with other partners from Wales in Ireland including Wales Arts International, Amgueddfa Cymru and Urdd Gobaith Cymru over the last year. In addition, an event for civil society will be held to bring together relevant stakeholders to:

- Explain the goals of the Shared Statement.
- Hear from stakeholders about how we can bring activity together.
- Share ideas around a future Shared Statement.

The Irish Sea network, an email-based network which is part of Agile Cymru, regularly provides information on events, funding opportunities and other relevant topics to our stakeholders. The network includes operational people from civil society, for example, the Wales Council for Voluntary action (WVCA).

We have also held two formal Symposiums and a stakeholder workshop on the Irish Sea Framework, which has allowed stakeholders to influence both our approach and the Framework's priorities. A further stakeholder workshop is planned in the near future.

Financial Implications

None. Any additional costs will be drawn from existing programme budgets.

Recommendation 7. *The Welsh Government should produce an annual Wales-Ireland relations report which captures all its activity across its different strategies and any additional activity that falls outside of a strategy. This should demonstrate how Wales-Ireland activity across its different strategies is coordinated. The report should include performance indicators, evidence outcomes and reach, and evaluate progress.*

Response: See below

The current, acute state of resource constraint facing the Welsh Government means that we are unable to agree to the production of additional annual reports.

However, the Welsh Government produces an annual report that covers the whole network including Ireland. The annual report includes detailed case studies on key activities that have taken place throughout the year or progress against our priority relationships, for example, the 2020-21 annual report case studies focussed on the inaugural Ireland Wales Ministerial Forum and our 'Wales In...' years have featured in subsequent reports. The 2022-23 report also featured the Minister for Education and Welsh Language's visit to Dublin. This offers an opportunity to see the breadth of work undertaken internationally providing a useful context for in country activity such as Ireland. We intend to maintain this approach.

Financial Implications

None.

Recommendation 8. *The Ireland-Wales Forum should produce annual activity reports, which monitor progress, summarise its meetings and identify next steps. The reports should help to better identify areas for targeted future support and should be completed after the next Forum meeting in October 2023.*

Recommendation 9. *The Ireland-Wales Forum should improve transparency by publishing meeting agendas, minutes and attendance details from the next meeting onwards.*

Response to Recommendations 8 and 9: See below

The Welsh and Irish governments already have an approach to publishing information and raising awareness of the Forum's activity. We produce a joint communiqué with the Irish Government which outlines the key points to be discussed ahead of the annual Ministerial Forum. In addition, we publish a [Written Statement](#) after the Forum has taken place. The Irish Government also publishes its own statements through the Department for Foreign Affairs. As a result, the Welsh Government does not see sufficient added value from the resources required to produce an additional annual activity report. Moreover, a report of this nature would have to be agreed, and produced, in consultation with the Irish Government and cannot be a unilateral decision made by the Welsh Government.

Similarly, the Irish Government would need to agree to the publication of agendas, minutes and actions. Given that this is not standard practice for the Irish Government's other bilateral agreements with partner countries, it is unlikely that an exception would be made in this case.

Financial Implications

None.

Recommendation 10. *The First Minister should provide further details of how the Welsh Government would like to see the BIC improved, and the Welsh Government should request that the UK Government considers these proposals.*

Response: See below

The Welsh Government takes participation in the British Irish Council (BIC) seriously and we believe the forum has become more multi-lateral and relevant in character over time. There are parts of this recommendation which can be taken forward that would need to respect the context of the BIC as an institution of the Good Friday Agreement. The Welsh Government is one of eight members each of whom participate on an equal basis. There are no constitutional grounds on which we would submit proposals to the UK Government.

Financial Implications

None.

Recommendation 11. *Where the Welsh Government adopts a similar approach for other priority international relationships, it should build in the findings of this report from the outset.*

Response: Accept

Each international relationship is different and developed in collaboration with international partners. Therefore, a templated approach to this may not be the most effective model for delivery. The Welsh Government will consider the findings of the Committee Report when developing, or adopting, a similar Shared Statement approach for other priority international relationships.

Financial Implications

None. Any additional costs will be drawn from existing programme budgets.

Recommendation 12. *The Welsh Government should review the evidence we have gathered and use it to inform future decisions on priorities for Wales-Ireland cooperation post-2025. These lessons should be taken forward by the Welsh Government and reapplied to its other priority international relationships in future.*

Response: Accept

The Committee's evidence will be taken into full consideration in informing decisions and activity beyond 2025. As with all key elements of cooperation, we will consider this with the Irish Government.

Financial Implications

None. Any additional costs will be drawn from existing programme budgets.

Recommendation 13. *The Welsh Government should outline how this Committee, the Senedd, Welsh Government sponsored-bodies and other stakeholders will be involved in Wales-Ireland cooperation beyond 2025.*

Response: See below

Our international engagement is founded on cooperation, and we work collaboratively with partners. In some areas of international engagement, such as sports diplomacy, the Team Wales Cymru approach has attracted praise. We will continue to engage partners and others in international activity.

However, it is important to acknowledge that the Wales Ireland Shared Statement is a government-to-government agreement and, as such, this is the focus of our primary engagement. We will take the Committee's considerations of this into account in our working with the Irish Government.

In terms of involving the Senedd, it would be constitutionally improper for the Welsh Government to advise the Committee, or the Senedd, on how they will be involved in Wales-Ireland cooperation post-2025. The role of government is to make sure that there are engagement opportunities for the Senedd and its Committees; whether the Senedd and its Committees choose to take those up, or to create their own opportunities for engagement, are matters for the Senedd.

Financial Implications

None. Any additional costs will be drawn from existing programme budgets.

Recommendation 14. *As international relations policy appears indivisible from trade in respect of Wales-Ireland relations, the Welsh Government should clarify how they are coordinated across the work of government.*

Response: Accept

International relations, inward investment, exports and trade policy are led by one directorate in Welsh Government – the International Relations and Trade Directorate (IR&T). This ensures that all of our international activity is coordinated. In addition, IR&T officials support other Welsh Government teams to deliver their international activity, for example Education colleagues or advising on bids for Agile Cymru funding.

Financial Implications

None.

Recommendation 15. *The Senedd Commission should provide the Committee with its views on the potential increase in the number of BIPA committees, as well as its considerations on increasing the number of Senedd representatives and filling the vacant seat.*

Response: Not applicable

It is not appropriate for Welsh Government to comment on Recommendation 15.

Financial Implications:

Not applicable.

Recommendation 16. *The Welsh and Irish governments should commit funding to Wales-Ireland relations proportionate to their ambition beyond 2025 without delay, to provide certainty to stakeholders and to ensure that opportunity costs are minimised.*

Response: Accept in Principle

Irish Government funding is a matter for the Irish Government. Welsh Government and Irish Government officials are discussing a mechanism for supporting a new phase of cooperation and stakeholders will be kept informed of any developments.

The relationship with Ireland remains a key priority for the Welsh Government and this will be reflected in the priorities of our Agile Cymru programme. Our Regional Investment Framework also recognises the importance of international and cross-border working and this will be reflected in any future discussions with the UK Government on the next phase of replacement EU funds.

Financial Implications

To be confirmed. £0.15m has already been committed to Irish Sea cooperation projects through Agile Cymru this financial year. Commitments in financial year 2024-25 would require the reprioritisation of other budgets.

Recommendation 17. *The Welsh Government should provide more information on Agile Cymru, including its focus on developing new links rather than preserving existing ones and the involvement of stakeholders.*

Response: Accept

The Committee has been provided with information on Agile Cymru and there is information on our website (<https://www.gov.wales/agile-cymru>). This information will evolve as we move forward through the changing landscape of post-Brexit relations. Stakeholders have been involved in the development of Agile Cymru thinking from the co-production of our Regional Investment Framework through to the current Agile Cymru stakeholder group. The Irish Sea Framework, part of Agile Cymru, has been discussed at two formal Symposiums and a stakeholder workshop, helping to shape its approach and priorities. The Irish Sea network regularly provides information on events, funding opportunities and other relevant topics to help facilitate co-operation and maintain existing networks.

It is incorrect to say Agile Cymru or the Irish Sea Framework has a focus on new links; it is supporting a new phase of cooperation which includes building on existing co-operation and new cooperation. This has been reflected in the projects supported by Agile Cymru under the latest Irish Sea funding call, which include new phases of some of the networks supported under the Ireland Wales programme and new areas of cooperation within the private and higher education sectors.

Financial Implications

None. Any additional costs will be drawn from existing programme budgets.