

Focus on the Welsh model of restoring lost connections to the EU



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Wales's First Minister encourages sub-national governments in UK and EU to take the initiative as CoR-UK Contact Group meets to identify ways of building new bridges between the EU and UK.

The Welsh government is focused on "opportunities that we can create for ourselves" as it seeks to develop new ties with regions in the European Union, First Minister Mark Drakeford told members of the CoR-UK Contact Group on 18 March at a meeting in Cardiff that focused on ways to re-shape relationships between EU regions and the UK's local authorities and constituent nations following the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the EU. Many speakers at the meeting – which brought together politicians from England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland as well as from the CoR – expressed the hope that new relationships could still be fostered within the framework of the international treaty under whose terms the UK left the EU on 31 January 2020.

First Minister Drakeford said that "we have a series of relationship at the regional tiers – with Brittany, the Basque Country, Flanders – where it is our efforts that make the difference", but drew particular attention to Wales' decision to establish a youth-exchange programme as an example of an opportunity it has created itself. The Welsh government had been "very disappointed indeed that it was not possible to negotiate continued membership of Erasmus+ – a student-exchange scheme established in 1987 by the EU under the management of a Welsh EU official, Hywel Ceri Jones – and had felt that, in the absence of one, however, it had an "obligation" to help Welsh people learn more about other parts of Europe as swiftly as possible. "You are only a young person once", he said.

The Welsh Taith scheme, which was created in February, will provide 15,000 young Welsh people with learning opportunities abroad and enable 10,000 young people from the EU and the rest of the world to

visit, volunteer and study in Wales. Taith, as a five-year programme (2022 to 2026) programme with Welsh Government funding of up to £65 million, means that Wales and its international partners can continue to benefit from exchanges in a similar way to the opportunities that flowed from Erasmus+.

The scheme was praised by several members of the CoR, with Oldřich Vlasák (CZ/ECR), councillor of the city of Hradec Králové, noting that he and other representatives of Czech universities view the programme as "very important for the future".

The EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement, which sets out the terms on which the UK left the EU, ended existing cooperation between regions, created no mechanism to enable future cooperation between regions, and did not foresee any structured role for local and regional authorities.

Loïg Chesnais-Girard (FR/PES), president of Brittany's regional council and chairman of the CoR-UK Contact Group, told the meeting that it was "absolutely necessary to formalise the role of local and regional governments". In particular, the CoR is currently advocating for the EU's regions and cities and for local governments and devolved administrations in the UK and Northern Ireland to be associated to the EU-UK Parliamentary Partnership Assembly. The leaders of both delegations – Sir Oliver Heald from the UK parliament and Nathalie Loiseau (FR/Renew Europe) from the European Parliament – spoke at the UK Contact Group.

"What has been agreed", Mr Heald said is that "there will be observer status for the devolved legislatures" and "provision for EU sub-national authorities to be observers, meeting by meeting, depending on the topic".

Ms Loiseau said "we will make sure that stakeholders are invited or consulted" and said that it been agreed to "share documents ahead of meetings".

The CoR-UK Contact Group, which was meeting in the UK for the first time since Brexit, also discussed an opinion on "strengthening the EU-UK relationship at sub-national level and remedying the territorial impact of the UK's withdrawal from the EU" that the CoR is currently drawing up. The opinion, whose rapporteur is Michael Murphy (IE/EPP), mayor of Clonmel, explores new avenues of cooperation as

well as calling for a greater institutional recognition of the sub-national dimensions of the EU-UK relationship. The recommendations are scheduled for adoption at the CoR's next plenary, in late April 2022.

Members of the Contact Group also discussed the crisis in Ukraine, energy independence and the importance of a collective effort to reduce carbon emissions. During his speech, First Minister Drakeford described Wales as a "Nation of Sanctuary" and promised that Wales will show refugees from Ukraine that "hope for the future is still possible", just as it has recently to Afghans.

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