Northern Ireland in the UK Contact Group's spotlight

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Meeting of UK and EU politicians also looks at new Welsh-Irish relationship and at the potential for energy cooperation.

Hilary Benn, a senior figure in parliamentary relations between the United Kingdom and the European Union, has said that some UK and EU ideas on how to resolve differences over the management of trade in Northern Ireland are "quite close" – and that agreement would provide "an opportunity to move on".

Mr Benn, a member of the European Parliament-UK Parliamentary Partnership Assembly (PPA) and a former chairman of the House of Commons select committee on relations with the EU, was speaking on 6 September at a meeting of a contact group created by the European Committee of the Regions to maintain contacts with devolved and local administrations in the UK in the wake of the UK's withdrawal from the EU.

Despite differences over trading arrangements and other difficulties in the EU-UK relationship, Mr Benn and other politicians at the meeting emphasised that cooperation at the local and regional levels continues, and said that there is valuable potential for cooperation on challenges such as reducing carbon emissions.

Mr Benn said that the current lack of a government and assembly in Northern Ireland is "a very serious problem", but he also stressed that, in his view, that there are proposals that could contribute to an agreement between the UK government and the EU on the future of Northern Ireland Protocol, which was drafted to avoid a hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland without compromising the integrity of the EU's single market for goods. "The UK's green lane and the EU's express lane proposals are quite close," he said.

Mr Benn also expressed optimism that "it is possible to find a way forward" on other issues, such as the role of the European Court of

Justice. "We have an opportunity to move on and we desperately need to do it," Mr Benn said. "If we can get the Northern Ireland Protocol sorted, it will be a much easier task."

MEP Nathalie Loiseau (FR/Renew Europe), co-chair of the newly formed UK-EU Parliamentary Partnership Assembly, identified the economy, the Ukraine war, surging energy prices and run-away climate change as compelling reasons for cooperation.

David Vaughan , the Welsh Government's representative on Europe, said that the Welsh-Irish relationship is being placed on a new footing. The introduction of scores of new direct transport links between the Republic of Ireland and France had radically reduced transport via the Welsh port of Holyhead, which was down 70% at one point in 2021, Mr Vaughan said. Wales and the Republic of Ireland have now responded to Brexit by identifying six areas of cooperation, and developing framework projects in three specific areas: research and innovation; the blue economy, particularly offshore wind; and "communities, culture and sport", which, Mr Vaughan said, would "boost tourism".

The chairman of the Contact Group, Loïg Chesnais-Girard (FR/PES). President of Brittany region, who was on 6 September confirmed for the second half of the CoR's 2020-25 mandate, stressed that links between cities and regions were essential in addressing issues such as the sewage pollution in the English Channel affecting both UK and French coastal areas, but also to efforts to accelerate the transition to renewable energy.

Speaking of the shift to renewable energy, Eero Ailio of the European Commission said that "I see here a real area for cooperation for regions and cities on both sides of the Channel", identifying Cardiff, Bristol and Glasgow as frontrunners in cooperation.

Alun Davies , a member of the Welsh Parliament, went further, arguing that the role of sub-national governments in the energy transition "is going to be fundamental". "It will be us who take forward some of these projects," he said.

Mr Davies also voiced the wish of CoR members and many UK representatives for a greater role in the re-configured political relationship between the UK and EU, particularly the Parliamentary Partnership Assembly (PPA). "We need to ensure that the UK is able to be represented in all its diversity," he said.

The PPA met for the first time in May, with the CoR being allowed to send one observer, Michael Murphy (IE/EPP), mayor of Clonmel Borough District. The limited number of meetings and the number of issues on the UK-EU agenda constrains the potential for deeper involvement, Ms Loiseau indicated, saying: "Meeting just twice a year with a packed agenda means that we have to be very strict regarding timing".

The meeting of the CoR-UK Contact Group also included a presentation of a study published by the CoR in June 2022. The study provides further evidence that the impact of Brexit is highly asymmetric across territories and across sectors, a reality that means that measures to buffer the impact of reductions in trade, increased costs for businesses, and reduced mobility for students, researchers and workers need to be targeted if they are to be effective. The study paid particular attention to four sectors in which the EU exports more to the UK than it imports: vehicles, machinery, wood and furniture, and food and agriculture.

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