

Enterprise and Business Committee 9 March 2016

Evidence Paper – EU Funding Ambassadors:

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Introduction

1. This paper sets out our roles and remit as EU Funding Ambassadors for Wales, our engagement with stakeholders and partners to date together with our initial findings contained in our [Interim Report](#) “Europe Matters to Wales: EU Policy and Funding Opportunities for Wales 2014-2020” published on 15 December 2015.

Roles and Remit

2. We were appointed by the Minister for Finance and Government Business on 3 December 2014 to help promote and maximise opportunities presented by the EU’s directly managed funding programmes. The appointments were made in direct response to the Enterprise and Business Committee’s report on EU funding opportunities 2014-2020, published in July 2014, which highlighted the need to engage in and promote further the EU’s directly managed programmes in Wales.
3. We were appointed based on our knowledge and experience of European policies and funding and of working with private, public and third sector stakeholders to help strengthen the partnership arrangements needed to help the Welsh Government in championing these directly managed EU funds. We were tasked to work with our respective sectors to help promote and maximise these funding opportunities and to advise the Minister for Finance and Government Business on how Wales can be more successful in exploiting policy funding under these programmes.
4. In undertaking this role we took a conscious decision that the directly managed EU funds cannot be treated in isolation and that it would be important to look across all EU policies and programmes and at the synergies between them to gain a complete picture of the opportunities available.

Engagement

5. Much of our work has involved a series of fact finding meetings to establish how we can make better use of the opportunities that the range of EU programmes present to Wales. This has involved meetings with partners and stakeholders across all sectors involved in the deployment and delivery of European Funding in Wales including the WLGA, the

WCVA, CBI and the FSB. We have also had a number of very useful meetings with the European Commission and other European Institutions.

6. It has also been important for us to engage directly with Welsh Government Ministers and their officials. As well as our meetings with the Minister for Finance and Government Business we have met with the First Minister, the Minister for Communities and Tackling Poverty, the Deputy Minister for Skills and Technology and the Deputy Minister for Culture, Sport and Tourism. We have also engaged closely with the Minister for Education and Skills and with his officials and we very much welcomed their positive commitment and engagement, together with that of the Minister for Finance and Government Business, in the facilitation of a conference on Internationalising Higher Education in association with Universities Wales in Cardiff last November.
7. This followed a very successful third sector conference, also promoted by us, last May “Europe Matters to Wales” hosted by the WCVA at which the Minister for Finance and Government Business also spoke. We are promoting further such events including a workshop on Erasmus+, in association with the British Council, on 22 February, a Creative and Cultural Industries Event in Swansea on 25 February (follows one held in Caernarfon last November) and a conference on Tackling Poverty and Social Exclusion in Cardiff on 17 March at which the Minister for Communities and Tackling Poverty will be speaking. We are also working with Welsh Government colleagues with the view of holding a Post 16 Strategy event to pinpoint the synergies between Welsh Government funding and the different streams of EU policy funding.
8. Our work has also involved us looking across the rest of the UK and Europe to identify best practice. We have had discussions, and direct engagement, with a number of regions to learn lessons on how the approaches witnessed may be applied to Wales.
9. We have overseen the establishment of an internal Welsh Government officials Network to represent and report on the European interests of each policy portfolio. The network has been very useful in helping us to identify the range of policies and funding programmes available to Wales and in bringing together officials to help explore these opportunities. The Network has undertaken a mapping exercise to identify the expertise and support arrangements that exist in Wales and has produced an [information grid](#) that has been published alongside our interim report.

Interim Report

10. The Minister for Finance and Government Business published our [Interim Report](#) on 15 December 2015 and wrote to key stakeholders seeking comments over our proposals and any further views on sectorial engagement to feed into our future work. Those consulted included Welsh Government Ministers, Assembly Members, the Presiding Officer, Chairs

of the Enterprise and Business Committee and the All Wales Programme Monitoring Committee, the Council of Economic Renewal, Welsh MEPs, the WLGA, WCVA, Universities Wales, Colleges Wales and to the head of the European Commission Office in Cardiff.

11. The Interim Report contains 3 specific recommendations together with a number of thematic and general observations which we consider important to influence Welsh Government's future approach to accessing EU policy funding. These recommendations and observations are largely centred around the need for Welsh Government to better prioritise and communicate its European strategic policies and to develop a stronger policy link with officials in Brussels. We are firmly of the view that greater direction and empowerment of the Welsh Government Brussels office to enable them to focus their efforts on key priority areas is the key to future success.

12. We specifically recommended:

(i) The creation by the Welsh Government of a European Interdepartmental Committee to:

- keep under review the impact of EU policies and EU funding across the span of Welsh Government strategies and policies;
- promote proactive cooperation between its Departments and the joined-up delivery of EU/Welsh initiatives and their combined funding; and
- focus attention on the key priorities for Welsh Government and ensure seamless coordination and cooperation between officials in Cardiff and Brussels in pursuit of the chosen priorities.

(ii) The Welsh Government should take a view on priorities to guide operational efforts over a timeframe stretching to 2020 in order to reflect the lifeline of EU programmes.

The Europe 2020 strategy and the range of EU policy funding programmes offer important opportunities for Wales but at the same time add inevitably to the complex challenge of ensuring effective joined up delivery. Priority setting is therefore crucial. To make this work well in practice, we suggest adoption of the following guiding principles:

- it should be designed to confirm and maximise synergies between EU and Welsh Government strategy and policies, and the interplay of EU and Welsh Government funding;
- it should provide a clear focus for the work of the European Interdepartmental Committee and the well coordinated efforts of Welsh Government staff and its partners in Wales and in Brussels so that they are empowered to take the necessary proactive action to pursue the chosen priorities;

- it would provide the basis for the Welsh Government to assess and review appropriate resourcing to pursue top priorities and to participate in European networks and platforms.
- it should in this way provide a good basis for Welsh Government to adapt, monitor and evaluate its own performance.

(iii). The need for the Welsh Government to continue to communicate widely good examples to illustrate the impact (potential or actual) of Welsh/European ventures and the difference they can and do make in Wales.

One of the essential keys to more effective communication about the significance of EU policy funding to Wales will be for Ministers to take every opportunity to spell out to the public, in their narratives concerning their respective portfolios, the added value of the EU contribution to Wales in both policy and financial terms. There are already good examples in this regard, particularly from the First Minister and the Minister for Finance and Government Business. Such a Ministerial team effort, across the span of Government, would also contribute substantially to ensuring a mature and well-informed public discussion within Wales on the arguments surrounding EU membership which will be generated over the next year.

13. We also consider that the following considerations should influence Wales' future approach to accessing EU policy funding:

- Simply chasing funding opportunities in isolation from a process that sets clear strategic funding priorities will yield few dividends.
- More could and should be done in Wales to exploit actively synergies between EU and Welsh Government policy funding.
- A more prioritised and co-ordinated approach, reflecting Welsh Government strategic priorities, is essential.
- Linkages between political commitment and the actions of policy officials in targeting EU funding opportunities should be strengthened.
- Prioritisation should therefore be reviewed, systematically and periodically, by Welsh Government since prioritisation needs to be defined across the span of Welsh Government strategy to provide a clear focus for exploiting EU policy funding opportunities to enhance the Welsh Government's own action plan.
- Welsh Government's current and future investment in facilities and staff resources through which to monitor EU policy and facilitate access to EU policy funding opportunities, should be re-examined.

- Further investment in facilities and resources may be warranted on the basis of a plan for more finely-tuned and targeted actions.
- Considerable EU funding expertise, together with membership of a number of EU policy networks already exists within Wales, both internally to Welsh Government and amongst wider stakeholder organisations. A more collective, innovative and pro-active approach to engage in knowledge and capacity sharing would assist Wales and Welsh organisations in accessing enhanced EU funding outcomes.
- The links with the Welsh Government's Delivery Unit could be usefully explored and reinforced.

14. We appreciate that it will inevitably take time for Government to fully consider and implement many of our proposals and that much of this will now fall to the next Administration following the election in May. However, we are pleased to see that, as a direct result of our recommendations, a senior officials EU Policy Group has now been established.

15. We also welcome the positive engagement by Ministers, officials and partners in helping to facilitate the key promotional and exploratory conferences and workshops mentioned above, and highlighted in our report. We see these as critical to better inform partners and stakeholders of the opportunities and funding synergies available to support the Government's key policies and strategies.

Next Steps

16. The Minister has asked that we focus our remaining time on the outstanding conferences and workshops and at further looking into the roles and requirements of partners across all sectors in Wales and what Government can do to assist them in further accessing EU opportunities.

17. We intend to comment further on that in our final report based on some very positive feedback and extremely useful observations received from partners and stakeholders on our interim report.

18. Our final report will be submitted to the Minister for Finance and Government Business in March 2016.