

Highland Council

Minutes of Meeting of the **Brexit Working Group** held in the Leader's Meeting Room, Council Headquarters, Inverness on Thursday, 23 January 2020 at 11.00am.

Present

Mr J Gray
Mrs M Davidson
Mr G Adam
Mr B Boyd

Mr G Cruickshank
Mrs T Robertson
Mr R MacWilliam
Mr S Mackie

Officials in attendance

Ms R Cleland, Corporate Communications and Resilience Manager, Chief Executive's Service

Mr A MacLeod, Brexit & European Policy Co-ordinator

Mr A Denovan, Resilience Manager, Chief Executive's Service

Miss J MacLennan, Democratic Services Manager, Chief Executive's Service

Mr J Gray in the Chair

BUSINESS

1. Apology for Absence

There were no apologies for absence.

2. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

3. Minutes of Previous Meeting

There had been circulated the Minutes of the previous Meeting held on Wednesday, 23 October 2019 which were **APPROVED**.

In this regard, and with reference to the report on Statutory Obligations and Civil Contingencies responsibilities which had been circulated at that meeting, it was confirmed that a Seminar for Members would be arranged as and when further clarification had been received from the UK Government on transition/withdrawal issues and if at that time those issues required detailed consideration by Members of the Council.

4. Brexit and European Update

There had been circulated Report dated 15 January 2020 by the Brexit & European Policy Co-ordinator which provided a summary of relevant Brexit and European issues relevant to the Council since the last meeting of the Group on 23 October 2019.

In this regard, it was confirmed that the UK would leave the EU on 31 January 2020

and enter a transition period whilst discussions took place around the terms of any future trade arrangements with the EU. Key dates would be 1 July 2020 (which was the deadline for extending the transition phase although the UK had now legislated against any such extension) and 31 December 2020 (which was when the transition phase ended and the UK would leave with or without a deal in place). In this respect, a further report would be circulated once more information became available but it was anticipated that what was being termed a 'skinny deal' would be in place by the end of the year and would be used by the UK Government as a framework for future discussions with the EU.

As such, Operation Yellowhammer had now been halted due to the decreased likelihood of the UK leaving the EU without a deal on 31 January. However, until there was further information on policies and deals arising from the UK's departure from the EU, it was not possible to know what the implications would be for the Council.

Specific information was also provided within the report in relation to the Brexit Costs funding bid, EU Settlement Scheme and EU funding.

During discussion, and with reference to the Brexit Costs funding bid, it was **AGREED** that a copy of the Highland Council funding application to the Scottish Government should be circulated to all Members of the Working Group for information. However, it was noted that this was now a historic application on the basis of costs anticipated from the impact of a 'no deal' Brexit.

In terms of the EU Settlement scheme, and with specific reference to the distribution list for Home Office literature on this scheme which was currently in place, it was **AGREED** that the Deep Sea Fishermen's Mission should be added to the list.

It was also **AGREED** that contact should be made with IT Services in regard to the purchase of an ID Document Scanning Service which could be made available across the Council and particularly within a Service Point in the Highland area.

It was further **AGREED** that an updated report should be requested from HR on the current position in relation to the number of Council staff who were affected by Brexit and applied to the EU Settlement scheme. Also, that contact should be made in this regard with Highlands & Islands Enterprise, Skills Development Scotland, the Chamber of Commerce and the Federation of Small Businesses with a specific focus on the various sectors across the Highlands.

An update was given in relation to current EU funding. At present, all ESF payments from the EU to the Scottish Government (Managing Authority) had been suspended and whilst there was confidence that the suspension would be lifted, the Managing Authority had encouraged Lead Partners to continue making payments to Delivery Agents. Recent correspondence from the Managing Authority had indicated that payment of all verified and eligible ESF claims would be resumed.

Thereafter, the Working Group otherwise **NOTED** the terms of the report as circulated.

5. Arctic Policy and Engagement

There had been circulated Report dated 15 January 2020 by the Brexit & European Policy Co-ordinator which summarised developments regarding Scottish-Arctic engagement and policy and highlighted opportunities for the Highlands and Islands region.

In this regard, detailed information was provided on the commitment being given by the Scottish Government in relation to engagement in Arctic matters, Scotland's Arctic Policy Framework and Opportunities for the Highlands & Islands in future (including through European/Arctic co-operation, scientific research and academic links and economic links).

During discussion, and in recognising the significant opportunities which could be available to the Highlands in future, it was **AGREED** that a future meeting would be convened to discuss this further.

In addition, a representative from Highlands & Islands Enterprise should be invited to a future meeting, possibly through a workshop.

Thereafter, the Working Group otherwise **NOTED** the terms of the report as circulated – on the basis of a recognition of the opportunities that existed with ongoing and future Arctic engagement and support for a closer alignment that would be beneficial to the Highlands & Islands.

6. Dates for Future Meetings

It was **AGREED** that further meetings would be arranged as and when necessary throughout the year and specifically if/when further updates were received from the UK Government which required detailed consideration.

However, it was also stressed that any Member of the Working Group could contact the Chair to arrange an additional meeting at any time if they felt that circumstances had changed to make this necessary.

It was further **AGREED** that a Seminar/Workshop should be arranged for Members in mid/late Spring to focus on issues in relation to Arctic Policy and Engagement and that this should include representation from outside bodies/agencies as necessary.

The meeting ended at 12.15pm.