Connecting Scotland – how Scottish organisations engage internationally

Highlands and Islands Council

Questions
What international activities are happening now in your sector and/or organisation? Please describe how and why these activities take place. Are other sectors or organisations involved? What do these activities contribute or achieve?

The Council engages on the international stage primarily via:
- Highlands & islands European Partnership (HIEP);
- membership and involvement in European networks
- inward investment activities;
- culture and tourism;
- Management of European Programmes;
- project work; and
- twinning and trans-national links

Highlands & Islands European Partnership.
The Council is a member of and currently chairs the Board of the Highlands & Islands European Partnership (HIEP). The Partnership comprises the seven local authorities in the Highlands & Islands, Highlands & Islands Enterprise (HIE) and the University of the Highlands & islands (UHI). Although increasingly active in Scotland and the UK, the primary focus of Partnership activity remains Brussels where it has an office in Scotland House. The Partnership was established to ensure a distinctive Highlands & Islands presence in Brussels; to ensure that the voice of the region was heard in the development of European legislation and funding initiatives and to maximise the benefits of the EU to the region.

European Networks.
The Council is of the firm belief that the voice of the Highlands, and indeed that of the Highlands & islands will have greater impact if it is heard with others of common cause. To this end it retains membership of:
- Conference of Peripheral and Maritime Regions (CPMR);
- Euromontana; and
- North Sea Commission (NSC).

In seeking to shape the agenda of these organisations and that the position of the Highlands is prominent in opinions they promote, the Council has sought and currently holds the following positions:
- CPMR – Councillor Drew Hendry is vice President, the UK member on the ruling Political Bureau and leads the Conference’s Climate Change portfolio;
- Euromontana - Councillor George Farlow is a Board member;
- North Sea Commission
- Councillor Jimmy Gray is Chair of the Energy and Climate Change Thematic Working Group;
- Councillor David Alston is the vice Chair of the Culture & Tourism Thematic Working group and alternate Scottish member on the Executive Committee

Engagement with other EU wide lobbying networks such as the Atlantic Arc Commission, Islands Commission, Eurada, and University of the Arctic is achieved via the memberships of other partners of HIEP.

Priorities change with time but at present, the Council is actively lobbying on:
- accessibility – both physical and digital;
- energy generation and the development of an integrated meshed grid;
- climate change as it impacts on regional development;
- waste management;
- indicators for determining eligibility of future allocations of EU funding; and
- regional policy.

**Inward Investment.**
The Council also acts with others in pursuit of developing Highland as one of the most attractive environments to do business in Scotland.

As part of the Scottish Cities Alliance the Council has been working in partnership with Scotland’s cities, promoting Inverness and the Highlands in international arenas. This raises the profile of the area to International investment and developer markets.

Recently the Council has been active in promoting the University sector to potential partners throughout Europe. The Council along with the University of the Highlands & islands (UHI) recently attended an international event in Gorizia, Italy designed to encourage economic and research opportunities between UHI and Croatian Universities in Dubrovnik and Zadar.

Links have also been made with First Scandinavia aimed at learning from the Norwegian “Newton Rooms” concept and how this can be used to encourage young people to explore career opportunities in STEM subjects. This is being reinforced by developing workforce openings locally to take these opportunities forward commercially.

Work is also undertaken in partnership with HIE and the Scottish Development International (SDI) to support inward investment to the Highlands.

**Culture & Tourism.**
The Council is a member of Cruise Scotland and uses this platform to promote cruise destinations to the international market.
Management of European Programmes.
The Council sits on the Monitoring Committee of the 2014-20 Northern Periphery and Arctic Programme and chairs the Regional Advisory Group.

Project Work.
This has declined in recent years but is subject of review as how to encourage more involvement in trans regional project work.

Twinning and Trans-national Links.
Twinning is very much led by the individual communities with limited support from the Council. However the Council has supported an exchange of young people from Augsburg who have had work placements with the Council during the exchange period.

Highland is also developing links with Arges County in Romania. This is at an early stage of development.

Why.
These activities take place in order to:
- contribute towards local, regional and national objectives to help grow the economy as part of the Scottish Government’s Economic Strategy;
- to develop and promote Highland as one of the most attractive environments to do business in Scotland;
- raise awareness among SMEs of the opportunities of international trade;
- raise the profile of the Council and of the Highlands as players on the European stage so that the European institutions are more likely to take cognisance of the views from the region in the development of EU funding initiatives and legislation;
- facilitate opportunities for the Council and regional stakeholders to learn from others via the networks that the Council has membership of.
- Open doors

Do you think your sector and/ or organisation is effective in participating in international activities? If not, what would help you to make improvements? What prevents you from making improvements now?

Effectiveness can be measured at different levels. In terms of achieving recent goals of eligibility for regional funding and regional aid eligibility, the Council (in partnership) has been very successful.

At a political level, the Council operates at the decision-making end of the organisations it is involved with.

Lobbying can be a long term game and the results of current activity will only be known in future years.

Learning from others as how to better deliver services is an area that warrants greater focus.
There is a view that working in Europe is difficult and the dissemination of good practice and benefits of working on the European and wider international stages would be beneficial. The pro-active support from the Scottish Government would assist get the message over that it is actually beneficial for Council’s to co-operate and work at on the international stage as long as it is in line with Council objectives and Government strategies and delivers benefits.

Budget reductions have reduced the ability to undertake this activity.

**What should organisations in Scotland do to be effective internationally? Are you aware of any good examples of this from Scotland or another country?**

Work together to share experience. The current Scottish Territorial Co-operation Network (SCONE) for example has the possibility to bring together actors in the field of European inter-regional co-operation to share experience as how to best apply for Interreg funds and to deal with the attendant administration.

As above, messages of support from the Scottish Government would help.

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