Connecting Scotland – how Scottish organisations engage internationally

West of Scotland European Forum (WOSEF)

INTRODUCTION

The West of Scotland European Forum (WOSEF) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Committee’s Inquiry on “Connecting Scotland”.

The Forum brings together the 12 local authorities in the West of Scotland together with a number of other regional organisations, for example Strathclyde Partnership for Transport.

The Objectives of the Forum are:

a) to identify EU issues of particular relevance to Western Scotland,
b) to enable partners to work together to represent Western Scotland interests on EU legislative and policy initiatives;
c) to promote joint working by Forum partners in accessing financial and other support from relevant EU programmes;
d) to form working relationships with other organisations and networks at Scottish, UK and EU levels where by doing so the interests of Western Scotland can be furthered; and

e) to raise the profile of the West of Scotland with EU institutions and other regions within the EU

In practice the Forum’s current workplan, adopted in 2010, has focussed almost exclusively on the 2014-20 Structural Fund Programmes (including however the relevant transnational and interregional structural l fund programmes) and the review of the European Commission’s Regional Aid Guidelines

The Forum has committed to reviewing its workplan in 2015/16 hence this inquiry is very timely.

The Forum is currently chaired by Cllr Tony Buchanan (East Renfrewshire Council) with Cllr Jim Clocherty (Inverclyde Council) acting as Vice Chair. Glasgow City Council acts as lead and support authority to the Forum whose annual budget is around £50,000. This includes some provision for officer coordination of the work of the Forum.
INQUIRY 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?

From the previous section it will be evident that the Forum as such has very limited capacity to engage in European activity – by definition it does not participate at all in broader international activity.

Generally speaking the European (and in some cases international) activities of local authorities in the West of Scotland can be grouped under 4 broad headings:

Twinning activity
School based activity
European/International networks
Transnational EU funding programmes.

It is not possible to present a comprehensive gazetteer of all Local authority activity within these headings but it is possible to give some illustrative examples under these headings.

Twinning: Most local authorities in the West of Scotland have a long standing tradition of actively supporting twinning activities. As far back as September 1980 for instance Kilmarnock and Loudoun District Council (now part of East Ayrshire Council) was presented with the Council of Europe Flag of Honour; this was followed in August 1989 by the Plaque of Honour which is second only to the Europe Prize itself. In addition East Renfrewshire Council, as well as being twinned with Albertslund, a suburban town on the outskirts of Copenhagen in Denmark, is also part of the International Twinning Partnership Network of towns across Europe. South Ayrshire Council has adopted a formal document outlining its approach to town twinning policy and practice.

School based Activity: This is another long standing area of European/International activity for West of Scotland local authorities much of which was supported by the EU in the 2007-13 period through the Lifelong Learning Programme. Within this programme the Comenius Initiative was set up re to enhance the quality and reinforce the European dimension of school education, in particular by encouraging transnational cooperation between schools and contributing to improved professional development of staff directly involved in the school education sector, and to promote the learning of languages and intercultural awareness. In the final (2013) round of projects approved for multilateral school partnerships Glasgow City Council was awarded no fewer than 9 grants covering 5 primary, 3 secondary and 1 special needs school. Activities of this type are
continuing to receive support in the 2014-2020 period through the ERASMUS + programme.

**European/International Networks:** Given the growing impact of EU policies and legislation on local authority operations, a need to influence EU decision making at source has been identified. Much of this has been carried out on behalf of Scottish local authorities as a whole via COSLA which, in addition to maintaining a Brussels Office, is an active member of the CEMR (the Congress of European Municipalities and Regions) – the Europe wide umbrella organisation for national local authority associations. In addition some individual local authorities in the West of Scotland are members of EU networks dealing with specific issues or types of authority. As an example, Argyll and Bute Council is involved in an international network of European regions, the CPMR (Conference of Peripheral and Maritime Regions), which work together to ensure their common interest and unique geographies are taken into account by the EU institutions and national governments. The policies include regional policy, competition policy and state aids, transportation and fisheries. Within the CPMR, Argyll and Bute Council is also a member of the Atlantic Arc geographic sub group which also hold an annual General Meeting each year in a member region.

**Transnational EU Funding Programmes:** Many EU funding programmes (in addition to the Education themed ones referred to above) are set up on a transnational basis. For instance in the 2007-13 funding period about 2.5% of the Structural Funds budget was allocated to “European Territorial Cooperation” (INTERREG Programmes). The West of Scotland region was eligible for the following programmes within this objective:

- The Ireland/Northern Ireland/Western Scotland Cross Border Programme (Ayrshire and Argyll only eligible)
- The North West Europe Transnational programme (whole region)
- The Atlantic Area Transnational Programme (whole region);
- The Northern Periphery Programme (Argyll and Clyde islands only)
- The EU wide cooperation programme INTERREG IV and URBACT II

The Forum has played a full role along with other stakeholders in publicising the opportunities provided these programmes. In recent times this activity has been carried out under the auspices of the Scottish Network on European Territorial Cooperation, a fairly informal grouping chaired by the Scottish Government with participation from a number of agencies including Scotland Europa as well as local government.
Among the projects involving WOSEF Members were:

- The Sail West Project under the Cross Border programme. This involved North and South Ayrshire Councils together with Argyll and Bute Council (plus Highland and Dumfries and Galloway Councils from other parts of the eligible area in Scotland). The ultimate goal of the project is to create a marine leisure centre of excellence in the coastal zone that will help to rejuvenate local communities through the provision of new employment opportunities;

- The ICMA (Improving Connectivity and Mobility Access) project approved under the North West Europe Transnational Programme. Strathclyde Partnership for Transport was a partner to this project. The project aimed significantly to affect modal choice at the beginning and end of a journey, so reducing the environmental footprint of transport. It also aimed to provide accessible solutions where and when they are needed, fostering equitable and socially inclusive transport for all. The aspiration was to see more sustainable and competitive transport provision on the first and last miles, which meets citizens’ expectations.

- The Roma Net project approved under the URBACT programme had Glasgow City Council as a partner. This transnational partnership of 9 European cities – led by Budapest - aimed to tackle the social exclusion of the Roma population throughout Europe. The work carried out by the Council in the context of this project was recognised by it being awarded the best team award in the 2014 COSLA Excellence Awards.

Successor programmes to all the above for the 2014-2020 have been prepared and have either been approved or are expected to secure approval by the European commission by the end of 2015.

_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?_

Despite the very real benefits from all the activity types listed above there are a number of constraints that limit the capacity of local authorities in the West of Scotland to engage in European and International work.

First and foremost are capacity issues – not just financial but also in terms of human resources. For example planning a transnational EU funding bid will typically involve a lot of work in advance of submission in terms of identifying suitable partners in other countries and in negotiating what are sometime complex proposed work
packages. This can often take over a year with no guarantee of success at the end of the process.

The relative peripherality of the West of Scotland also is a factor. It generally takes longer and cost more for organisations in the West of Scotland to take part in multilateral based activities in contrast to partners based in mainland Europe (or close to the Channel Tunnel rail link in the south of the UK)

Finally press and public scepticism about the value of European and International activity is also a factor.

Despite considerable rationalisation for the 2014-20 funding period there are still a very large number of transnational EU funding programmes each with its own detailed rules, eligibility criteria, timetables and web sites. The recent launch of the Scottish EU funding Portal by Scotland Europa is a welcome step in moving towards a “one door” approach to finding out about these programmes. The Forum is one of partners who have made a financial contribution to this initiative.

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

Obviously to be effective internationally any organisation needs to exhibit:

- High level management/elected member commitment to work of this type
- A clear up front appreciation of the resources required and the risks that may arise;
- Sustained support for this activity over a period of time – there is often a considerable time gap between undertaking the activity and realising the practical benefits “on the ground”;

The Forum is not aware of any good practice from other countries in this regard and would be very interested in any light the Committee investigation can throw on this subject.

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