

Cross-Party Group on USA

23rd February 2022 6-7:30pm

Minutes

Present

MSPs

Dean Lockhart MSP
Daniel Johnson MSP
Jenni Minto MSP
Michelle Thomson MSP
Murdo Fraser MSP

Attendees

Jack Hillmeyer
Michael Feldman
Ian Houston
Stuart Hamilton
Rob Lang
Rachel Gwyon
Frank Cogliano
Brad Mackay
Lesley Campbell
Alexia Haramis
Harriet Mortimer
Kate Nowakowska
Jason Via
Kelly Glass
Kevin Rogers
Ros Wardley-Smith
Scott McElvanney
Steve Kerr
Anna Stella
Peter Mowforth
Alan Johnston
Andrew Muir
Brad Mackay
Carol Dew
Donella Beaton
Jacqui Watt
Jo Graham
Joanne Davidson
John Leighton

Mateo Urquijo
Olivia McLaren
Scott Johnstone
William Stirling
Hina Khan
Nora Rothrock

Apologies

Stephen Kerr MSP
Allan Hogarth
Sadie McKinley
Jamie Cooke
Sandy Begbie

1. Meeting to commence

Dean Lockhart MSP (DL MSP) opens the meeting, presents the agenda and welcomes all attendees to the first meeting of 2022. He thanks the US consulates for joining us.

2. Update from the United States Consulate General Edinburgh

Jack Hillmeyer (JH) starts by outlining the US Government focus currently, which is the very serious events in Eastern Europe. These reached a height with the announcement of sanctions, which showed the value of the special relationship with the UK. At every level they have been reaching out and having bipartisan meetings, and they're heartened by the statements from the UK and Scottish Governments, which show that we're all on the same page. Looking closer to home, JH notes that we do have the announcement of a nominee for the new ambassador to the UK: Jane Hartley, although this is yet to go through the Senate. She was previously President Obama's Ambassador to France, and whilst she'll be based in London she will come up to Scotland. JH also highlights that they are supportive of the soon-to-be-announced Scottish Council on Global Affairs, which should be launched near the end of April. This will be a great, non-partisan platform supported by all political parties, to talk about global affairs and see how Scotland can influence, and be influenced by, foreign policy.

Michael Feldman (MF) starts by highlighting the upcoming 25th anniversary of Tartan Day on the 6th April – this originated in Canada and is also celebrated in the USA. They are creating their first ever-official US Consulate General tartan to celebrate and are hoping for good public engagement. Additionally, Cab. Sec. Angus Robertson MSP may be travelling to the USA for Tartan Day celebrations. MF notes the annual in-person Select USA Investment Summit being held in Maryland this June, which is a premiere global event to promote foreign direct investment into the US. MF highlights that they are interested in both national and sub-national delegations and will be reaching out to the Scottish Government on this.

JH adds that the 3rd Consul Officer, likely in July, will soon join them.

DL MSP replies that on Ukraine it is great to hear that the UK and the US are working together. He mentions that there has also been encouraging news on the development of trade MOUs between the UK and several US states. DL MSP asks what the importance of these are, and if there are any sectors that are of particular interest.

JH highlights that there are discussions happening on a bilateral trade agreement between the US and the UK, and meetings may be starting soon. The areas of real interest are life sciences, space, and others.

MF comments that there is a lot of interest in moving beyond the legacy Scottish industries and collaborating on things like electronic gaming, biosciences, space etc.

3. Update on Scottish – US relations

Ian Houston (IH) starts by noting that the sort of bipartisan leadership and forum that DL MSP and this Cross-Part Group provides is invaluable, and commends JH and MF for their work. IH comments that the special relationship between Scotland and the US is a really unique and special connection, and their large diaspora and very modern, active relations provides many opportunities for connections. IH highlights Tartan Day as an important event for reminding us of that relationship. He also welcomes the work of Allan Hogarth (AH) and Stuart Hamilton (SH), and comments that there needs to be more collaboration and dialogue across sectors and between the US and Scotland.

4. Updates on Trade Mission Program

Stuart Hamilton (SH) first gives a bit of background for those who don't know of the trade missions programme: Scottish Chambers of Commerce are now 3 years into the 4 year trade mission programme, with each trade mission led by a local chamber and focused on B2B meetings and building relationships in order to encourage trade and contracts. The missions are open to all Scottish businesses and are generally multi-sector events with businesses of all sizes. Approximately 75 missions have been run over the past 3 years, with 12 of those with the US, a top trade priority for Scotland. The missions have moved online very successfully since March 2020, and are now more accessible to business. Coming up, Edinburgh Chamber is running a virtual mission in March with Massachusetts, focusing on IT, electronics, product manufacturing, etc. and another with Ohio towards the end of the year. We are also returning to physical missions, with Inverclyde Chamber leading a mission to Miami at the end of March focusing on tech, food and drink, and life sciences, and Forth Valley leading a mission shortly after to New York, focusing on tech, consumer goods, the creative industries, and also participating in the Tartan Week parade there. You can get in touch with Stuart or Ros at Scottish Chambers for more detail on upcoming missions, or visit exporthubscotland.com

5. Update on the US – Scotland route development

Rob Lang (RL) gives an update from Edinburgh airport, which is very much back up and running. North America is a vital part of their service with exceptional connectivity coming back and daily frequency re-starting on several routes. RL highlights that Delta have increased the size of their plane on the Edinburgh-US routes to one that can carry cargo, which provides a real opportunity to develop trade and business between the two countries. The airport now has a dedicated Cargo Manager for the first time ever, RL notes that they are continuing to work with a number of Destination Marketing Organisations in the US to promote routes, as well as with tourism boards, with the visitor economy being vital for both countries. This connectivity also provides better links for academia and students. RL comments that they have very strong summer activity but want to return to strong year-round activity as soon as possible. He highlights that they are very keen to work with in-person trade missions to see how they can work together to the benefit of both.

6. The role of DIT and an update on support available

Steve Kerr (SK) explains that the DIT presence in Scotland is relatively new, and is to support businesses to internationalise, and they will soon expand to include international trade advisors too. The MOUs mentioned earlier are a significant focus for UK ministers, and the first one likely to be signed is with Indiana and will cover all sectors, though life sciences have been highlighted. Oklahoma is likely to follow, as well as North and South Carolina. SK highlights that it is important to note that these are not trade deals, but statements of cooperation and areas we can collaborate on. SK will be happy to update when we have more detail. SK notes that the biosciences sector are focusing on plans for the BIO International Convention in San Diego, and they are about to announce an innovation competition which will give people a chance to exhibit there. Scotland Week is also coming up and they intend to have a presence there. SK points out that they are trying to encourage Scottish businesses to go to DIT if they want an inward or outward trade mission that DIT could sponsor.

Rachel Gwyon (RG) notes that the DIT Edinburgh office has been created to help Scottish businesses to export more, to bring in more investment and make the most of trade deals etc. They join up closely with Scottish Government to ensure they are adding value to what Scottish Government are already doing. Businesses can access advice, market research, etc. in Scotland, or can also access support services in the US, with offices in 7 parts of the US. They will be broadening the support that is available across all sectors to add extra agricultural attaché in America to help unlock market barriers. They are excited about the upcoming MOU and what this can do for Scotland's key sectors, and they already have very good links, e.g. with Silicon Valley investors who are looking to Scotland for potential investment opportunities.

Michelle Thompson (MT) MSP comes in with a question: research has been done on the Scottish diaspora and one of the key themes to emerge was the trust in doing business with Scotland and its people, but corruption is becoming a concern, and she is concerned that this could impact Scotland's global brand.

IH responds that the Scottish brand is generally speaking intact, and he thinks it's unlikely to be tarnished by issues of corruption – it is a real competitive advantage to be Scottish and Scottish companies need to start recognising that and putting their Scottish identity front and centre of their brand.

MT MSP asks DIT how they interface with Scottish Government?

RG highlights that she joins up very regularly with her opposite number in the Scottish Government, and they jointly chair a cross-Scottish public sector group that looks at how the services link between Scottish and UK Government, and they also join up with the Welsh and Northern Irish Governments every quarter to check alignment on how they're supporting businesses and to jointly liaise with business representative organisations. The team also talk with SDI probably most weeks. RG notes that it is a very open relationship.

MT MSP comments that one of the challenges is how we make the Scottish brand heard through the prism of the UK, as this can be confusing for non-UK businesses.

IH responds that Scotland does also have the advantage of three key annual celebrations that are recognised internationally: Tartan Day, Burns Night, and St Andrews Day, but we need to be more creative in using these to engage with US officials and others.

Murdo Fraser (MFr) MSP mentions that he has heard concerns from the tourism sector that there isn't much leisure travel from the US, is this something that the airport recognises? This is a very important market for us in Scotland

RL replies that the airlines reckon that bookings are looking good, but they are doing a lot of monitoring work. Hotel associations have also said they are starting to see more traffic. There had been some nervousness around Covid testing on the way back out, so they are developing a new PCR testing facility inside the airport to make it much easier for passengers and to restore confidence.

7. Update on the developments on US students in Scotland and the Turing Scheme

Frank Cogliano (FC) explains that the University of Edinburgh has been through a period of great uncertainty, but despite a bit of a dip in numbers of international students in 2020, numbers have actually increased for the 2021 intake. He highlights that US applications were through the roof for the 2022 intake, with a 75% increase. Students on years abroad had also rebounded by autumn 2021, and these are all important ambassadors for Scotland and for the University. They are still having some issues around visa, but generally, the outlook is very good. Post-Covid they are keen to connect with Edinburgh Innovation, the commercialisation arm of the university, with sectors of particular interest being big data, medicine, and the space sector. FC attended a meeting of the UK-US Fulbright Commission recently, and the clear message was that they wanted to see more applications from Scotland – there is a real opportunity here for Scottish universities to work together on encouraging take up of this. On the Turing Scheme, this is starting to come together, and the UK

Government have now committed to funding it until at least 2024, with £10m for the current year. FC comments that it is too soon to say if it is as good as Erasmus, but it does make it easier for students to study in the US and Canada, both of which are very popular destinations for UK students going to study abroad.

Brad Mackay (BM) comments that the University of St Andrews have had a very similar experience. BM highlights the very close HE links between the US and Scotland, with 35% of undergrad US students who come to the UK choosing Scottish universities. BM comments that the Turing Scheme does have some limitations, e.g. it only funds outward-bound students, but it is a global scheme so there are opportunities there. They have had other scholarship schemes to support students to experience studying in the US, and they are working with partners to look at how they can reciprocate funding to ensure US students have the same opportunities to come and study in the UK. They have actually seen a 30% jump in the number of students coming from the US to study with the University of St Andrews. Research partnership and collaborations are also still going full tilt, and moving online has opened up new opportunities and collaborations. BM adds that they are investing heavily in the US as a key strategic partner.

DL MSP reflects that it is great to hear about the uptick in number of students coming to Scotland, and asks if this is in any particular areas?

BM replies that for years, there was a focus on social sciences, but interest is now much more spread across a range of programmes.

FC agrees, and historically they had a particular interest from US students in International Relations and Veterinary Medicine, given that this is a recognised qualification in the US. There is still a bit of a bias towards arts and humanities but it is more spread into sciences etc.

DL MSP asks what additional clarity would be useful on the Turing Scheme?

FC notes that it is great that the scheme has been extended for 3 years, but more clarity over the longevity of the scheme is still needed. However they do need to work through the scheme for a year or two to work out where the problems are.

BM agrees, and adds that the opening date of the applications is quite late, and that can make it difficult for students to prepare for the move to the US and their new courses.

JH notes that he would love to see the Fulbright Programme continue to grow

8. D. Lockhart to thank the audience and handover to J. Hillmeyer and M. Feldman for final remarks

DL MSP thanks all the panel participants for their great updates and insights.

9. J. Hillmeyer and M. Feldman to provide final remarks

JH thanks Dean, the MSPs, and Alexia, as well as all the speakers for another really helpful meeting. He notes that having great speakers from so many different areas shows the breadth and depth of the current relationship and opportunities to tap into.