



T:BUC Engagement Forum

“Engaging with the Business Sector”

Tuesday, 1st March 2022,
10.30am – 12.30pm via Zoom

Minutes

Contributors:

Gareth Johnston - Director of Strategic Policy and Good Relations, The Executive Office
Lisa McIlvenna - Deputy Managing Director, Business In The Community
John Healy - Vice President and Managing Director, All State NI
Angela Noon - Chief Finance Officer, Siemens and Chair of the UK Skills and Productivity Board
Dr Jayne Brady - Head of Civil Service
Michelle Hatfield - Director of HR and Corporate Responsibility, George Best Belfast City Airport
Richard Cushnie - Director of Good Relations, The Executive Office
Benny Miskelly - Purpose Officer, PwC
Jenni Barkley - CR and Communications Manager, Belfast Harbour
Laura Hourican - Senior Vice President Human Resources, Firstsource Solutions
Dr Denis McMahon - Permanent Secretary, The Executive Office

1. Welcome and Introductions

Gareth Johnston - Director of Strategic Policy and Good Relations, The Executive Office

Mr Johnston welcomed all present to the Forum. T:BUC had been engaged with the business sector on good relations practice and interventions being delivered by the business community along with identifying inherent challenges and opportunities. The Executive Office (“TEO”) had formed a close relationship with Business in the Community (“BITC”), one of the benefits being in the Urban Villages Initiative. Other initiatives would be highlighted by the speakers invited to contribute to the Forum. Ongoing work reflected TEO’s commitment to assist with the work of building a united society across a number of programmes.

Mr Johnston outlined just some of the fantastic work being delivered, including:-

- Continued delivery of good relations projects challenging the impact of COVID;
- £3.6M of small grants awarded to worthy voluntary sector initiatives;
- A District Council Good Relations Programme to improve relations between and within District Councils and support local solutions to local good relations issues;
- Various PEACE 4 projects which were now drawing to a close. Steps were underway to build on the progress made across communities by utilising a new tranche of EU PeacePlus Funding (€1Bn);
- T:BUC Camps had enjoyed another successful year, with focus on climate change and environmental impact. A tree planting event had been held for young people which would be mirrored on 19th March when Good Relations Ambassadors would be planting trees on the Stormont Estate;
- The Washington Ireland Programme, which was focussing on mental health on the island of Ireland;
- The DfE Peace for Youth Programme remained on target to engage with 10,000 young people offering skills and employment training whilst fostering good relations;
- DoJ had made significant progress across a number of sites on facilitating opening of interface areas for longer periods of time, networking, cross community co-operation and removal of interface barriers;
- Ongoing work by the DfC Cross Community Youth Sport and Creativity Programme;
- Positive progress on delivery of the DfC Shared Housing Programme, which had delivered 1,733 homes to date across Northern Ireland with political support and the participation of advisory groups including the community led five year Good Relations Plan;
- The Shared Education Campuses Programme, promoting good relations, equality of identity and respect for diversity, was progressing with four projects including a current construction in Limavady.

2. The role of businesses in communities in NI Challenges and Opportunities

Lisa McIlvenna - Deputy Managing Director, Business In The Community

Mr Johnston invited Ms McIlvenna to speak and Ms McIlvenna went on to give a short presentation on the role of BITC which comprised of over 200 organisations across Northern Ireland who, in total, employed over 40% of the work force. BITC had been formed in England over 40 years ago as a response by businesses to riots which were happening across the country at that time, trying to effect change by using a series of skills in a positive way across communities. In Northern Ireland, a number of business leaders were brought together in an attempt to try and understand and support communities towards becoming more self-sustaining. A key ethos of BITC was to explore opportunities to support business to be a force for good and this had gained momentum, with many businesses now incorporating responsible business practices within their key strategies.

BITC focussed on the “Three Ps”, i.e. Planet/People/Places. Social inclusion and prosperity were key driving factors and current initiatives included:-

- Programmes and initiatives directed towards developing young people for entry into the workplace and creating inclusive work spaces;
- A digital platform which matched business skills and resources with community needs and projects;
- A Ban The Box initiative challenging business recruitment practices with the aim of giving people with convictions a fairer chance of securing employment;
- Focus on assistance from businesses in tackling poverty, supporting programmes which delivered food and activities for young people in deprived areas;
- The National Business Response Network had reached out to over one million people during the course of the COVID pandemic, providing food, technology and support as needed within communities;
- Tackling digital poverty: 9% of children in the UK do not have digital access and over 1,000 children benefitted from donation from businesses of digital devices;
- A Strive To Work programme was co-designed and successfully launched in the North West supporting the long term unemployed to tackle challenges around long term recruitment.

Ms McIlvenna closed by stating that, although many challenges remained, a responsible business ethos was emerging across organisations with increased engagement with local communities and increased interest in Environmental, Social and Corporate Governance (“ESG”). However, a “So What?” question was emerging, underlining the need for business interventions to be based on real outcomes. This, in part, had contributed to a shift whereby businesses were increasingly keen to collaborate around social issues which was being matched by increased interest within communities.

Mr Johnston thanked Ms McIlvenna for her presentation, underlining that the UK Government was also focussed on real outcomes so: “Is anybody better off?” was another key question emerging.

3. Investing in stability and good relations

John Healy – Vice President and Managing Director, All State NI

Mr Healy gave a brief overview of his work in the community, including his role as a Prince’s Ambassador for Responsible Business in Northern Ireland. He went on to outline his role as Managing Director of All State NI, which was a subsidiary of the All State Corporation, an insurance company based in the USA. All State had been in Northern Ireland since 1998 and currently had 2,500 employees (1,500 in Belfast and 1,000 in the North West).

Mr Healy began by outlining the challenging times in which we were living: globally, nationally, locally and individually. There was conflict in Europe, the world was just emerging from a global pandemic, there was rising inflation and Northern Ireland was still dealing with the fallout out from BREXIT, including the recent collapse of the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Mr Healy emphasised that All State NI lived amidst the community and did business in the community and was, therefore, inextricably linked to it. The workplace was often the only place where different communities could come together as people lived and socialised in different spaces. Early indicators, post-COVID, were that the world of work had changed and that people now wanted to work in an organisation they could feel connected with, where they felt they were making a positive contribution to communities and where their contribution had relevance.

Progress had been made across Northern Ireland. The Tourism industry had grown from almost nothing to cruise ships docking in Belfast and, pre-COVID, 285,000 people had been visiting Northern Ireland annually. Twenty five years after the Good Friday Agreement had been signed, some of the biggest TV programmes were being made in Northern Ireland and Belfast was well on the way towards being the number one FinTech hub in the world. Nine hundred international companies were now investing within Northern Ireland and talented staff and refugees from abroad were now coming in, investing their lives, careers and futures alongside us and that diversity was impacting communities.

However, challenges remained. BREXIT and protocol issues remained unresolved and divisions still existed between communities. For the past three years businesses had been on the brink of a knife edge and were still waiting for outcomes, which should be a general concern for everyone. With emergence from the pandemic to war in Europe and rapidly rising inflation and hospital waiting lists, businesses were facing many factors which remained outside of their control. Other issues of continued concern were: a skills deficit; the challenge of creating leadership that could adapt to change and incorporate innovation and the need to address under-investment in the public and private sector. Everyone needed to see a working Northern Ireland Executive that would help to address these problems.

To close, Mr Healy quoted Voltaire: “No problem can withstand the result of sustained thinking”. Businesses together with community based organisations could create a space to think about these issues and work towards solutions and that could not take place until enough traction had been built up to enable collaborative working and BITC provided a solid network to do that and would only become more important as we all faced the challenges of the next twelve months or more.

Mr Johnston thanked Mr Healy for his talk highlighting, with the current displacement of Ukrainian nationals, the need to integrate refugees as a key area of focus under the banner of good relations.

4. Investing in skills and diversity and good relations

Angela Noon - Chief Finance Officer, Siemens and Chair of the UK Skills and Productivity Board

Ms Noon began her address by emphasising that she would talk about the combination of her two roles in the light of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and the disruption and change that would mean in terms of skills required from work forces and employees.

Topics currently under discussion by the UK Skills and Productivity Board included:-

- Future skills and what does GB/Ireland need to prosper in the future;
- Digitalisation. Consumers are starting to want things faster with more customisation and we were getting to the stage where platforms were taking over our lives so a larger proportion of people were digitally savvy;
- Robotic processes and automation would be taking out low skilled employment so a huge upscaling of society was required. Demographics indicated increased need for partnerships between business and Government in order to provide the investment required to facilitate that;
- In order to achieve strategic goals as we move to digital puts a huge onus on social skills and how to inject that into entry level schoolchildren. It was seen during COVID that, in order to touch another human being remotely required listening skills, humility and an understanding of how to connect to another person so sensory skill sets would become more important in the future as new technologies were adopted. There would be much bigger focus on human interaction and human emotion;
- It was anticipated that there would be less academic focus going forward with demand for a wider range of skills: problem-solving; good communication; good persuasion skills; empathy and authenticity;
- Businesses would start to see this alongside net zero sustainability. Young people will want to join organisations with a purpose and the purpose will be important to them and businesses needed to focus on recruitment of those with softer skills, not necessarily focussed on black and white data analysis and getting things right first time;
- That was already starting to be the future of work and there had already been focus on gender and ethnicity in recent years but future focus was likely to be on social diversity and what people from different backgrounds could bring to the mix;
- Another challenge was responsibility towards the planet and the road to net zero and the green economy. There was already a lot of EU investment into “green skills” and this would create the new skill sets in society and UK/Ireland would have to define which skill sets they had which would set them apart from other countries, whether it be FinTech, Pharma or Manufacturing, which were all being disrupted by the rate of net zero. New skill sets would be required across all sectors, along with an understanding of the entire green cycle and UK/Ireland had to identify gaps and make the necessary investment;
- A levelling up strategy was required with investment in infrastructure: roads, transport, technology, innovation and within the Universities and Schools of the future and their relationship with business was a key challenge;
- Jobs were leaving the UK, particularly to China, in what was traditionally the best performing markets so rescaling of new business models was required as well as exploring new and emerging opportunities;
- New questions emerging would include: “Can you help me be more sustainable?”, “Can you support my own manufacturing processes to deliver a greener product or be more innovative?” more of a role as a solution provider;
- Different leadership was required to face these challenges, including how to act as a responsible business when potential investors will be saying: “I expect your portfolio

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to look like this in the future and, if you are not on board, I will not invest in your company". This Ms Noon highlighted as a serious topic which would get to maturity very quickly.

To close, Ms Noon commented that T:BUC's voice was a necessary and important conduit between business, communities and Government to ensure UK/Ireland continued to innovate alongside competitors overseas.

Mr Johnston thanked Ms Noon for her presentation and commented that it highlighted the need for an holistic approach. Mr Johnston felt that consideration could be given to pilot schemes around business and social skills to assist in identification of individuals with emotional intelligence ("EQ") and empathy.

Ms Noon felt that Mr Johnston's comments were spot on, emphasising that her organisation was now recruiting people who would never have been recruited fifteen years ago.

5. Head of Civil Service

Dr Jayne Brady – Head of Civil Service

Dr Brady began by giving forum participants an overview of her career path. She had started her career in the private sector as an Engineer working in technology and had then taken her experience in technology and innovation into the public sector, building the foundations for the recently approved Citi Deals project before moving on to the post of Head of Civil Service in Northern Ireland.

Dr Brady went on to highlight key areas of focus, including:-

- Inclusive support pathways were required between schools and jobs as well as investment in the resources to support them;
- An holistic, partnership approach was required from Government Departments and partners in industry and community sectors.
- Northern Ireland had proven to be resilient given the challenges it had faced over the past two years. Looking at the next ten years, it needed to build a strong platform, particularly in the business sector. Northern Ireland's had some big systematic issues, the economic inactivity rate was still 27% and there were still health and social inequalities, especially around women under 25 and people with disabilities, so work was needed on narrowing these gaps;
- One successful collaborative project was a DfE funded programme called Digital Futures where FE Colleges, Universities and SMEs worked together to identify key skills and pathways and delivered a twelve week reskilling programme.

Dr Brady closed by emphasising her commitment to deepening relationships with businesses and community groups.

6. Investing in good community connections

Michelle Hatfield - Director of HR and Corporate Responsibility, George Best Belfast City Airport

Ms Hatfield stated that Belfast City Airport had been at the heart of its local community since its establishment in 1983 and collaboration had always been key. The organisation had met the huge challenges within the aviation industry caused by COVID with a spirit of resilience. Ms Hatfield went on to outline the ethos underpinning some of her organisation's collaborative projects.

- There were four sustainability core pillars: people; environment; education and community;
- Key focus would continue to be around the education of young people and inspiring the next generation of young people from pre-school to graduation and everywhere in between;
- The organisation took a structured approach with regular collaboration with key stakeholders and members of the local community. Community funding had been established since 2009 and £500K had been invested in local community and educational projects to date;
- Airlines paid a fine for any plane landings outside of scheduled operating hours and Belfast City Airport used fine monies to help fund these collaborative projects;
- There was active linkage with other charitable partnerships, companies and community networks so collaboration was key;
- Current strategic key themes included:
 - The Ignite Youth Leadership programme. The organisation wanted to change the life of 100 young people and 20 young people had graduated so far. The aim was to create pathways for career development and also to inspire and instil confidence in young people. A short video was played with feedback from various young people on what the Ignite Youth Leadership programme had meant for them;
 - Community funding and charitable partnerships. For example, over £30K had been raised to support the Welcome Organisation's work with the homeless and a van had been purchased to assist the work of the Bangor Food Bank;
 - Sustainability and the road to net zero. Belfast City Airport want to be an industry leader for sustainable travel.

Ms Hatfield finished her brief presentation by stating that, although there were a number of difficulties and challenges to overcome, Belfast City Airport had been awarded Northern Ireland Responsible Company of the Year by a commitment to work collaboratively and focussing on the following success factors:

- Meaningful stakeholder engagement;
- Having a strategic approach;
- Celebrating focussed communication: evaluate, measure, challenge and respect;
- Collaboration being a powerful key to achieve impact.

7. Panel session

Facilitated by **Richard Cushnie** - Director of Good Relations, The Executive Office

Panel Members:

- **Benny Miskelly**, Purpose Officer, PwC
- **Jenni Barkley**, CR and Communications Manager, Belfast Harbour
- **Laura Hourican**, Senior Vice President Human Resources, Firstsource Solutions

Mr Cushnie introduced the Panel Members. Given time constraints, Mr Cushnie went on to group some of the questions which had arisen throughout the presentations.

The first theme was around: *“How to create engagement”* and *“Ideas on improving collaboration”* and Mr Cushnie invited Ms Barkley and Ms Hourican to comment on these themes.

- **Jenni Barkley**, CR and Communications Manager, Belfast Harbour

Ms Barkley stated that business and communities had been collaborating for many years but the key to success had been in building meaningful partnerships and to find partners with a similar ethos and strategic direction. For example, Belfast Harbour had a number of IT companies within its office developments and was working with them on improving educational attainment initiatives which would be of benefit to everyone. Belfast Harbour also supported the Northern Ireland Screen Academy Programme.

Belfast Harbour believed in finding an organisation in parallel with its own ethos and engaging in collaborative and meaningful partnerships in order to achieve objectives together. However, it was not pure philanthropy. The organisation also needed to deliver a business and another key question to ask was: “What can they bring to us?” Similarly, community organisations had to be properly researched to ensure alignment on common themes.

Ms Barkley reminded participants that assistance could also be given on a non-financial basis, e.g. usage of building space. However, there was a funding element to these partnerships and Belfast Harbour had supported pilot programmes in the past such as BITC’s Time To Code, as well as providing expertise in order to assist other organisations to apply for Government funding. Organisations also needed to be vocal on what they needed from Government in order to keep moving things forward.

- **Laura Hourican**, Senior Vice President Human Resources, Firstsource Solutions

Ms Hourican also identified BITC projects, especially around education, as a key driver, stating that young people were the work force of tomorrow and it was vital to provide opportunities to learn the skills, digital, technical and social, that would be required going forward.

Board and SMT participation with community organisations was also considered vital to building meaningful relationships. One thing organisations could do better was to promote more effective listening with respect to both experts and community leaders.

Ms Hourican emphasised that, in order to attract international investment, a collaborative approach was key.

Mr Cushnie invited Mr Miskelly to comment on some of the ***challenges and difficulties around building relationships***.

- **Benny Miskelly**, Purpose Officer, PwC

Mr Miskelly invited organisations to follow PwC's lead and "flip the model", i.e. focus on the problem (e.g. suicide) and then source community action. Their experience had been: "Start with the issue and everything else follows". If people bought into the issue, collaborative opportunities would arise and positive impact would follow.

Mr Miskelly highlighted Dr Brady's comment on Northern Ireland's economic inactivity rate of 27% as a key challenge. This was a big figure and needed long term commitment to effect change. PwC, for example, was currently committing to ten year programmes.

Collaboration had emerged as a key theme. Help was needed from Government and other companies needed to come on board in order to support and help the most vulnerable. For example, PwC's mental health programmes had already saved the lives of ten young people and companies should not hold back from tackling some of the hard issues as these were often the most rewarding.

Mr Cushnie thanked the Panel Members for their time and insights, stating that he wished there had been more time to develop themes. However, the conversation had started.

8. Closing Remarks

Closing Remarks from **Dr Denis McMahon** - Permanent Secretary, The Executive Office

Mr McMahon thanked all participants for their contributions and went on to highlight some issues which had struck him as being particularly relevant, namely:-

- EQ and social skills, which were a current topic of discussion at an international level;
- How Northern Ireland was going to take its place in the world and investment in the cross over between business and communities would be central to that;
- The need to focus on the mental health of young people to give them confidence, positive examples and to create pathways that led away from the grip of negative cycles;
- The need for business groups to listen, especially to community organisations;
- Supporting the emergence of confident, diverse, thriving communities by helping to tackle the hard issues.

9. Finish

Mr McMahon reiterated TEO's commitment to engaging with businesses and the public in order to make a difference. He encouraged participants to think of the TEO as an open door with respect to support with blurring boundaries and linking businesses with the wider community in an attempt to make life better in Northern Ireland for everybody.

The Engagement Forum finished at 12.34pm.