

REPORT ON EU – OCT FORUM – TAHITI 2019

Trilateral

After a long and tiring journey, we - Councillor Tony Green and Financial Secretary (FS), Dax Richards, - arrived in Tahiti at 5.30am on Tuesday, 26 February 2019. Shortly after arrival we were joined by the SHG UK Representative, Kedell Worboys MBE, and along with the UK Member State Representation, Ian Ascough, we joined members of DEVCO (Committee on Developing Countries Matters) of the European Commission for the trilateral meeting.

The meeting began with the FS outlining progress made on the 11th European Development Fund (EDF) programme on connectivity and accessibility through the delivery of the Digital Strategy. The FS outlined the progress made against the milestones for 2018 particularly the progress with the development of the Special Educational Needs Policy (SEND) and also the Telemedicine Policy.

The FS then provided an update on the Cable Project, the commission confirmed that the second fixed tranche for the 11th EDF Programme had been received from St Helena Government (SHG). The discussion then turned to BREXIT where the commission asked how we thought we would be affected by BREXIT either through a deal or no deal scenario. The team outlined the impacts in terms of funding and trade and the UK Rep also outlined the wider benefit of our membership to the Overseas Countries & Territories Association (OCTA) and what it means for the likes of St Helena to have a voice on the international stage. We also thanked the commission for the support through the programming and also the support received from officers at the commission. This was well received by the commission team.

Discussion then took place on the recent assessment of the 9th and 10th EDF carried out by Mark Watson and his colleague. The FS advised that he had not seen the draft report however discussions on-Island with the consultant had led him to believe there was going to be a recommendation for St Helena to be eligible for any 'envelope B' funding that might be available. The commission said this could be something to look at but given the uncertainty around BREXIT this is unlikely at this time. The FS also outlined the valuable contribution made by the consultants in looking at future possibilities of infrastructure development and this was also welcomed by the commission.

What was made clear by the commission was that once the UK exits the European Union (EU) they are of the view that this would mean that the UK OTs will no longer be eligible to attend any future trilateral meetings despite there might be a transitional period if there is a 'Deal' BREXIT. There is still no clarity on how the continued dialogue will continue post BREXIT between the commission and the UKOTs, particularly as we continue to implement the 11th EDF programme. We need further clarity on this key issue for St Helena and all UK OTs.

OCTA Ministerial

The OCTA Ministerial followed on Wednesday, 27 February, where the key topic of Post-2020 was discussed followed by the OCTA business for the past year and the election of the new OCTA Chairman, President and Executive Committee.

The discussions on post-2020 were particularly encouraging for St Helena and other UK OTs with unanimous support from all non-UK OTs for some form of continued cooperation post-2020 and post BREXIT, preferably with the continuation of the OCTA.

The Ministerial then heard about specific reports commissioned by the OCTA during the past year, specifically on the Innovation Programme, the regional cooperation in the Indian Ocean and the programme on Tax Cooperation.

The Ministerial then turned to the election of the new Chair, President, Executive Committee and the Audit Committee for the next year. Curacao was elected as the incoming Chair and Saint Pierre et Miquelon as the President. St Helena was once again elected to the Executive Committee.

The final session of the day looked at and agreed the Political Declarations which would be presented to the Commissioner at the EU OCT Forum on Friday, 1 March.

EU OCT Forum

The Forum started with an introduction from the Chair of OCTA (President of French Polynesia) outlining the importance of the OCTA and cooperation between OCTs, members states and the European Commission. The Chair was quite vocal again about support to UK OTs during this period of significant uncertainty and welcomed continued cooperation post-BREXIT between OCTs. This was particularly relevant for those OCTs where there are opportunities for regional cooperation on key areas effecting all OCTs such as Climate Change, Natural Disaster Management and managing of our oceans.

Then the European Commissioner for International Cooperation and Development, Neven Mimica, gave an intervention setting out the need for continued cooperation post 2020 through the new Overseas Association & Greenland Decision (OAGD) which has just been adopted. The commissioner also touched on the issue of BREXIT and how the OAGD does not include the UK OTs, however does leave the possibility open of regional cooperation provided funding from the UK OTs were to be made available by Her Majesty's Government (HMG). This was welcomed by many of the UK OTs although as St Helena does not benefit from a regional funding envelope there is little that the Island stands to benefit as a result.

Then followed interventions by the speakers for the member states including the French Republic, Kingdom of the Netherlands, Kingdom of Denmark and finally the United Kingdom. Each group of OCTs were then given the opportunity to nominate

one leader to make an intervention on behalf of the OCT group. The Hon Victor Banks, premier of Anguilla, was asked to speak on behalf of the UK OTs. Victor delivered a speech on behalf of the UK OTs, outlining our thanks for the support shown by all other non-UK OTs to continue cooperation going forward regardless of the outcome of BREXIT. He also touched on the fact that UK OTs had no part to play in the vote on BREXIT yet we all have to face consequences and fallout of the decision to leave. The forum closed with the agreement of the common conclusions of the forum.

UKOTs' Trilateral with the Commission

During the course of the EU OCT forum, the UKOTs were able to meet with the Commissioner Mimica and the UK Member State Representative to discuss key issues through the trilateral.

The Commissioner outlined two key issues:

1. The Withdrawal Agreement and the keeping to the terms – the Commissioner reiterated the EU's commitment to do all it can to keep the current EDF 11 programmes open as it stands now, with a period of transition until 31 December 2020
2. Development Cooperation – where possible the post-BREXIT partnership should be kept as close as possible to what is currently. Special mention was made of regional cooperation and the need to allow UK OTs to continue as part of OCTA.

Ian Ascough then gave a brief intervention, specifically to make mention of the UK Government's commitment to ensuring funding for the EDF 11 Programme is made available in the event of a 'No Deal' Brexit and also HMG would consider looking at how UK OT membership of OCTA could continue and also to look at the possibility of HMG providing contributions for the OCTA membership.

Some OTs then took the opportunities to outline where they would like to see cooperation continue in the future, specifically concerns around trade and access to the single market was raised. St Helena took the opportunity to thank the commission for their support and cooperation of the years, this was echoed by a number of other OTs.

Anthony Green, Dax Richards & Kedell Worboys

SHG Delegation at the EU OCT Forum