Welsh Parliament
Senedd Cymru

14th Meeting of the Committee of the Regions-UK Contact Group

19-20 October 2026

Summary Report



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1. The Committee of the Regions-UK Contact Group

The Committee of the Regions-UK Contact Group brings together representatives from the EU's Committee of the Regions (CoR) with members of the UK's devolved legislatures and local government associations. It was established post-Brexit to maintain links between regions and local authorities in the EU with the devolved legislatures and local authorities in the UK. Its key aims are to:

- Act as a forum for continuing dialogue and partnership between the EU and UK local and regional authorities;
- Provide members with the opportunity to discuss issues arising from the UK's withdrawal from the EU;
- Support cross-border and territorial cooperation;
- Act as a forum to debate and discuss common areas of interest and UK-EU cooperation in international fora.

The Senedd is represented on the Contact Group by Sera Evans MS, Chair of the Early Years, Children, Young People and Education Committee and Elwyn Vaughan MS, Chair of the Economy, Energy and Connectivity Committee.

The 14th meeting of the Contact Group took place in Belfast on 19-20 October. This report summarises the key issues discussed by Members at the Contact Group.

2. The State of Play in UK-EU relations: Bringing 'practical experience' of delivery on the ground

The Contact Group held a discussion with Dunstan Hadley, Cabinet Office, UK Government, Lisa Hemmer Political Counsellor, EU Delegation to the UK and Professor Katy Hayward, Queen's University Belfast on the state of UK-EU negotiations ahead of the UK-EU summit scheduled for 20 November.

The Contact Group heard that 'real progress' has been on reaching an agreement on further areas of UK-EU cooperation but there is a great deal of work to be done to finalise agreements on key areas ahead of the summit. It heard an ambition from both sides to conclude negotiations on a Sanitary and Phytosanitary agreement, emissions trading and a youth experience scheme and to progress discussions on the UK potentially joining the internal electricity market of the EU.

On security and defence, speakers emphasised the importance of continued close collaboration to address 'the serious security issues' faced by the European continent. The UK hopes that it can be part of the Ukraine support loan.

Beyond the detailed technical negotiations it was confirmed that the UK Prime Minister will set out future options for the UK-EU relationship around the summit.

Contact Group members emphasised that practical implementation of much of the existing UK-EU agreements and future agreements rests with local, regional and devolved authorities. They called for better consultation and inclusion of their voices in the on-going negotiations, noting that their on the ground experience should form a key part of the discussions. They emphasised the critical role actors at this level can play in rebuilding cooperation between regions and cities in the UK and EU.

Elwyn Vaughan MS, highlighted the difference between genuine consultation and devolved governments merely being informed of decisions taken once the detail has already been finalised.

Consultation with the devolved governments in the build up to the summit was described as detailed but it was acknowledge that further engagement and consultation is needed on how agreements reached will be implemented and operate in practice.



The need for further consideration to be given to adequate consultation mechanisms for UK and EU local authorities was accepted. Professor Katy Hayward said that 'it makes perfect sense' for devolved, local and regional authorities to be heard in these discussions.

The Contact Group heard from Professor Hayward about the impacts of the implementation of the Windsor Framework and Brexit in Northern Ireland. Whilst the Windsor Framework has eased some of the practical barriers facing traders and people in Northern Ireland, she emphasised that it remains a source of contention and unease.

On initiatives already agreed, the UK's re-association to the EU's international learning exchange programme, Erasmus, was welcomed as a positive step towards re-building relationships between young people and learners in the UK and EU. However, concerns were raised by Contact Group Members that not enough has been done to prepare for the successful delivery of Erasmus in 2027. Concern was raised about the loss of expertise in the UK and the lack of awareness and at a local level about the return of the programme.

3. The local and regional dimension of the EU-UK relationship

The Committee of the Regions will consider and vote on an opinion on the Local and Regional Dimension of the EU-UK relationship in the coming months. Members of the Contact Group held an exchange of views with Gillian Coughlan, Head of the Irish delegation to the Committee of the Regions who is the rapporteur for the opinion.



Contact Group Members identified key areas for future cooperation, barriers to further engagement and key steps that could be taken to address these. They once again emphasised the need for devolved, regional and local authorities to recognised by the UK and EU as key strategic delivery partners.

Agreeing practical measures that directly improve people's lives and deliver demonstrably on the ground was a key call from Members. Possible areas of cooperation included work on food security, best practice on customs, energy security and the green transition, maritime connectivity and logistics, education and schools. The loss of collaboration following the UK's departure from the EU's cross-border funding programme Interreg and the need for renewed funding to support engagement was raised.

Sera Evans MS and Elwyn Vaughan MS were also asked by the rapporteur to provide written evidence in advance of the meeting. In their submission they drew attention to the work of their predecessor Senedd Committees on these

issues and noted committees in the Seventh Senedd are just beginning their work to consider these issues in detail.

4. Cross-border collaboration in higher education between UK and EU-based institutions

Dr Anthonay Soares, Director of the Centre for Cross-Border Cooperation and Catriona McCarthy, Interim Director Education, British Council addressed Contact Group members on higher education collaboration and the UK's participation in the 2027 Erasmus scheme. The British Council has been appointed as the UK's national coordinator for the scheme and will support deliver of the scheme in the UK.

The speakers highlighted the importance of education and research collaboration for the building of longer term trust. Catriona McCarthy set out some of the key changes to the Erasmus scheme for 2027 and said that engagement with the sector had taken place.

Whilst the return of UK to the Erasmus scheme was warmly welcomed by Members, concern was reiterated about a lack of capacity and institutional knowledge in the UK to successfully deliver and deploy Erasmus quickly. Members highlighted the difficulty of UK only associating to a single year of the programme as opposed to the full programming period of six years. Members noted that one year would not provide sufficient time and security to those looking to build partnerships. Members called on the UK Government to be cognisant of the challenging timetables in any value for money assessment of the scheme after only a single year.



Sera Evans MS, highlighted the success of the Welsh Government's international learner scheme, Taith in reaching underprivileged and underrepresented groups that have not previously benefitted from Erasmus. It was critical that Taith is not lost by a focus on Erasmus alone. Catriona McCarthy highlighted the complementarity of Taith and Erasmus.

Other issues discussed was the importance of the Horizon research programme to UK and EU universities. Members also advocated for further collaboration on vocational education and skills shortages across the UK and EU.

Negotiations between the UK and EU on a youth exchange scheme were welcomed.

The issue of home tuition fees for EU students wishing to study in the UK was a key theme in the conversation. The decline in EU students studying in the UK post-Brexit was noted however UK Members highlighted the financial difficulties facing the UK's higher education sector.

Sera Evans MS also highlighted that decisions on tuition fees are devolved and so emphasised that any agreement reached between the UK and EU will need the agreement of the devolved governments.



5. Study Visit: Black Mountain Shared Space

Contact Group Members undertook a study visit to the Black Mountain Shared Space in Belfast to learn about the work of the cross-community centre, the impact of the EU Peace programmes in Northern Ireland, and the work of Springboard Opportunities, a programme that provides support young people in Northern Ireland. They also heard about use of the Erasmus programme by South Eastern Regional College to support teacher training and vocational qualifications.

The study visit provided an opportunity to learn about the overall structure and impact of the Peace programme, the impact of the organisations funded by the programme on their communities and the ongoing challenges on the ground. Contact Group members noted the many of the lessons learnt and good practices developed through these programmes are applicable and important for action to tackle community cohesion in other parts of the UK and EU.