



Department of Social and Family Affairs

Minister Mary Coughlan Represents Ireland At British-Irish Council On Social Inclusion

Mary Coughlan TD, Minister for Social and Family Affairs attended the meeting of Representatives from the British-Irish Council on Social Inclusion in Cardiff on 15 and 16 July 2004. The meeting was hosted by Edwina Hart AM MBE, the Welsh Assembly Government's Minister for Social Justice and Regeneration.

The British-Irish Council was established under the Strand Three Provisions of the Good Friday Agreement as a forum for its Members to exchange information and best practice and, where possible, take forward joint action.

"I am delighted that the Council's work has included promoting best practice, at both national and local levels. It has looked at improving access to financial products and services such as credit unions and money advice," Minister Coughlan said.

Delegates at the meeting welcomed a most useful study visit to Dublin last December 1st and 2nd when they visited a MABS project to see at first hand the procedures established to help people on low incomes to tackle debt problems. Delegates were very interested in MABS work with financial institutions and other organisations, especially the Credit Unions.

"The Irish service is the only centrally funded money advice service in the EU. While other countries have established procedures to help people on low incomes to tackle debt problems the MABS service remains unique and internationally recognised as a model of best practice," said Minister Coughlan.

Ministers recognised that the problems of social and financial exclusion affect communities throughout all British-Irish Council Administrations. The meeting heard progress reports on the range of strategies that Members are working on to tackle these problems.

It was noted that financial inclusion strategies can make a major contribution to improving individual and household income, employability, health and well being. At a community level, financial inclusion programmes can support ownership of assets and the capacity of communities to foster wealth creation and enable local businesses to grow.



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The Council has studied efforts to improve financial capability across British-Irish Council Member Administrations and it has examined how governments can best support the development of social enterprises aimed at benefiting the economic and social regeneration of communities.

Ministers agreed that British-Irish Council Member Administrations have learned a great deal from each other and that exchanges of information have had a significant influence on developments in financial inclusion in several of the British-Irish Council Member Administrations. They reaffirmed the important role that financial inclusion can play in social inclusion and anti-poverty strategies more generally. British-Irish Council Member Administrations will continue to exchange information and ideas and learn from each other's experience.

It was agreed that the next topic for work within the Council Social Inclusion theme would be Disability - particularly in areas of access to work, education and training.

ENDS July 16th 2004