

Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee

4th Meeting, 2022 (Session 6), Thursday, 3 February

Inquiry into the Scottish Government's international work – evidence session with the Cabinet Secretary

Introduction

Today's evidence session is an opportunity to discuss with the Cabinet Secretary the issues which have been raised with the committee during its inquiry into the Scottish Government's international work. Areas which Members may wish to raise with the Cabinet Secretary include:

- How the Scottish Government is engaging with the EU following Brexit and what challenges it now faces as part of a third country.
- How the Scottish Government is engaging with the Trade and Cooperation Agreement including the Partnership Council and Specialised Committees.
- The Scottish Government's commitment to continued alignment with EU law and to developing a European culture in Scotland.
- How the Scottish Government will provide information to the Scottish Parliament on the operation of the TCA and on its commitment to continued alignment with EU law.
- The Scottish Government's wider international policy approach, which countries it is seeking to prioritise engagement with and the development of the new International Framework.
- The locations of the Scottish Government's international offices along with the aims and outcomes for those offices.

- How the Scottish Government works with the UK Government to pursue its own international priorities and to complement the work of the UK Government.
- How the Scottish Government's international development policy is developing following the recent review and in light of the increased funding for the international development fund.
- Given the commitment in the Programme for Government 2021-22 to reconstitute a Ministerial working group on Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development, how the Scottish Government is seeking to ensure international development issues inform development of its domestic policy agenda.

This paper provides a short summary of the written evidence the committee received along with a detailed outline of the oral evidence taken by the committee. (SPICE has previously produced an overview of the Scottish Government External Affairs Policy, which members may also find useful and can be found in the [Committee's papers](#) for its meeting on 25 November 2021 - see Annexe C of those papers, pages 34-41).

Summary of written evidence

The Committee also received 21 written submissions. 5 of the responses received were from individuals and 16 from organisations. A [summary of the written evidence received has already been provided to the Committee by SPICE](#).

To assist members of the Committee, a summary of the main themes which arose from the written evidence are provided below.

Engagement with the EU

The responses to the call for views supported the view that the Scottish Government should continue to engage with the European Union following the UK's departure from the European Union. Some respondents also suggested that the Scottish Government should prioritise its EU engagement over its external engagement with the rest of the world.

Whilst it was recognised that the UK's departure from the EU has changed the nature of Scotland's engagement with the bloc, there was agreement that the Scottish Government's focus on engagement with the EU should be targeted at a limited number of policy areas with respondents clear that the Scottish Government should focus its engagement on policy areas of mutual interest such as climate change and energy policy.

The impact of the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement

Respondents recognised that following the entry into force of the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA), a number of the policy areas covered by the TCA (and the Withdrawal Agreement) are areas of devolved competence. As a result, it was agreed that there should be a role for the Scottish Government and Scottish Parliament in engaging with the TCA. Responses suggested this engagement should be on the basis of a cross-UK approach to engagement with the EU.

Most respondents said that it was important that the Scottish Parliament continues to scrutinise the operation of the TCA because of the number of areas covered which sit in areas of devolved competence. There was also agreement that parliamentary scrutiny of the Scottish Government's engagement with the European Union is also important.

External Affairs

Whilst most respondents suggested continued engagement with the EU should be a priority, it was recognised that wider external engagement was also necessary. As with its EU engagement policy, it was suggested that the Scottish Government's external affairs policy should adopt a strategic approach if it is to be effective in its external relations and that this includes ensuring that priorities in external relations are driven by, and match, domestic priorities.

There was general agreement that the Scottish Government should prioritise its international engagement through both a thematic and geographic focus. In addition, most respondents who addressed the question suggested that the Scottish Government should use culture and soft power to promote Scotland internationally.

International Development

Several responses to the call for views were received from organisations working in the international development sector. These responses were clear that international development should be a clear priority for the Scottish Government's external affairs policy.

Respondents also suggested that Scotland's international development policy should be based around developing thematic expertise in areas such as climate change, gender and migration including supporting refugees.

There was no clear consensus on whether the geographic focus of the international development policy should be focussed on a small number of countries or more widely.

Working with the UK Government

There was general agreement amongst those who responded to this question that the Scottish and UK Governments shared many of the same international priorities. It was suggested that with developments to intergovernmental mechanisms, the devolved administrations could play a more significant role in shaping the UK's foreign policies post Brexit.

Summary of oral evidence

The Committee has previously held the following evidence sessions for its inquiry into the Scottish Government's international work:

[25 November 2021](#) – Evidence session with Dr Kirsty Hughes, fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh; Dr Adam Marks, international policy executive at the Law Society of Scotland; and Professor Murray Pittock, University of Glasgow and co-chair of the Scottish Arts and Humanities Alliance.

[9 December 2021](#) – Evidence session with Anthony Salamone, managing director of European Merchants, and Dr Fabian Zuleeg, chief executive and chief economist at the European Policy Centre and then from David McAllister MEP, chair of the European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs.

[16 December 2021](#) – Evidence session with the following officials from the Scottish Government: Martin Johnson, EU director, Brussels office; Dr Alexandra Stein, head of Berlin office; and John Webster, head of London office.

[13 January 2022](#) – Evidence session with David Hope-Jones OBE for the Scotland Malawi Partnership; Mark Majewsky Anderson from Glasgow Caledonian University and Lewis Ryder-Jones for Scotland's International Development Alliance.

Prioritising EU engagement

Much of the oral evidence the committee has heard has focused on future engagement with the EU whilst in the written evidence received, there was a majority of respondents who felt engagement at EU level should take precedence over wider international engagement. On prioritising EU engagement, Dr Kirsty Hughes told the Committee:

“There are limited resources and the question is how to prioritise them. The impact of Brexit in itself would make a case for there to be greater focus on Europe, which we will come on to if it is in the evidence and the questions. The EU and the European Economic Area remain Scotland's biggest trade partners, if we include all the European Free Trade Association countries—just over 50 per cent of Scotland's trade is with EU and EFTA countries. They are also geographically close and, in many ways, they are sympathetic—if that is the right word—or reasonably closely aligned with Scottish and UK policy interests and priorities, for instance in the area of climate...

... Certainly, there is a case for Scotland also to be international, but it makes perfect sense to put Europe at the core of that.”

Anthony Salamone suggested that following Brexit the Scottish Government needs a well-developed strategy for how it seeks to engage with the EU due to now being a third country. He also told the Committee that there is a need for greater Europeanisation in Scotland:

“With regard to a policy culture, I think that it would be useful to have a greater degree of what I would describe as Europeanisation of Scottish governance. It is not a question of engagement, as engagement already exists, but Scottish politics collectively—the Scottish Government and Scottish institutions generally—needs to deepen its degree of interconnection with what is happening in Brussels and in member state capitals and elsewhere. We do not see Scottish politics as having as much of a connection in that regard, which that makes it a bit more difficult for the Scottish Government to have a strategic approach.

If we look at existing Scottish Government documentation, there is a degree of optimism, which is normal for a Government, but I think that there is sometimes over optimism with regard to how much influence and success the Scottish Government will be able to have in the years ahead.”

Dr Adam Marks linked engagement with the EU and the Scottish Government’s commitment to keep pace with EU law arguing that this policy approach necessitated continued close engagement with the EU:

“On the keeping pace power, how much it will or will not be used and how much time it will take are interesting questions. However, it is inevitable that working with the EU will remain important. I also emphasise that it is useful to work with some of the EEA countries and Switzerland, since they deal with issues that are similar to those that the UK and Scotland will have to deal with regarding their relations with the EU. In particular, Norway has been very good at working out how to engage in Brussels.

In looking more broadly at the importance of being aware of policy developments, areas such as Bavaria have done very well on informing people in Germany, Bavaria itself and Brussels about what matters to them. Organisations such as Scotland house could seek to emulate such models.”

Dr Fabian Zuleeg suggested that the Scottish Government’s commitment to continued EU alignment was a practical expression of Europeanisation but that it presented some challenges:

“I would have this question for the Scottish political system: what does alignment mean and to what extent does alignment mean making difficult choices that might lead to divergence from the rest of the UK on certain issues? Of course, that will always depend on the constitutional settlement and on what kinds of choices the Scottish Government can make.

Alignment is a very ambitious commitment. I am not saying that it is not something that you should do, but to be truly aligned with what is happening in the European Union is an enormous task for both member states and sub-national actors within member states, especially when they have legislative powers that are touched by European policy. If that is really the direction in which Scotland wants to go, it will require quite a lot of focus and investment to make sure that the alignment is meaningful.

That also means having a two-way discussion with the European Union. Often, alignment is not just about having the text of a law that is then transmitted into the national system, but about how that is interpreted and then realised and implemented. Alignment is a very far-reaching goal. If you do it well, it means that there is a certain Europeanisation of the debate, but Europeanisation goes further than that. Alignment is a major task.”

On the scale of the Scottish Government commitment to alignment with EU law, Dr Adam Marks told the Committee:

“you can use the keeping pace power to follow EU law or not. To give you a sense of the scale of what is happening in EU law, year to year—I have just dug out this information—1,356 legal acts were adopted in 2020 across the EU. Many of those will not be relevant to Scotland in trying to keep pace with EU law, and there are questions about what the objectives are within that.”

Martin Johnson, Head of the Scottish Government’s Brussels office set out the office’s role in supporting the Scottish Government’s EU alignment policy:

“The Brussels office’s role on alignment is to feed back into the Scottish Government on two main things. The first is helping to ensure that there is a good sense of the strategic big picture. A lot of what my team does is about reporting on latest developments. A heads-of-state Council meeting is happening right now, and we had the fit for 55 follow-up package of announcements earlier this week, which had some interesting and relevant stuff for Scotland. The team here is providing information on that big picture through various channels.

Secondly, we are engaged in specific areas to support colleagues. For example, if they need to know more about the fit for 55 climate and environment package, we can help to set up a conversation or clarify information—we can help those channels run. There may be legislation coming down the track that we might want to have a conversation about. To pick one example, at the moment, the EU is thinking a lot about hate crime legislation, which is an area that the Scottish Parliament has looked at in recent times. We might be able to have a conversation about that and say, “This is our experience. This may be of use.”

Whilst witnesses providing both oral and written evidence suggested that engagement with the EU should be a priority, it was also recognised that following Brexit international engagement was also important. For example, how does the UK and Scotland engage with the world following Brexit and what are the global

priorities. Dr Adam Marks suggested that adopting priorities on a thematic rather than geographic approach made sense:

“As for the issue of focus, I go back to an earlier question about whether things should be approached on a geographic or thematic basis. I say that, to a degree, it makes more sense to take a thematic approach, because that means that you can pick the topics that you want—climate change, or whatever. You could then work across multiple places on those topics, which is where co-ordination between the UK and Scottish Governments becomes quite important.”

Challenges engaging with the EU following Brexit

Whilst the evidence the Committee received was clear that continued engagement with the EU should be a priority, witnesses also set out that as a result of Brexit the opportunities for engagement have changed. For example, Dr Fabian Zuleeg set out how formal engagement with the EU will now take place through the governance infrastructure established by the Trade and Cooperation Agreement:

“I would put a bit of a reality check on that, however, in that Scotland is no longer part of the EU. The relationship between Scotland and the EU will not exclusively go through the trade and co-operation agreement, but the overall relationship of the UK with the EU will have a significant, if not decisive, impact on the relationship that Scotland can have with the EU.

Much of the formal or official engagement will be done within the framework of the TCA and the bodies that have been set up under it. That is a limitation, especially since, at the moment, the overall relationship is not going well. That has an impact on co-operation across a wide range of areas where there is potential to work together more. At the moment, that does not seem to be the wish of the British Government, which is limiting the opportunity for that.”

David McAllister MEP told the Committee Scotland can pursue a different and more informal engagement with the EU within the limits of its constitutional position. He explained:

“that includes exchanges such as that which we are having this morning as well as informal exchanges on topics of mutual interest, which will be particularly important. Scotland house in Brussels is doing an excellent job. It is, of course, a useful channel for any kind of engagement with the EU, as well as the representations that you have now established in some of the member states.”

Martin Johnson, Head of the Scottish Government’s Brussels office set out how it now engages with the European Parliament and the other EU institutions following Brexit:

“You have heard evidence, I think, about the friends of Scotland group of MEPs, which we set up a couple of years ago, since EU exit. It is a very

effective mechanism through which we can engage with a wide group of MEPs from all kinds of political backgrounds who have a general interest in Scotland. That allows us to create a dialogue and is a way for ministers to engage and for us to connect to development of the policy agenda, for example, which links back to alignment.”

Dr Zuleeg also focussed on the challenge facing a third country in seeking to engage with the EU though he added that the doors of the EU institutions are always open:

“Over the years, we have seen that institutions, member states and regions are very happy to engage with other third countries and with other actors in the system, but it requires additional engagement and additional investment. In my view, it also requires a focus in terms of what Scotland might want to be engaged in, because given the breadth of topics, it is very difficult to be engaged in everything.”

Dr Zuleeg highlighted the way in which Norway (both through its government and other public authorities) has successfully engaged with the EU institutions by being selective about the issues to focus on.

Anthony Salamone suggested that as a part of a third-country, it was important that the Scottish Government ensured that its own priorities connect with the ongoing priorities of the EU and that:

“You do not want to be chasing the EU agenda constantly as it changes, or chasing each presidency as it changes and saying, “What are the priorities of this presidency and how do we connect with them?”.”

Dr Zuleeg summarised how third country engagement is seen from the EU’s perspective:

“I think that the EU is also a political body. The components parts of the EU are political and the challenge for third countries or sub-state actors in third countries is, to put it bluntly, what it is that they bring to the party. Why should the other side be interested in such co-operation or in investing in that relationship? If you are talking about member states, or even sub-state actors in member states, the logic of why you are engaging is much clearer, because those are the actors that you will have to co-operate with on an on-going basis. The demand from the third country is always, “What is it that you can bring to this? How do you contribute to the objectives of the EU?” On that basis, you can have a fruitful exchange.”

Martin Johnson, Head of the Scottish Government’s Brussels office set out how the challenge his team faces following Brexit:

“The reality is that we have left the EU and the transition period has now ended, so we are outside the system and we are not automatically plugged in as we were previously. Other witnesses have talked about how that has certain implications. We are not in certain rooms, we are not in processes and structures, and we do not have direct access to the information that we had

before. Also, we are not able to influence the development of legislation in the way that a member state would. That is a significant change.

For me and the team here, that creates new challenges around how to build networks, how to get good information and how to plug into the places that we need to plug into. Can we still exert influence? It is very difficult, but we should continue to look for opportunities.”

Scrutiny of the post-Brexit landscape

The Committee received evidence setting out the importance of the Scottish Parliament’s role in scrutinising the new post Brexit landscape. This includes scrutiny of the governance arrangements in the Trade and Cooperation Agreement and also the Scottish Government’s commitment to continued alignment with EU law.

Witnesses also suggested that this new landscape also means that the Scottish Parliament may need to adopt new scrutiny processes. For example, Dr Kirsty Hughes told the Committee:

“Brexit represents a very big change to how the UK’s relations with the EU are scrutinised, here in the Scottish Parliament and elsewhere. It is certainly true that that makes scrutiny more difficult. To state an obvious but nonetheless important point, it also means potentially creating new processes and structures. It is important for the Scottish Parliament to find a way to play a role in the new structures that are already in place or that are being fleshed out.”

Anthony Salamone stressed the importance of the Scottish Parliament scrutinising the details and operation of the new Trade and Cooperation Agreement:

“More generally, there has been a lot of emphasis in the Scottish Parliament on Brexit and the formal arrangements under the trade and co-operation agreement between the EU and the UK. That is natural, given that the agreement is so consequential to our engagement or relationship with the EU. It is worthwhile to continue the scrutiny, and perhaps to develop it more, of the substance of what the Scottish Government is doing in its engagement with the EU.”

This view was also expressed by David McAllister MEP who told the Committee:

“We as parliamentarians have two key roles when it comes to the implementation of the TCA. We need to ensure close scrutiny of the proper implementation of the withdrawal agreement and the trade and co-operation agreement, and we need to play a full running role in driving forward the debate on future areas of co-operation between the European Union and the United Kingdom.”

Linked to this, witnesses stressed it was important that the Scottish Parliament and the Constitution Committee in particular engaged with the governance structures established under the Trade and Cooperation Agreement including the Partnership

Council, the Specialised Committees and the Parliamentary Partnership Assembly. Critical to this engagement, it was highlighted that there needs to be transparency about decision making within these bodies to allow Scottish Parliament scrutiny.

On the importance of scrutinising the Scottish Government's commitment to keep pace with EU law, Professor Murray Pittock told the Committee:

"This committee's role in scrutinising the alignment of Scottish legislation with EU legislation will also be important. When it comes to the importance of engaging directly with the EU and policy makers on that, Scotland's international hubs—notably, the Brussels office—will obviously have key roles to play."

Anthony Salamone also told the Committee that Parliamentary scrutiny of the Scottish Government's international policy was important:

"The Parliament has a crucial role. It is important to recognise that the Scottish Government, as stated in the programme for government, intends to increase its engagement in the European and international plane. To me, it would make perfect sense for the Scottish Parliament to increase its scrutiny of what the Scottish Government is doing in the area. That scrutiny could focus on what the substantive content of the global affairs framework will be—what priorities, areas of focus and strategic objectives the Scottish Government will articulate—and how it is going about that."

The Scottish Government's international framework

The written evidence received by the Committee suggested that the Scottish Government needed to update its international framework. The Scottish Government has committed to updating the framework though no timeframe has been indicated.

Dr Kirsty Hughes told the Committee:

"It has an international relations strategy, but I think that it needs a new assessment. It is not very strategic or coherent, and I am not sure how long it has been in place. Europe probably needs to be at the heart of the Government's international strategy.

However, what is then needed is to put the policy priorities across the geographical priorities, in a sense, and see where that takes us on whether the international offices that are already in place need to be further expanded, or whether those priorities can be adequately serviced from the small number of offices that already exist. Obviously, there is a risk of being too thinly spread."

Anthony Salamone told the Committee that the Scottish Government's international framework needs to better set out a post-Brexit strategy for international engagement:

“It would be useful for the Scottish Government to articulate a post-Brexit strategy. Of course, we have an international framework, which is about two pages long, and there is a promise of a global affairs framework, which I hope will articulate that kind of vision.”

Scottish Government’s international presence

The Committee heard evidence on the geographic spread and role of the Scottish Government’s international offices including its European hubs.

Martin Johnson, the Head of the Scottish Government’s office in Brussels set out the two outcomes set out in the National Performance Framework which the Scottish Government’s international offices are seeking to align with:

- “We have a globally competitive, entrepreneurial, inclusive and sustainable economy”
- “We are open, connected and make a positive contribution internationally”.

Martin Johnson later set out for the Committee how each office developed a business plan and identified the outcomes to be achieved:

“The starting point is that the international network has five outcomes. They are: reputation; businesses trading internationally more effectively; research and innovation capability being promoted and partnerships and funding secured; investment coming into Scotland; and, finally, Scotland’s interests in the EU and beyond being protected and enhanced. Those outcomes are at quite a high level, but they are the starting point, not just for the Brussels office but for the other overseas offices.

The outcomes are converted into business plans in each office. In the past two or three years, the plans have increasingly been developed as joint SDI and Scottish Government projects or as Scotland Europa and Scottish Government projects, in the Brussels context. The plans generate more specific objectives and aims and, at the end of each reporting year, each office produces an evaluation report that is fed back centrally to colleagues, the director for external affairs and the international board that sits above all that.

Martin Johnson also set out for the Committee how outcomes are measured:

“On building on that specifically, what kinds of things are measurable? Clearly, economic and other forms of diplomacy are, by their nature, quite difficult to measure. Some of the things that they deliver are inherently medium term or longer term. Things like reputation and enhancement of reputation—which relate to what Alexandra Stein said about cultural events—are hard to measure, although we try to measure them. It is an evolving situation in which we are improving as we go through measuring the likes of

volume of senior ministerial engagements, the number of events that we promote, participation in events directly and in terms of their audience, and how the social media footprint grows and the nature of it.

On the trading and economic front, are there specific investments or outcomes that we can point to? That kind of hard economic measurement is more in the SDI space, but I think that it is something that we should be alive to, as a network.”

In terms of the Scottish Government’s European strategy and the balance between hubs, the office in Brussels and teams back in Scotland, Dr Kirsty Hughes told the Committee there appeared to be a good balance of resources:

“However, when we look at the Scottish Government’s European strategy, we are not only talking about the hubs and its office in Brussels. There are also groups or units—whatever the correct term is—of officials in the civil service in Scotland who work on co-ordinating European affairs.

My impression is that there is a fairly coherent structure at the moment in terms of fitting the hubs into the wider European strategy bodies and in terms of the overall European strategy that is being co-ordinated jointly out of Edinburgh and Brussels at senior level. That is good.”

The Scottish Government’s heads of offices were asked about the location of the international offices and the number of hubs in Europe. In response, the witnesses highlighted the importance of geographic proximity for trade volumes. On the wider question about locations for offices outwith Europe, John Webster added:

“When it comes to wider international locations and whether we should be in Australia and New Zealand, I am sure that there are compelling reasons for developing relationships—historical reasons, to begin with. I am sure that my ministers would love to do so if we had the capability and resources. However, based on my experience, when it comes to the deployment of limited resources, looking to a near neighbourhood makes a lot of sense from an economic and a trading perspective.”

All three of the Scottish Government’s international office representatives emphasised the importance of cultural diplomacy in their work. Alexandra Stein, Head of the Scottish Government’s Berlin Hub told the Committee:

“There are two very clear approaches in our cultural diplomacy work in Germany. First, it is part of our soft diplomacy work. We use events such as St Andrew’s nights and concerts to invite political and economic contacts whom we have made over the past while and to reaffirm and deepen relationships. For example, at our latest Burns supper, Scottish Development International had two tables for its invited guests. That has helped very much on the trade and investment side, and it links to a memorandum of understanding with Hamburg.”

The Committee has also sought to understand the different roles of each of the Scottish Government's international offices. On the role of the Scottish Government's office in Brussels, David McAllister MEP told the Committee:

"I guess that Scotland house will be closely following what we are doing and what the European Commission, the European Council and the European Parliament are discussing, and that it will be providing the Scottish Government with all the relevant information. I am always very impressed with the work of Scotland house. It is a small but very effective team—it is very visible and present, and it reaches out. I understand that Scotland house is working on a network of people, including myself, who have relations with Scotland and who are dedicated to bringing Scotland and the whole United Kingdom as close as possible to the European Union."

Alexandra Stein suggested that for the Berlin hub, things had not changed markedly as a result of Brexit:

"That said, however, we seek to engage on matters of substance and matters where we have common bilateral interests, whether those are around climate change, renewable energy or higher education. Those conversations have very much continued and we are still engaging. In some cases, we find slightly different ways through, but it is very much about finding the positive way forward. Although Brexit has now been concluded, the door is still very much open to us. We still find it very easy to have all the conversations and to start partnerships. There is certainly a willingness to engage and to find new ways of doing things."

And John Webster, Head of the Scottish Government's London hub set out his office's role:

"In what I do in London, I of course engage every day with overseas embassies through the normal course of the diplomatic circuit. A priority for me is to engage with EU embassies and to maintain those links. One important aspect of an effective diplomatic or international network is that you co-ordinate both your inputs and your outputs, understanding what information you are looking for and is important. It is also important to make sure that your reporting goes to the right people across that network, so that we are all informed, can speak with one voice and are working to an overall strategy in terms of what we are looking for."

John Webster also told the Committee that he thought the London hub was unique in terms of its innovative model:

"The Scotland House London model is interesting; I would say that it is unique. I have never, in my 35-year career in diplomacy, seen an innovative model like it. In fact, just in the past couple of months, I have had visits from a couple of London-based embassies that are considering the model as one that they might like to follow in their international network, and as they reshape their presence in London. I am due a visit from the Spanish ambassador early in the new year for exactly that purpose."

You talked about inviting businesses on to the platform. Scotland House London is split into two distinct functions on the same platform. It has an intergovernmental partnership, through which the Scottish Government works with contributory partners: Scottish Development International, Scottish Enterprise, Highlands and Islands Enterprise and VisitScotland. We hope to add to that partnership model with other agencies in Scotland in the new year.

We have a business hub that offers membership services not just to Scottish businesses. Scottish universities and innovation centres are also members of Scotland House London. They can subscribe through our membership model, and for their subscription they get a top-class serviced office with a networking space, a boardroom facility, an events space and the opportunity to interact with Government and agencies and to get support for what they are doing.

That also gives us the opportunity to run events with members that create a community of practice, which enables us to tell a more holistic story about who we are and what kind of country Scotland is today. It enables us to attract a more diverse set of audiences for which our doing this as the Government alone might not be so attractive.”

Anthony Salamone suggested there was a need for the Scottish Government’s international offices and hubs to work collectively and ensure there is “a sufficient interconnection between them”. In addition, he suggested that the Scottish Government needed to better set out the strategic reasons behind the locations chosen for the offices:

“However, it is worth having a suitable rationale and justification for those offices, why the Scottish Government feels that it needs new offices, why it has chosen the particular locations that it has chosen and why those offices will be in the service of whatever strategic objectives that the Scottish Government outlines. A clearly articulated strategy is needed. Making that information available for the public to scrutinise, as well as for the Parliament to scrutinise and perhaps even take a decision on, seems to be the logical approach to me.”

The Committee also heard that it was important that the work of the international offices is evaluated and that outcomes are reported to Parliament. For example, Dr Adam Marks told the Committee:

“There should be a commitment on reporting. I agree that it might not be necessary to report every Burns supper, so the thresholds in relation to what needs to be reported require careful thought. However, there should be reporting of meetings and of what is being done. Confidentiality would need to be taken into account, for commercial reasons if nothing else. I refer to my previous statement that transparency is the friend of much of the process, but there will always be some limits. As I said, a commitment to keeping the Parliament up to date on EU law as it develops would be useful, particularly to this committee, so that it can assess what is happening.”

Dr Kirsty Hughes backed up this view:

“Scrutiny is important. It is important in and of itself, because we need transparency and accountability, but—as has come up repeatedly this morning—we also need more coherence and clarity in international policy with regard to Scotland and how it relates to UK Government actions. A regular and reasonably detailed reporting agreement would be beneficial. We can smile about whether we want to know how many Burns suppers there are, but to be frank, one assumes that the hubs are reporting back to their European directors in the civil service, so it ought to be perfectly easy to report whether there were five or 55 Burns suppers.”

Engagement with the UK Government

Whilst international relations is a reserved matter under the Scotland Act 1998, it is generally accepted that Scotland should also have an international presence. How the Scottish Government works with the UK Government to pursue its international priorities is a focus of the Committee’s inquiry.

John Webster, Head of the Scottish Government’s London hub set out how he worked with the UK Government in his previous role as head of the Scottish Government’s Dublin hub:

“I think that you are asking about how we interact with UK partners on the platforms that we share with the UK. I am sure that we will get into this later in the conversation, but my most relevant experience on that comes from some years working on the British embassy platform in Dublin as the head of the Scottish Government office there. Relationships on that platform were excellent. There was a real sense from the UK ambassador and his team of the complementarity of what we both do. There was also a sense that the Scottish Government being on the platform allowed a more complete and holistic picture of and story to be told about what Scotland offers in Ireland and the doors that that opens.

There is work to be done on how we share information about the discussions that we have with Governments in other countries. Some of that is sensitive. The UK Government will be reluctant to share sensitive diplomatic reporting and we must respect that, but personal relationships on the British embassy platforms and the quality of the relationships are the means through which we will improve our sense of that picture.”

Martin Johnson echoed these comments telling the Committee that the Scottish Government’s Brussels office worked closely with the UK Government mission to the EU and that they work collaboratively in a number of areas. For the Berlin hub, Alexandra Stein told the Committee that they also worked closely with UK colleagues in Berlin:

“There is a clear programme of sharing information. There is a rhythm of information-sharing meetings, whether they are part of the regular embassy calls or involve particular areas, such as public health, the climate or energy, where we think that Scotland has particular interests in the embassy...”

...We have helped to provide speakers in other areas. For example, earlier this year the embassy organised an information workshop on the Under2 coalition and, given that Scotland had taken over the European co-chairmanship of the coalition, we felt that it was more than appropriate that we should be part of the panel. We were duly represented on that panel as partners, we made main presentations and then we followed up with individual states within Germany, which then expressed interest in joining the coalition.

Another area is the promotion of understanding of devolved issues. For example, people may just not be aware of our engagement in youth exchanges or language learning. Germany or the embassy may be engaging with the Department for Education, but the Scottish Government also has an interest because education policy is devolved. There is a lot of information sharing and seeking to contribute.”

David McAllister MEP told the Committee that one way in which the Scottish Government can pursue its relations with the EU is through its relationship with the UK Government:

“I believe that, on the one hand, Scotland should pursue its engagement with the EU by pursuing its interests with the UK Government. Bearing in mind Scotland’s current constitutional situation, that formal channel remains important.”

Similar to David McAllister’s view, Dr Adam Marks told the Committee that the Scottish Government could take account of what the UK is doing and where appropriate adopt a coordinated UK approach:

“The Scottish Government’s work outwith those structures should take into account the framework of what the UK is doing. Again, what that work is should be transparent for this committee and the UK Government. The Scottish Government could meet, for example, the European Friends of Scotland group, to try to influence the European Parliament. Again, the Norwegians have done such things very effectively in trying to influence the European Parliament. That is the sort of good work that should be done. It needs to be done in a way that is co-ordinated with a whole-UK approach, and it is a process that must cut both ways. The UK must take into account the devolution settlement, and the devolved Governments must take into account wider UK Government policy.”

Professor Murray Pittock suggested that the Scottish Government can add value to the UK Government’s international engagement because “the great advantage is in extending the range of the team, as it were, because the Scottish voice resonates strongly abroad. In many cases, it aids the UK voice”.

Dr Kirsty Hughes suggested a review of the UK internal structures governing international relations:

“Interestingly, despite the differences, I do not think that there are necessarily big clashes. As Dr Marks and Professor Pittock have said, we need to sort out the structures for intergovernmental relations and make them better. A lot of

what the 2013 memorandum of understanding—the concordat—says on why and how devolved Administrations, including Scotland, can and should engage in international relations through and with the UK Government is very good, but it obviously needs updating. It was drawn up at a time when we were still in the EU.”

Anthony Salamone also suggested that to facilitate cooperation between the Scottish and UK Governments, a new concordat on international relations should be agreed:

“We have an international relations concordat that dates back to 2013, and the proposal is to leave that as it is. There could be merit in seeing whether it would be possible to renew that concordat and, as part of such a renewal, to reflect a bit more how things work at the moment.”

The Scottish Government’s international development policy

The key message to come from the Committee’s evidence session with international development stakeholders focussed on the importance of ensuring an approach of policy coherence at domestic and international levels. Lewis Ryder-Jones told the Committee:

“Coherence issues can delve into any other policy area domestically and can potentially consider the different elements of the ripple effects of decisions and actions that take place in Scotland. That can include our trade and business activity. It can of course include our climate plans and ambitions for net zero. It can also include Scottish Government spending on procurement and the supply chains that are involved in that.

When it comes to policy coherence solutions, it is still our view that there is much work to be done. From the perspective of those who work in the area across the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, other international organisations and the United Nations, where the sustainable development goals have a specific policy coherence target, one of the most important things is that systems need to be put in place by the institutions that provide scrutiny to ensure that coherence is at least recognised—or that incoherence and trade-offs are recognised—at political level.”

It was suggested that other parliamentary committees should consider the international impact of domestic issues relating to things such as rural affairs or the climate in order to ensure that the trade-offs and policy coherence issues are considered. Lewis Ryder-Jones also told the Committee:

“I put it back to the Parliament to say that, without genuine sustainable development impact assessment tools—for example, the tool that was developed by the Scottish Parliament information centre in the previous session of Parliament—being rolled out across all committees, the Parliament cannot properly take on its scrutiny role to ensure that value for money is achieved across any area of policy when it comes to international impact. We know that the low-income countries of the world have been historically and

still are very dependent on the outcomes of the trade and climate action of rich countries such as Scotland.”

Linked to developing policy coherence, the witnesses also told the Committee that developing global citizens in Scotland is important. Lewis Ryder-Jones said:

“At its heart the issue is about creating global citizens in Scotland. I do not think that we can make genuine progress without an increasing awareness among the general public of how their actions impact the social, environmental and economic outcomes of people elsewhere. A big part of legislation to that degree must include an element of upskilling of civil servants, parliamentarians and the wider public on the impact of our actions. We cannot now, if we ever could, decouple our own actions from what happens elsewhere.”

The witnesses were asked about whether the Scottish Government’s international offices could include a focus on international development, for example by opening an office in Malawi. David Hope-Jones told the Committee:

“I think that the option of having a footprint on the ground in Malawi would strengthen the Scottish Government’s work, but that is not easy and it needs to be done right. The Scottish Government is to be commended for the fact that, since 2012, it has core funded our sister network in Malawi, which is the equally unimaginatively named Malawi Scotland Partnership. It does the same as we do on this side: it co-ordinates, represents and supports the many civic links between Malawi and Scotland.

I applaud successive Scottish Governments for respecting the independence, autonomy and value of engaging civic society in that way. There is opportunity for the Scottish Government to meaningfully have a footprint—a small office—in Malawi, but it should not blur the distinction between the governmental and the non-governmental. It should not disempower what is already there as a Malawi-led civic enterprise co-ordinating the Malawian civic side, and nor should it confuse or complicate the fact that the Government of Malawi, of course, determines policy in Malawi for that side.

The fundamental relationship between Scotland and Malawi is not necessarily one of big numbers or corporate entities; it a relationship of friendship, human understanding and dignified partnership. The ability to have a civil servant or two in Malawi to develop the long-term relationships with the Government of Malawi and with civic society there would probably help things. However, it would be a very different approach from what is happening in Washington and elsewhere, because it would not be about Scotland trying to have influence or about building trading relationships; it would be about depth of understanding and strength of relationship.”

Lewis Ryder-Jones added:

“If there were to be more Government offices across the world—I firmly agree that that is a very different thing from having civil society actors in those settings—we would be in a better position to consider investing more in the

areas of the world that are currently considered lower-to-middle income and where progress can be made in understanding and cultural ties can be extended and increased. That said, I do not believe that that should necessarily be a Government office. I think that civil society investment is a much more powerful expression of that kind of development.”

Mark Majewsky Anderson built on the need to support the work of Scottish civil societies across the globe suggesting that the Scottish Government can take advantage of that international presence:

“The solution is to use the help of civic society organisations and universities to gain a footprint in countries across the world. Our university has extensive networks in Latin America, not just with universities but with Governments and civic society organisations. I urge the Scottish Government to use those organisations to map where we have a presence in countries and what that presence looks like. The Government could then take advantage of that and ensure that we have more of a foothold. It would then be able to make an informed decision about the potential for investment in future.”

David Hope-Jones told the Committee that the Scottish Government has an essential job which is to co-ordinate and bring together the different work that is being done, and to have a single touch point with Malawi to ensure that Scotland is really listening to Malawi’s priorities.

He also told the Committee about the success of the Scottish Government small grants programme which was funded through the international development fund but was closed in 2021. He told the Committee:

“The small grants programme is probably one of the best bits of what the Scottish Government has achieved through its international development programme over the past 16 or 17 years or so...

... My first-hand experience is that some of those small grants had a remarkable impact on the ground. This is in no way a coded criticism of larger organisations and more structural approaches, which are equally important, but I was astonished at the value being achieved using relatively small quantities of money and the impact that you could see on the ground through, principally, volunteer-run organisations.

I think that the small grants programme was particularly well thought through in that it looked to deliver not just project grants. It also provided capacity-building grants and grants that allowed organisations to say, “Look, we’ve got a great idea but we just need to put in a bit of research and thought. We need to put in time to listen to our colleagues and counterparts in Malawi to develop this idea before we start the doing”.

On the reason for closing the small grants programme, David Hope-Jones told the Committee:

“From the outset, I expressed my reservations about how the review of the small grants programme was set up. The terms of reference of the review say

that it should not consider the impact that projects have had. I completely agree with what Mark Ruskell said. We are talking about taxpayers' money, and its use absolutely must be led by evidence. However, I do not see how you can review the success of a programme without looking at the success of the projects in it. In fact, the terms of reference do not necessarily require the contractor even to look at whether the programme's objectives have succeeded.

The end report made the criticism that there was no clear evidence of success against the objectives of the programme. However, it was very clear that that was because of the way in which the objectives were written at the beginning of the process. That was not necessarily due to any failure of the programme. It is hard to measure success because of how the terms of reference were worded when that was first set out.”

Despite the UK's departure from the EU, Mark Majewsky Anderson told the Committee that it was important that Scotland continues to develop links with EU based bodies and organisations including in the area of international development. He suggested that this might assist in continued access to EU funding based on these partnerships.

Finally, David Hope-Jones set out for the Committee why it is important that Scotland has an international development policy for historical reasons and added that Scotland's programme can add real value in addition to the UK's international development funding. He told the Committee:

“The business case that was made at that point constitutionally was that Scotland and the Scottish Government could add value by supporting civic links and were able to achieve something quite distinctive. The Scottish Executive never set out to emulate or replicate what the UK Government was doing with the Department for International Development, now the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. I think that there is a real danger that, if we lose that self-awareness—that big picture view and that humility—we will try to spread the jam too thinly. Inevitably, for practical reasons, that would mean sacrificing the principal foundations on which all of our efforts are built. Key among those principles is dignified partnership—real, meaningful, human partnerships and a recognition of the value that all of civic society can have.”

The Committee heard that this distinctive approach with a focus on civil society engagement is particularly important given the small scale of funding available, even with the programme's value increasing to £15 million per year.

However, the Committee were also told that changes to the international development fund made access to funding opportunities less predictable. For example, David Hope-Jones told the Committee:

“Historically, there was a call for applications every year and almost everything had a competitive process that was clear and transparent. I could say to our members, “Do not apply this year; instead, develop the concept and apply in 12 months' time”. I cannot do that now because there might be a

call in five years' time but it depends on the whim of the day. There is not the predictability, the transparency and the accountability that there once was. Almost everything other than the core funding for organisations that has gone on for 15 or 17 years should be competitively tendered for because that builds confidence and awareness.

I am worried that an outcome of the review is that, although there is a principle that says that there should be transparency and accountability, none of the different strands of grant making requires the Scottish Government to have a transparent process. It is hugely important that the process is predictable, transparent and accountable. Following that approach will deliver the best value for money."

Finally, Lewis Ryder-Jones told the Committee that there needs to be a better understanding about international development funding in Parliament:

"However, beyond the transparency issue, it has been striking at a parliamentary level over the years that, when international development funding has been debated in the chamber or elsewhere, there has not been the level of understanding across the Parliament of what the money has been spent on and, therefore, scrutiny has potentially been missing. There has often been a positive conversation on the successful relationship building that has come about through the funding but there has been less of that with regard to the impact of projects across the partner countries. I propose that the Parliament has a role to play to ensure value for money and should ensure that meaningful debate is had on the spend."

Iain McIver, Senior Researcher, SPICe Research

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