



TAOISEACH LAUNCHES CoR CONFERENCE ON SUPPORTING SME'S IN ATHLONE

Political representatives from local and regional governments from across the 27 Member States of the EU met in Athlone on September 29-30 for a major conference, to discuss the problems facing Small and Medium Sized Enterprises (SMEs) and how to help these businesses grow and create jobs.

The conference, an initiative of Cllr. Constance Hanniffy, President of the Economic and Social Policy Committee of the CoR (the EU Committee of the Regions), was officially opened by An Taoiseach, Mr. Brian Cowen TD and included interventions from Gunter Verheugen, EU Commissioner for Enterprise and Industry, Frank Ryan, CEO of Enterprise Ireland, the French Presidency of the EU along with a range of contributors from Ireland and overseas.



Brian Cowen T.D. opens CoR conference on Supporting SME's in Athlone

are vital to maintaining the viability of our communities, ensuring economic stability during times of economic change and have a high degree of loyalty and responsibility to the areas where they are based. They need our support and all authorities need to ensure that their policies are SME-friendly".

With over 23 million SMEs in the EU, it is accepted that they need better access to finance, skills and innovation; better regulation and less red-tape; enhanced access to public contracts and overseas markets; and implementation of policies which protect their interests. Cllr. Hanniffy added that "we can always improve and learn from others and the latest proposals from the European Commission are welcome. What we now need is implementation of the 'Think Small First' principle and there is a role for local authorities in reducing the administrative burden on small companies; reviewing the culture of buying goods and services and looking at how charges are applied and how local authorities interact with the small business community".

The Taoiseach also gave a very well-received address emphasising the importance of SME's and the role of the CoR particularly in the context of the current banking and economic troubles. He stressed the importance of the EU generally and touched on our domestic difficulties with ratifying the Lisbon Treaty.

The proceedings were deemed very successful by participants with Cllr. Hanniffy received great backing for the conference from local community and business interests. A social programme was also organised including a visit to Clonmacnoise, a reception hosted by the Athlone Town Council and a dinner hosted by the Athlone Institute of Technology.



Back from left Cllr. Barney Steele, Cllr. Paul O' Donoghue, Cllr. Declan McDonnell and Cllr. Denis Landy
Front from left Cllr. Constance Hanniffy, An Taoiseach Brian Cowen T.D. and Cllr. Seamus Murray

The conference, organised in conjunction with the Association of Irish Regions and the BMW Regional Assembly, discussed the contribution that SMEs make to the economy and the impact of the proposed Small Business Act for Europe which the European Commission is bringing forward

SME-friendly. Cllr. Hanniffy is currently also the CoR rapporteur on the Small Business Act.

At a time when small businesses face a number of challenges, not least the difficulties created by the international financial climate, Cllr. Hanniffy, underlined that "SMEs



Section of audience at conference

CLLR. MARY SHIELDS REPORTS TO OIREACHTAS COMMITTEE ON ADULT LEARNING



Following adoption of her opinion on the Action Plan on Adult Learning at the Committee of the Regions plenary session last June, Cllr. Mary Shields (Cork City Council) was invited to address the Oireachtas Committee on Education and Science on October 23.

The Commission's Action Plan on Adult Learning aims to help remove the barriers that prevent adults from engaging in learning activities and to improve the quality and efficiency of the adult learning sector. It focuses on those

who are disadvantaged because of low literacy levels, inadequate work skills or who lack skills for successful integration into society.

In her address to the Committee, Cllr. Shields emphasised that the need to continuously adapt and upgrade knowledge, skills and competencies is a prerequisite in today's knowledge-based economy; adding that engaging in learning is a particularly important step for those outside of the workforce, in terms of personal development and enhancing self-esteem.

Cllr. Shields underlined the key messages of her opinion to the Oireachtas members noting that there are no easy, cheap and quick solutions to increasing participation in adult learning. Rather, what is necessary is a change of mindset and attitudinal shift to make it easier for adults to access learning opportunities.

Noting that the issue of finance and funding remains critical, the Cork City councillor suggested that more could be done on providing sustainable funding

for adult learning, both by the public and private sectors. At the same time, better use could be made of second level schools and other public resources (such as libraries) for adult learning.

The opinion highlighted the importance of the professionalisation of adult learning personnel and the need to continually invest in our teachers and trainers.

Accompanied by Secretary to the Irish Delegation Patricia Potter, Cllr. Shields responded to the range of issues raised by the Oireachtas members who were keen to ascertain the key lessons to be learned for Ireland as they discussed the importance of a national strategy; the attitude of the responsible Minister and Department; implications for the local and regional level in Ireland and the general role of the CoR.

Transcripts of all meetings of the Oireachtas committees, including this one are available online at: <http://debates.oireachtas.ie/Committees.aspx?Dail=30>

THREE IRISH COR MEMBERS MONITOR PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IN AZERBAIJAN

Working as part of a Council of Europe observer group, Cllrs. Seamus Murray, Patrick McGowan and Barney Steele recently monitored the presidential election in Azerbaijan. On the Caspian Sea, the oil and gas rich state is bordered by Russia, Georgia, Armenia and Iran.



Azerbaijan is party to the EU's European Neighbourhood Policy which aims to forge closer ties with countries to the South and East of the EU without offering them a membership perspective. Through the Neighbourhood Policy, the EU seeks to promote greater economic development, stability and better governance in its neighbourhood.

However, the result of the October 15 ballot was never in doubt, after leading opposition figures boycotted the poll. The results gave the incumbent Ilham Aliyev 89 per cent of votes with his nearest rival under 3 per cent. Mr. Aliyev had succeeded his late father in 2003.

While the observation mission released a statement which said that the presidential elections in Azerbaijan met democratic



elections in Azerbaijan met democratic standards and principles, Cllr. Seamus Murray considered that "boycotting the elections by several opposition parties was not a success, and that political parties should participate in elections". The monitors' claimed that the poll reflected welcome and considerable progress over previous elections.

IRISH DELEGATION SECRETARIAT

Patricia Potter, Director of the Dublin Regional Authority is Secretary to the Irish Delegation.

Visit the Committee of the Regions website at: www.cor.europa.eu

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