Malcolm Chisholm, MSP, Scottish Executive Minister for Communities, chaired a Ministerial meeting of the British-Irish Council in Edinburgh on 2 and 3 March on matters of Social Inclusion.

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 discuss, consult and endeavour to reach agreement on co-operation on matters of mutual interest within their respective competencies.

The devolved administrations in Scotland and Wales – the Scottish Executive and the Welsh Assembly Government - lead the work of the Council on Social Inclusion.

The Scottish Executive was represented by Malcolm Chisholm, MSP, Minister for Communities, who hosted the meeting. The Irish Government was represented by Séamus Brennan, TD, Minister for Social & Family Affairs. The British Government was represented by Anne McGuire, MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work & Pensions and the Rt. Hon Lord Rooker, Minister of State at the Northern Ireland Office. The Welsh Assembly Government was represented by Huw Lewis, AM, Deputy Minister for Communities. Jersey was represented by Senator Paul Routier, Minister for Social Security. Guernsey was represented by Mary Lowe, Minister for the Social Security Department and the Government of the Isle of Man was represented by the Hon. Steve Rodan, MHK, Minister for Health & Social Security.

A full list of delegation members is attached.

Mr Chisholm welcomed delegates to the meeting. BIC Ministers reviewed the Group’s progress on the phase of work covering disability and access to employment, education and training as agreed at their previous meeting in Cardiff in 2004.

Ministers acknowledged and recognized that disability can create significant challenges and barriers for people wishing to access employment, education and training opportunities in all of the BIC administrations and reiterated their commitment to helping people overcome these barriers in order to reach their fullest potential, free from poverty and social exclusion.

Ministers reviewed the work undertaken by the Officials Group, which had explored core common themes across the BIC administrations relating to disability and access to
employment, education and training. The Group had also shared experiences and learning points which had actively contributed to the development of thinking in this area across the administrations.

Ministers agreed that not only is work the best route out of poverty for disabled people, but that it also improves health, boosts dignity and self-esteem, and creates valuable links to the wider community. Ministers noted that strategies to assist disabled people into employment can have a major positive impact on their lives and the communities in which they live, but that they depend on effective engagement with employers and demonstration of the very real business case for taking disabled people into work.

The Council’s work has looked at attitudes towards the employment of disabled people and examined best practice and experience at both national and local levels. This includes a focus on how best to deliver joined-up policy and services for disabled people to improve their access to employment, education and training across a range of interventions, whether through general advice, practical help, advocacy, or job-specific guidance. Ministers recognized that work need not necessarily be conventional, full-time employment and that for some disabled people sheltered employment remains a preferred option. However opportunities should always remain available to people to move on to new challenges and realize their potential more fully.

Ministers agreed that BIC Member Administrations have continued to learn a great deal from the exchange of information, knowledge and ideas. Furthermore, this transfer of information promises to have a significant influence across the BIC Member Administrations as they develop strategies for helping ensure that disabled people have fair access to employment markets and to education and training opportunities. BIC Members agreed to continue this exchange of information and good practice and to learn from each other’s experiences.

Ministers further agreed that the next topic for work within the Council’s Social Inclusion theme would be [insert here next topic once decided.]

LIST OF DELEGATES

The Scottish Executive
Malcolm Chisholm, MSP
Mike Palmer
[Neil Langhorn
Minister for Communities
Head of Social Inclusion Division
Head of Social Inclusion Strategy Team]

Welsh Assembly Government
Huw Lewis, AM
Anne Stephenson
Tracey Breheny
Lynne Schofield
Deputy Minister for Social Justice and
Regeneration
Head of Communities Directorate
Joint Head, Social Justice Co-ordination Unit
Joint Head, Social Justice Co-ordination Unit

Irish Government
Séamus Brennan, TD
Frank Letif
Tom Rowley
Orlaigh Quinn
Minister for Social and Family Affairs
Special Advisor
Press Officer
Social Inclusion Policy
British Government
Anne Maguire, MP  Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work & Pensions (Disabled People)
Rt. Hon. Lord Rooker  Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office
Mike Daley  Department for Work and Pensions
Dr Gerry Mulligan  Head of Equality and Social Need, Northern Ireland Office
Arlene McCreight  Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, Northern Ireland Executive
Nigel Treanor  Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, Northern Ireland Executive

States of Jersey
Senator Paul Routier  Minister for Social Security
Ann Esterson  Chief Officer

States of Guernsey
Mary Lowe  Minister for the Social Security Department
Malcolm Nutley  Chief Officer Social Security Department

Isle of Man Government
Hon. Steve Rodan, MHK  Minister for Health and Social Security
David Cooke  Director of Social Services
Andrew Swithinbank  Assistant Director of Social Services