

File name: Panel Session – Northern Ireland on the World Stage (Invest NI Heads of Territory).mp4

Moderator questions in Bold, Respondents in Regular text.

KEY: Unable to decipher = (inaudible + timecode), **Phonetic spelling** (ph) + timecode), **Missed word** = (mw + timecode), **Talking over each other** = (talking over each other + timecode).

F: Well, as you've been hearing, the support delivered to exporters by the Invest NI teams here in Northern Ireland is complemented and augmented by the expertise of its overseas teams across some 24 global locations. Exporters really value the commercial experience, the connections, local knowledge and on-the-ground support delivered by Invest NI's international network. The overseas team was critical at the height of the pandemic by representing Northern Ireland businesses around the globe when they themselves couldn't travel to those all-important markets. And it's now key to building commercial opportunities for Northern Ireland businesses, and supporting them to navigate and succeed in overseas markets. The overseas network also leads the charge for Northern Ireland in terms of targeting and seeking out investment opportunities. So, on both counts they are right at the heart of delivering on that 10X vision for the Northern Ireland economy of the future. Today, we're delighted to have Invest NI's heads of territory with us.

Swathi Sri is Head of India, Middle East and Africa and is joining us from Dubai. Nick Caldwell is the Head of the Asia Pacific team. Peta Conn is Head of the Americas team and Derek Andrews is head of GB and Europe. So, to chair this particular discussion, please welcome back to the stage, Steve Harper and, Steve is going to get their insights into what's going on right across the markets globally. So, Steve, if you would like to come up and chair this panel. And, I know two of the guests are online, two of the guests are present. so, if we can get you onstage and hear what everybody has to say. Good luck.

Moderator: Thank you, Karen. Hope everyone enjoyed their, their lovely lunch. I thought it was a great demonstration of Northern Irish food and drink, it was-, it was wonderful. As, as Karen has said we've got 24 offices around the world, and we-, and we want to hear from, from some of the exporters and, and how they, I guess, use those members of staff and colleagues that we have overseas. We have about 60 of our colleagues working across those 24 offices and they're headed up by the, the four people that Karen kindly introduced. So, I guess, to start it off, I'm keen for each of the heads of (mw 02.24) to introduce themselves, talk a little bit about where they're based, and, and the number of offices and where those office locations are. So, if we maybe start with you first, Swathi?

F: Hello everyone, great to be here, (inaudible 02.38) actually. I'm Swathi, I'm based in Dubai, heading the India, Middle East and Africa team. We have offices dotted around this diverse region, Dubai being the regional headquarters and one of the oldest overseas offices, operating in the region for over 27 years. We also have offices based in Chetta (ph 03.01) covering Saudi and the Levant region. Doha, covering

Qatar, Kuwait and Iran. And, Johannesburg covering Africa. Now, the offices, as Steve mentioned, are ably supported by experienced in market staff. And we also have advisors in some of the key markets with relevant market and sector expertise. We also intend to add a couple of more offices in the near future to support the export in the region.

Moderator: Thank you, Swathi. Derek, you're unable to join us because of this COVID thing, unfortunately, but great to have you virtually. Maybe can you give us an overview of your territory?

M: Delighted, Steven, good afternoon everybody from-, I study in Belfast, I should say, who thought COVID would be a testimony to resilience? So, I'm, I'm proud to head up the GB and Europe team. You'll find us in Manchester, in London, in Dublin, Madrid, in Dusseldorf, and in Brussels. And we're there to support Northern Ireland companies who want to sell into those countries and we're also there to identify potential inward investors to come into Northern Ireland. So, we sell Northern Ireland, we sell Northern Ireland companies, and we've had a fairly good track record in doing that.

Moderator: Thank you, Derek. And then on the stage here, we have Peta. Do you want to give us an overview of where you're based?

F: Sure thing, Steve. I head up the Americas team. Our HQ is in Boston. We have seven offices throughout the Americas, and we call it the Americas because it does actually include South America where have an office in Santiago, in Chile. We've got an office in Toronto, in Canada, and then I've got five offices throughout the US. As I mentioned, our headquarters in Boston, we've got Chicago, New York, San Francisco, and we're currently recruiting for a new role for LA.

Moderator: Thank you very much, and Nick.

M: Thanks Steve. Firstly, sorry, just after 743 days in Singapore, it's great to be home. So I head up our operations in Asia Pacific. I'm based in Singapore. We've got three offices in China. In Beijing, Shanghai and in the south of China in Guangzhou (ph 05.16). We've an office in Hong Kong. We have an office covering North-East Asia in Tokyo. We will soon to have an office in South Korea and then ANZ we cover from Sydney and obviously South-East Asia we cover from Singapore. So, in each of those offices our staff are sectorly focused along the major lines of technology, advanced manufacturing and engineering, life and health sciences and education. Then, there's about fourteen countries in Asia and we leverage (mw 05.50) advisory support providers, so we have coverage for all of the major economies in Asia. Thank you.

Moderator: Thanks, Nick. Swathi, I want to come to you first. So, we've been hearing-, we've heard it just from Con very-, in the last panel session about-, he was talking about expo. And, I know that

you're coming to the end of, of, of what has been a hectic six months for Expo 2020 even though it was in 21/22, but can you maybe tell us a little bit about how Northern Irish companies were able to take advantage of some of the opportunities that were there?

F: Sure. It has been a long road to Expo, Steve, as you mentioned, Expo was originally scheduled to run for around six months from October 20th 2020, but with the pandemic Expo was postponed by a year, and opened eventually on October 1st 2021. If I may, I would like to take a quick moment to provide some background of what Expo itself. Expo is not a typical trade show. So, for around 170 years, world expos provided a platform to showcase the greatest innovations that have shaped the world that we live in today. Whether it is television, computers or even ice creams. So, and also this was the first time that Expo was hosted in this particular region. And to add to that, it was also the first time for Northern Ireland to take part at a world expo. We set out with the vision to maximise Northern Ireland's presence at Expo and I believe that we have achieved that. And throughout the six months of Expo period, close to 25 speakers from Northern Ireland, spanning across the spectrum of, business, academia, culture, addressed global audiences and engaged in some thoughtful dialogue. Glad to hear from them-, a couple of, a couple of them earlier today. And the speakers of course covered a wide range of sectors too, from fintech to agritech to AI to life and health sciences to advanced manufacturing today. All of which feature very prominently in our own 10X version. So, the speakers and their presence really helped us promote Northern Ireland and their subject expertise on a world map. And, on February 16th, Northern Ireland of course took over the UK pavilions event space under the theme, 'Imagine Nation.' We showcased rich history of our innovation and notable personalities from Northern Ireland. General audience got an opportunity to visit Northern Ireland virtually through VR headsets, experience a live art session, and also live performances by musicians, bringing a wee bit of Northern Ireland into Expo. And on the day also, we had business leaders and educators and innovators come together as thought leaders and panels to share why Northern Ireland is a great destination to live, study, work, trade and, and invest in.

So, keeping all this current challenges on hand, we also released a super panel on Journey to Circular Economy on the day highlighting our contribution. Apart from all this, some of our companies have also won commercial contracts in the build-up to Expo and, for example, 35 pavilions out of 191 pavilions at Expo. That is close to around 18% of the pavilions were equipped with catering equipment by a company from Northern Ireland. And a company from Northern Ireland also is behind all the waste recycling of you know, the waste that is generated at Expo. And there are no, no prizes for guessing which company I'm talking about. Con was in the panel earlier. And, we are also delighted that Minister Lyons visited us twice during the Expo period, which has only helped us establish new connections and build on the existing relationships. All in all I think Expo was a brilliant platform to showcase brand Northern Ireland. And I would like to say that our participation will not only benefit the universities, the companies that look at global markets for business expansion and drive our export growth, but also help the international community to know a little bit more about Northern Ireland as a destination.

Moderator: And Swathi, I'm, I'm keen just before you drop off, just to explore a little bit. So, there are-, there are fifteen international students in the room here today from, from Queens university some of them from, from the region that, that you're in. And I know that you have a member of

your team who, who helps to sell education in Northern Ireland.

F: Yep.

Moderator: What is it that attracts students from-, international students to come and study here?

F: If I can use some anecdotes here, Steve. I think one of a very prominent Emirati lady once told us that, 'I would like my children to be away from distraction.' And by distraction she meant you know, big cities like probably London and Manchester, where there is a big diaspora of students from this particular region studying. And also, the crime rate is pretty low, it, it's-, Northern Ireland is a safe place to study and obviously the quality of education, whether it's Queens or Ulster and-, the courses that they have to offer I know-, courses in cyber security for example are, are, are really high in demand within the region. So, yeah, I think a combination of the place, the people, and, the education quality.

Moderator: Thank you. I'm gonna turn to you, Nick, if that's okay. You're based in Singapore and your teams cover from Tokyo in the North-East to Sydney in the-, in the South-East of that. How, how does a Northern Irish company even begin to think about the complexities and the complications of, of getting into any one of those markets?

M: Thanks, Steve. It's a very complex question and Asia Pacific no doubt is a complex place. Many cultures. As I said earlier, you know, fourteen different countries, many languages, many types of legal structure and law, tariffs, etc. So, how do we approach that? I think simply from the aspect of educating the Northern Ireland exporter to, to provide one-to-many education, also specific one-on-one education about specific markets that they're interested in. To go out to sectors within Northern Ireland or indeed clusters of companies within cross-sector (mw 12.33) in Northern Ireland to educate. That allows the companies to make a choice on which markets they're interested in. We've got people on the ground who are sectorly specific, understand their geography. Our staff in Asia Pacific primarily are from two places. The country that they're in, or from Northern Ireland so they're-, so they're very passionate people about their own country and about Northern Ireland exporting, or the Northern Ireland are very passionate about getting Northern Ireland companies to export. But they've been in the markets for a long, long time.

We supplement our own on-the-ground knowledge with, with research. And then as part of that education phase, we're trying to reach out to companies who've exported to many markets already, the bigger style of companies. We're also trying to reach the smaller companies who-, to inspire them, so they can aspire to export in three to five years' time. So, exporting is not a journey, it's not a decision. I think it was Con said, 'You just can't decide to go somewhere.' I think he said 2013, he, he looked at me, he looked at Swathi's territory in Dubai. 2017 he made his first sale, 2020/2021, they're now getting deep into it. It's a long journey. I think the important thing to remember though is that we have staff on the ground who are experts in their field, experts in their countries that they're in and we're here to help.

Moderator: And, so, would you encourage them-, so we have a team of, of, of very experienced international trade advisors here in, in Northern Ireland. So, their first step is, what, to contact those trade advisors?

M: Absolutely. I think the first step is through the client manager and client executive. We have a-, well, we call it the, sort of, triumvirate, off the client manager, client executive having the first primary relationship in the domestic environment of Northern Ireland. And then the international trade advisor, you know, have a wealth of knowledge. We talk to them all the time, we deal with them all the time. And between the ITA as we call it and our in-market team, you've got the full suite of people to advise. So, Invest Northern Ireland, you know, provide a lot of financial incentives and interventions and non-financial interventions. What we, kind of, miss, and we don't give ourselves enough credit for is that we've got the specific pearls of wisdom on the ground. And it's not just business cards. I've been in Asia for 25 years, I've worked globally. It's, it's-, you take the tactics. The tactics came to Singapore with us, if Kerry's in the audience, 2020 as one of ten cohort of companies that were cross-sectoral.

So, in that mission, we were educating those group of companies nine months before they came. We were doing a lot of research specifically to find the people who influence buying decisions and banks. Given the global nature of the world today, you could find a buying decision and a bank in Tokyo but the procurement's done in London. That's just the nature of the world, so we're educating about all of that, we're educating about the local market. Then we're bringing them to the market. And then we're arranging a whole bunch of meetings with potential customers, and going to those meetings with them, hand-to-hand combat at times. But that allows the companies to get a feel for the market. From that, the tactics can make a decision to say that, 'Well, we need to partner up. This is a big market, we're the newbie. We need to partner up with a bigger entity.' And now, one year later, they've made their first sales into South-East Asia through Singapore. So, it's that types of strategy. Nothing is-, there's no cookie-cutter here but there is certain methodologies that work, and we always arrive at a successful outcome.

Moderator: And, and I think as Con said earlier on, sometimes a positive outcome is actually, 'This market's not for me,' and you save a lot of time.

M: It's a great answer. Just by finding out it's not for you, allows you to concentrate on somewhere else. Because, guess what? Invest Northern Ireland have offices all around the world. China might not be for you, Singapore might not be for you, the Americas may be, Dubai-, you know. It's, it's export anywhere. Just get exporting. We're here to help.

Moderator: Well, you've just brought Peta into the conversation, so a natural segue into that. Peta, you're based in Boston and you cover the Americas. You know, it's talked about Nick's geographic bane, huge. The Americas is, is enormous. How, how does a Northern Irish company even start to think about that?

F: Well, again, re-iterating Nick's message. Speak to us first. You know, we fully believe in, in a customisable solution, because what might work for one company may not work for another. The US is an enormous territory, you could regard it as 50 separate countries, so we want to have discussions about, 'Okay, well, what is a good target market for you?' And maybe start off at a bite size. Get your feet wet, get into the market and then we can help you expand while you're in there. Obviously our region also covers Latin America. I was wanting to re-iterate Con's message before about-, sometimes those markets that may not be immediately obvious are the ones with great potential, because you don't have a whole bunch of other competitors going after those markets. And when we have people in market to support you in your, your growth journey to some of these less common markets, you know, you could get some really good successes out of there. But to re-iterate Nick, to re-iterate our exporters, make sure you do the research. Get the advice. We're here to help you with that, be it on a location to go to, on the channel to market, you know, we are here to help.

Moderator: And, obviously, you, you have a team that sells Northern Ireland. And we heard Keith from Aflac talk about Andrea in New York contacting him six, seven years ago. What, what's that-, what's that team seeing in the US? What's the-, what are the trends from US companies that are-, that are looking to scale?

F: It's really interesting being, I guess, just in the-, in the US for two years now and talking to the, the team that is very established there. And the way that we have sold Northern Ireland has obviously evolved over those past few years because we have established industry here now that, you know-, in essence has an integrity and a profile that didn't exist ten years ago. We've got phenomenal ambassadors for Northern Ireland, like Keith, like, David will be in six months' time, I'll give him. You know, they're telling their stories, they are sharing the experience. And what really resonates with our US investors does come back to the talent piece. And it's really about, you know-, a, a project is given to a staff member in Northern Ireland. They will query if they are doing it the right way, they will add value, they will push back on the US company and bring a, a degree of value back to the business that people don't really understand until you've experienced it. So, having people like Keith, the other US investors tell that story to other businesses is also generating that additional interest in us as a region.

Moderator: Thank you, Peta. If I could, bring Derek back in. Derek, obviously you don't need to go quite as far as the US in order to, to find markets in order to, to export to. So, so why are-, why are the markets of GB and, and the Republic of Ireland so, so important on that journey?

M: Well, I think just to put a wee bit of context around that. Between GB, Ireland and the rest of the EU, you know, we sell over £17 billion worth of goods into those particular markets. £10 billion into GB, £4 billion into the Republic of Ireland. So, those are markets that are close to home. I think for a lot of Northern Irish companies, you know, they have to take a, kind of, risk, their capability, their capacity to export. Again,(inaudible 20.22) the export health check. The-, go to the website, it's a no-brainer for anybody who wants to have a quick check as to whether or not they've got the ability and desire to export. But closer to home, culturally closeness, cultural affinity, common language, common law, ease of travel.

So, it makes it easier for the-, for the exporter. And that's between, as I say, Ireland, the Republic of Ireland and GB. But if people want a, a taster of what it is like to do business in Europe, of course we've been running a very successful (inaudible 20.56) programme for many years, and a lot of companies have started their, their European experience on that particular programme.

They do it because it's safe, it's secure, it's very well managed and it's extremely well supported by the European tech. And I know that the, the minister had the experience of going out to, to the (inaudible 21.17), to, to the Going Dutch programme and talk to companies that were there, and find out what their experiences were. And I think he was extremely impressed, as were the companies of what we can do for people in-market.

Moderator: And I guess, Derek, just before we, we round off the session, I'm keen-, obviously, you know, you, you have a, a, team that sells Northern Ireland right across Europe, you know. What, what sort of, trends are you seeing, you know, post-COVID from, from potential investors? Are you finding that Northern Ireland's increasingly on their map?

M: Definitely so. Look, there's no doubt that COVID has had-, has had a major impact on, on the strategic business decisions of, of companies right across the world. You know. I know Peta's experienced this, Nick, and, and Swathi. Now, in Northern Ireland we've got that unique position of not only having experience of COVID, we've had the experience of coming out of-, of coming out of Europe, and we've had a, a position where we have access to markets. So, that has had a, a, a, you know, a joint influence on the decision making of, of, of companies. You know, we talk about resonance and, and what companies have experienced that. But I would have to say before we end, you know, we always talk about exemplars of how Northern Ireland people, Northern Ireland companies and inward investors have actually acknowledged how we-, how, how resilient we are and how we reinvent. I think we have to look at our own organisations, Steve, and give ourselves a pat on the back whenever we talk to international investors.

I have no, no qualms in talking about how we moved 500 people from office-based to remote. How we reinvented a lot of our delivery programmes from physical presences to digital. Companies, you know, whenever they're talking, not only did they get that experience from, from international investors and (inaudible 23.10) but I think you have to give yourselves a pat on the back for that. Interest has not waned during the two years. In fact, we've seen more enquiries coming out of GB and Ireland than, than I've ever experienced in my twenty plus years of attractive foreign direct investment. And that's right across the gambit from advanced manufacturing and engineering, factories of the future, warehousing and distribution of the service companies. So, Northern Ireland is still very much open for business and continues to be so in spite of all the adversity.

Moderator: Hear, hear. Well said, Derek. Well, thank you very much for the panellists for, for, for

joining us. And just for, for any companies in the room and again, online or anybody based in Northern Ireland, please, as I said, we have 60 of our colleagues around the world and please see them as an extension of your sales teams. They are there to help Northern Irish businesses go further and go stronger. So, thank you very much. Captions by www.takenote.co