



# IT'S BUSINESS AS USUAL

## Gibraltar's European Programme director, Charles Collinson keeps calm and efficient amidst the turbulence of the EU referendum result.



**“It's business as usual here,” affirms Charles Collinson, director of the government's European**

**Programmes, almost as soon as I sat down in his office. It needed to be said. It was early on the Monday after the EU referendum result that announced that a slim majority of UK voters wanted to leave the European Union and Gibraltar was reeling from the result. The elephant in the room addressed with candid directness, we could relax and, well, get down to the business of finding out just how Gibraltar can still benefit from EU funds.**

The EU funding programme in Gibraltar is one of the EU's and the Gibraltar Government's success stories in a way that makes Gibraltar an example to the rest of Europe, a fact of which Charles is quietly proud.

“When we are asked to name a project that can be an example of success, we can name Gibraltar. We can process applications for funding within just a few

short weeks here, where this might take much

longer in other jurisdictions, and we can attend to the microbusinesses here as efficiently as we do with the larger projects, which means that Gibraltar was the first region in the whole of the EU that could successfully close down the last programme of funding in the necessary timescale having ensured that all the allocated funds were properly and fully distributed and accounted for.” This then meant that Gibraltar was the first part of the UK to receive its new allocation. Small it may be, but in business terms and EU structural funds terms, Gibraltar is functioning with exemplary efficiency.

Charles Collinson has led his small secretariat in Gibraltar for some nineteen years or more. Responsible for administering European Union structural funds allocated to Gibraltar for the financing of economic and social projects, Charles has seen the undeniable benefits that membership of the EU can bring to an area.

“The developments that EU funds have facilitated in Gibraltar have been central to Gibraltar's economic development,” he explained. Having provided funding

in forms of grants to business and other projects. As and when Brexit happens, this funding may be withdrawn. But we do not know what happens next and it will be some time before the final withdrawal occurs, so we are functioning just as we always have.”

This means that there is a fundamental source of funding support for small businesses in Gibraltar. “What we think works best is for people to approach us at the ideas stage. Whether you are a company director with an idea for expansion or moving your company in a new direction, or whether you have just left school and have this burning idea you instinctively know could be successful, come and talk to us. We could provide grant funding for up to 30% of the cost of projects of just over €60,000.”

Situated at Bleak House, just off the main No. 2 bus route to Europa Point, going to see the team is not difficult. They are friendly, personable and willing to help Gibraltar's entrepreneurs to navigate their way through the process of application.

“It is actually quite an easy process,” Charles says, with calm enthusiasm. While it is probably still the case that the myth of bureaucratic breeze blocks barring the path to any EU process is a persistent one, there could be little further from the truth with regard to applying for a grant to help you make your business idea a reality. “Our fund helps with providing basic capital for small businesses,” Charles clarifies, “an applicant can give us a call and we will arrange a meeting with our funding advisor who in turn will help them with completing the form that is required.”

While the process is fairly straightforward and the funding advisor an invaluable support to applicants, there are specific requirements that applicants need to meet and the documentation

available on the website explains these. They vary from being able to show relevant registration documents, to providing quotations for the items or services that the grants are sought to fund, to showing how the business will create employment and meet environmental requirements.

“It is possible for projects to receive 30% of its funding for free, and an organisation is also able to obtain additional funding from other sources such as private investors or through bank loans,” Charles went on to explain. “In some ways this is why we like to be approached with an idea rather than with set plans; we can then help applicants understand what we can fund and it gives them the flexibility to adapt their project if necessary. And we go one step further than this; we run a rolling programme of processing grant applications which means that we can be approached at any time for funds avoiding the delays that occur in other countries where applications can only be made through bidding rounds with very specific deadlines.”

Over the years the processes have been refined and streamlined, and Charles' team is now eight-strong. As well as funding advisors, there is an accounts team to process the claim, technical support team and staff working on the wider programmes such as the transitional programmes. In all, a team of experts to help applicants' access money that is free. Charles does emphasise this fact: once allocated to a project, the funds can be drawn down in stages as the business needs it, and while it does have to be audited and accounted for, it does not have to be paid back. There's little more appealing to a canny business person than free money, even if there are criteria to fulfil.

And as for the criteria? It's an off-putting word that sends signals to busy

entrepreneurs that they will need to jump through bureaucratic hoops. Not the case, Charles assured me. The EU funds have various goals that need to be met across the whole of the EU and at central level, broad parameters are set. From 11 priorities EU-wide, these have been narrowed down to 2 that apply to Gibraltar: that the project needs to create employment through an innovative and sustainable business, and/or should be associated to the environmental aspect of production and distribution of energy by renewable sources. Don't feel put off; most business ideas can apply themselves to fall within these parameters and that has to be good for Gibraltar as a whole as well as for the entrepreneurs.

In summary, small businesses in Gibraltar are in a perfect position to seek free money from the EU, at least in the short term, and this can take a huge financial burden from a business during its most vulnerable period. There is a sense of quiet pride in the way Charles speaks about his team's work and their role in supporting the development of Gibraltar's economy on the large scale with social fund projects and with microbusinesses.

“We have been able to access almost €60 million of EU funds over the years to create 115 new businesses, expanded 87 businesses, created 3715 jobs and helped Gibraltarians achieve 5143 qualifications.” There is no doubt in my mind that Charles Collinson and his European Programmes team have been a crucial part of Gibraltar's success, and while it is impossible to predict the unprecedented, through the negotiations that there are to come it may be possible that this form of funding may well be available for many years still.

A final message from Charles? “Keep calm, keep a clear head,” he smiles, “keep your eyes on your special project, and come to us as soon as you have your idea, because we are still in the business of providing free money to Gibraltar's businesses.”

