

CONTENT OF THE NORTHERN IRELAND EXECUTIVE'S RESPONSE TO THE NORTHERN IRELAND TASK FORCE

BACKGROUND

On 7 April 2008, the European Commission adopted a report from its Northern Ireland Task Force (NITF) that identifies key EU policy initiatives and programmes which can be used across government in support of the region's economy. The Committee for the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, (COFMDFM) was provided with a copy of the Northern Ireland Executives response to the NITF report on 23 January 2009 and were invited to give their views. This paper provides points of note on the Executives response.

INTRODUCTION

1. On 7 April 2008, the European Commission adopted a report from its Northern Ireland Task Force (NITF) that identifies key EU policy initiatives and programmes which can be mobilised in support of the region's economy. The Task Force was set up by the Commission's President, José Manuel Barroso and led by Commissioner Danuta Hübner. It takes stock of Northern Ireland's economic development and points out ways that Northern Ireland can take advantage of its EU membership and can boost its modernisation. The aim of the report is to make suggestions on how Northern Ireland can reap the maximum benefit from the EU support they can receive from now until 2013.
2. The Task Force was put in place following President Barroso's visit to Belfast on 1 May 2007, just before the devolved institutions were re-established. Its mandate was to look at how to improve Northern Ireland's access to, and participation in, EU policies and programmes. The core members of the Task Force represent the services of the Commission with a role to play in Northern Ireland's economic modernisation (agriculture, education and culture, employment, regional policy, enterprise and industry, environment, maritime affairs and fisheries, research and development, transport and energy), together with the European Investment Bank.
3. The main role of the NITF is to facilitate the change in relationship between Northern Ireland and the EU. The historic and current relationship is that Northern Ireland has been a major recipient of European regional aid. However this is now entering a period of transition and Northern Ireland must develop strategies for relying on its own resources.

4. The Committee for the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, (COFMDFM) was provided with a copy of the Northern Ireland Executives response to the NITF report on 23 January 2009. The Committee were invited to give their views on the response by 19 February 2009.
5. This paper considers the content of the Action Plan as it relate to the remit of OFMDFM.

WHAT HAS THE ACTION PLAN ADDED?

6. The Executive's response to the Task Force report has to be seen in the context, not only of how it relates to the Task Force report itself but also, in how it relates to Northern Ireland's European Strategy 2006 - 2010, "*Taking Our Place in Europe*", published in 2006. Since its publication, government has begun to deliver on this strategy through the development of departmental action plans and has stated that it will monitor its progress on the Strategy.

Government departments will set out detailed actions in their business plans, which will be reported on annually. A senior civil service policy group will monitor progress towards achieving the aims and objectives of 'Taking Our Place in Europe'.¹

7. It is useful to view the response to the task force in relation to the 2006 strategy because there are enough similarities between the two documents to view one as an extension of the other. As the Executive Response states:

This renews our approach to Europe as first outlined in the strategy document for 2006-2010, 'Taking our Place in Europe', which sets out a structure for positive, outward and forward looking engagement with Europe.²

8. The Executive response's full title is "*Priorities for European Engagement: Executive Action Plan in Response to the Commission President's Northern Ireland Task Force*". This action plan takes the same general form as the earlier strategy but includes departmental actions under the key objectives.
9. There were 3 high level key objectives in the 2006 strategy, where as the action plan has now increased this to 5 (referred to as "themes" in the action plan). The three earlier objectives are retained and two new ones are added. These two new themes are based heavily on the findings of the Task Force; that is Accessing Funding and Sharing Northern Ireland's experience of Peace Building (table 1).

¹P23 http://www.ofmdfmi.gov.uk/taking_our_place_in_europe.pdf

² P6 *Priorities for European Engagement: Executive Action Plan in Response to the Commission President's Northern Ireland Task Force*, Northern Ireland Executive, Draft at 22 January 2009.

Table 1 A comparison between the key Objectives stated in Northern Ireland's European Strategy and the Themes stated in the Executives response to the NITF

Strategy	Action Plan
1. Promoting Northern Ireland's interests within the European Union	1. Promoting Northern Ireland's interests within the European Union
2. Raising Northern Ireland's positive profile throughout Europe	2. Raising Northern Ireland's positive profile throughout Europe
3. Raising awareness and encouraging participation in European	3. Raising awareness and encouraging participation in European
	4. Access EU funding
	5. Share our experience of building peace and conflict resolution in a divided society with Europe and beyond.

10. This structure differs from the Task Force report which considers each of the policy areas where Europe is of relevance, such as Agriculture and Rural Development, or Employment and Social Policy and makes recommendations and suggestions on each. The Executives response however does not respond using the same format making it difficult to link up the two documents and establish recommendation and corresponding action. Instead the response has chosen to integrate the recommendations and suggestions into its strategy through the Action Plan. Examples can be seen where the Action Plan is moving forward on issues identified by the Task Force such as the recommendation to apply for the EU's Quality Food schemes for its Beef, Lamb, Comber Potatoes and Bramley apples and this is included in the action plan.

11. However some of the suggestions identified by the Task Force are not included in the action plan. For instance - and of specific relevance to OFMDFM - the Task Force highlights the PROGRESS programme, a new programme for employment and social solidarity, which has attributed to it from 2007-2013, Eur 743 million. PROGRESS's five policy areas are employment, social inclusion, and protection, working conditions, non-discrimination and gender equality and therefore central to OFMDFM policy but this programme is not included in the Action Plan.

12. The extent to which many of these actions were already on-going and which have been triggered by the Task Force is difficult to determine, however the timeline hints at the fact that many of the actions have been running for some time. If this is the case then it raises the question of how the Task Force has impacted on Northern Ireland's approach to Europe. For instance through the key targets there are a number of quantifiable goals set such as; the Eur 8 million approved to projects involving Northern Ireland partners under the Framework 7 Programme³. Has this increased because of the Task Force, is there a baseline figure?

³ P10 *Priorities for European Engagement: Executive Action Plan in Response to the Commission President's Northern Ireland Task Force*, Northern Ireland Executive, Draft at 22 January 2009.

13. As the Task Force report offers recommendations and suggestions across government departments, so to, the Executive's response is cross departmental. The actions within the Action plan are organised into the 5 key themes which also relate to 7 Government objectives. The actions within each of these categories is attributed a "lead department" to ensure that there is accountability. The table below shows how the Themes and the Objectives are aligned.

Table 2 The 5 Themes and 7 Objectives of the Executives Action Plan.

Themes	Objectives
Promote our interests within the European Union	To engage in the EU policy making process to ensure that our needs are known to the policy makers and that we are prepared for forthcoming policy changes.
Access EU Funding	To increase the number and value of NI projects securing funding from competitive EU funding programmes. To maximise benefits from mainstream EU Funding Programmes through innovative approaches and participation in best practices initiatives
Raise our positive profile throughout Europe.	To project a dynamic forward-looking approach as a peaceful region 'Open for Business', participating actively in strategic alliances with other regions, sub-regions and cities. To equip our people to operate effectively in Europe and demonstrate engagement through the relationships we build.
Raise awareness and encourage participation in European matters	Encouraging civil society participation in European matters.
Share our experience with Europe and beyond.	Record and share the experience of peace building and conflict resolution in Northern Ireland.

OFMDFM AS THE LEAD DEPARTMENT

14. OFMDFM has 10 action points which it has responsibility to lead on. These come under a number of the policy areas across all the key themes and almost all of the Government Objectives. Of those actions that do fall to OFMDFM to lead on, most are ongoing rather than new actions in response to the Task Force report. This can be evidenced from the fact that within the timetabling most are well established. The exception is in relation to objective 7 "*Record and share the experience of peace building and conflict resolution in Northern Ireland.*" Within this objective, OFMDFM is the lead department in developing proposals for international research into peace building. The action points established for this objective are for OFMDFM to review its research base, identify partners to move forward and to identify external funding and sponsorship. Appendix 1 identifies all 10 of OFMDFM's action points within the action plan.

CONCLUSIONS

15. The Executive has taken the Task Force report and integrated it into the existing Northern Ireland Strategy for Europe. In doing this, it has added two objectives to the three contained in the strategy. In relation to these two objectives; *accessing EU funds* was already included in the strategy but not stated as a separate objective with its own actions, targets and timetable. The other new objective, *to utilise Northern Ireland's experience of conflict and peace building on the international stage* was new to the strategy and the Executive's response outlines how it intends to proceed on this but with no timetabling included.
16. Much of the substantive delivery of the action plan is associated to lead departments across government depending on their areas of responsibility. The main departments are Agriculture, Finance and Personnel and Enterprise, Trade and Industry. OFMDFM, although retaining overall responsibility for the Action Plan, does not have responsibility for many of the specific actions. Its main actions are centred on developing its Sustainable Development Strategy.
17. The structure of the document makes it difficult to read across from the Task Force report to the Executive's response. The associations that the response has with the existing strategy highlight a number of questions which remain unanswered.
 - 1) **Given that the existing Strategy is due to be reviewed, does the action plan take the place of this review?**
 - 2) **Why did the Executive choose to respond to the Task Force in a format in keeping with the existing Strategy rather than the Task Force report?**
 - 3) **Why are some recommendations made by the Task Force such as the PROGRESS programme not included in the Action Plan?**
 - 4) **Does the response represent a reaction to the Task Force report or actions which were already being carried out as part of the existing Strategy?**
 - 5) **Why was baseline information from the monitoring of the earlier Strategy not included in the Executive's response?**

February 2009

Appendix 1. Actions attributed to OFMDFM as Lead Department in the Executive's Response to the Northern Ireland Task Force

Theme 1:	Promote our interests within the European Union		
Objective 1:	To engage in the EU policy making process to ensure that our needs are known to the policy makers and that we are prepared for forthcoming policy changes.		
Policy Area	Action	Key Stages/Milestones	Timeline
Sustainable Development	<p>Following development of a new Sustainable Development Strategy for NI, begin engagement process with EU officials to:</p> <p>a) identify opportunities for progression of sustainable long-term investment plans and,</p> <p>b) To develop the position of the Executive within the EU to more fully exploit SD-related opportunities.</p>	<p>Resume EU engagement process with the intention of further developing our relationship with national and EU institutions to explore and consequently make use of opportunities associated with innovation and sustainability programmes which complement our plans and priorities.</p>	<p>A draft Sustainable Development Strategy has been presented to Ministers for discussion. Scope for progression of NITF will be dependent upon the speed with which approval is achieved, as this will inform the engagement process and identify priority areas for action.</p>
Equality	<p>To maintain a strategic overview of developments in relation to the establishment of the EU Gender Institute in Vilnius, Lithuania and build a productive working relationship with its Director/staff..</p> <p>To monitor developments and liaise with the lead Westminster department in relation to the development of equality legislation generally in Europe so that the particular circumstances of this administration can be identified and considered.</p>	<p>Liaise with the EU Commission on the work programme for the Gender Institute.</p> <p>Liaise with the Institute as appropriate during the implementation of the work programme.</p> <p>Take account of the work programme of the institutions when developing equality policy and legislation.</p>	<p>Ongoing in 2008 /2009</p> <p>Ongoing in 2008 /2009</p>
Social inclusion	<p>To maintain a strategic overview of developments in relation to the Renewed Social Agenda</p>	<p>Input to the draft Directive on Anti-Discrimination.</p>	

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Theme 2:	Access EU Funding		
Objective 3:	To maximise benefits from mainstream EU Funding Programmes through innovative approaches and participation in best practices initiatives		
	To facilitate (including providing entrees to the NI Public Service) and co-ordinate visits at the European Investment Bank's (EIB) request for EIB representatives to discuss EIB financial investment with NI Departments.	To respond within 2 weeks to EIB in relation to the arrangements of such requests/meetings.	Ongoing
Theme 3:	Raise our positive profile throughout Europe.		
Objective 4:	To project a dynamic forward-looking approach as a peaceful region 'Open for Business', participating actively in strategic alliances with other regions, sub-regions and cities.		
Open Days	To assist the NICS and other public sector organisations in promoting NI as a region of Europe.	To participate in Open Days 2008 and 2009 and to provide the opportunity for Departments to showcase NI projects as part of our events.	Oct-08 Oct-09
Objective 5:	To equip our people to operate effectively in Europe and demonstrate engagement through the relationships we build.		
Sustainable Development	To establish direct links with the European Sustainable Development Network (ESDN) and with the European Commission with a view to informing NI Sustainable Development Strategy development.	Initial engagement with ESDN and the European Commission. Identifying regional funding and co-operation opportunities to promote and share knowledge and expertise in the effective incorporation of Sustainable Development principles across regions. A draft Northern Ireland Sustainable Development Strategy has been presented to Ministers for discussion. The new Strategy will express the Executive's ambitions in relation to SD through a number of commitments. These will form the basis for future engagement with those EU Directorates capable of supporting the ambitions expressed within the Strategy and its subsequent Implementation Plan.	Commencing September/October 2008 Ongoing therefore

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European Years	To raise public awareness of and participate in the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue	<p>OFMDFM, in partnership with the Equality Commission and other partners, will continue to highlight the contribution that many events and activities are making to furthering intercultural dialogue and to badge them with the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue (EYID) logo.</p> <p>Plan an NI event/conference to mark the Year of Intercultural Dialogue and to highlight NI's contribution to best practice in this area. The proposed theme of the conference would support the new programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration (CSI).</p>	<p>Ongoing throughout 2008</p> <p>Ministerial agreement to the Cohesion, Sharing and Integration (CSI), and it being published for consultation will determine the timing of any proposed conference.</p>
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Theme 4:	Raise awareness and encourage participation in European matters		
Objective 6:	Encouraging civil society participation in European matters.		
European Years	To raise public awareness of and draw regional and local governments' attention to European policy campaign themes.	<p>Identify and provide support to flagship event for the European year of creativity and innovation 2009.</p> <p>Monitor implementation and highlight successes throughout year.</p> <p>Raise awareness of the European year for combating poverty and social exclusion among NI departments.</p>	<p>Oct-08</p> <p>Ongoing in 2009</p> <p>Jul-09</p>
Opportunity Europe	Raise European awareness among post-primary pupils with a two-day fair and exhibition that encourages participation in language learning and opportunities to work, travel, study and volunteer in other European countries.	<p>Actively participate in Commission's Opportunity Europe Steering Group.</p> <p>Promote Opportunity Europe among NI Departments.</p> <p>Attend and participate in Opportunity Europe event.</p>	<p>Oct-08</p> <p>May-October 2009</p> <p>September/October 2008</p>

Appendix 1. Actions attributed to OFMDFM as Lead Department in the Executive’s Response to the Northern Ireland Task Force

Theme 5:	Share our experience with Europe and beyond.		
Objective 7:	Record and share the experience of peace building and conflict resolution in Northern Ireland.		
Research, teaching and learning facility on sharing our experience with Europe and beyond	To develop proposals for international research, teaching and learning on the experience of building peace and conflict resolution in a divided society and conflict resolution in order to be a resource providing the European Union support in the work with regions in conflict both within and external to the European Union.	<p>Access previous research and work on this policy area</p> <p>Work on building partners to take the project forward</p> <p>Identify possible external funding sources and sponsorship</p>	