



Response to Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) Inquiry into the Barroso Taskforce

Introduction

The Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the OFMDFM Inquiry into the Barroso Taskforce.

NILGA is the representative body for district and borough councils in Northern Ireland, representing and promoting the best interests of local authorities, as supported by all the main Northern Ireland political parties as well as independent elected members.

Northern Ireland councils acknowledge the continued and evolving regional investment by the EU in Northern Ireland, and its positive impact on peace, stability and prosperity. There has been long standing EU financial support for Northern Ireland as one of the priority “Objective 1” regions. During the period 2000-2006, six programmes received EU investment of some €2.2 billion to which was added the EU contribution to the International Fund for Ireland. For the current planning period, 2007-2013, Northern Ireland has six programmes with a financial contribution of €1.1 billion, including a continuation of the PEACE programme.

Northern Ireland local government has benefited from EU investment, and we acknowledge the hard work of our council representatives who sit on EU Programme Monitoring and Steering committees.

Within a small European region, municipalities / councils have a critical yet strategic interest in EU affairs. Laws, investment and policies have a direct effect on our everyday lives and the future prosperity and growth of our region.

We acknowledge our strategic working partnership with OFMDFM, the Department of Finance and Personnel and other NI Departments in the current negotiation process with the UK Government and the European Commission, on the next round of regional EU Programmes.

We have formally sought a practical – and political Strategic partnership with OFMDFM in order to co-scrutinise the next stage - building on the strengths of the Barroso Task Force’s legacy (post 2014), and its growth challenge to Northern Ireland.

Response

Barroso Task Force benefit

Northern Ireland Local Government notes the personal commitment to, and material input into, the region by José Manuel Barroso, President of the European Commission, the practical assistance given by DG Regio Commissioner Joannes Hahn and Danuta Hübner before.

NILGA acknowledges the value the Barroso Report (April 2008), the significant role played by its Chair, Ronnie Hall, the Office of OFMDFM in Brussels, and the European Commission’s continued local support for the region.



The Barroso Task Force has delivered what it had set to do – the creation of a political and strategic platform that has allowed the foundation of a strong and vibrant network supporting outputs to create economic improvement of the Knowledge Economy in NI.

A Barroso Task Force Legacy: closer local partnership

Local Government feels that it is immensely important that the Northern Ireland Executive continues to have a presence in Brussels, engage with the European Commission, support the work of our local Members to the European Parliament, and all our elected / non- elected regional representatives on European bodies such as the Committee of the Regions.

Around 75% of all local policies and regulations have been affected by laws emanating from the EU.

All council services are affected by EU laws in one way or another. Whether it is EU legislation on energy efficiency, equalities, procurement, recycling, waste and working hours, it is by and large councils that implement and carry additional costs.

We share with our regional European partners the same real life challenges of enabling greater social cohesion, while stimulating local economic growth, and sustainable jobs.

We share a common purpose to support and protect citizens, and the communities we serve. Regions and Municipalities in small regions – in particular NI - have an opportunity, in partnership with the European Commission and Parliaments to enable life changing opportunities and investment – as a Barroso legacy.

Northern Ireland local government enjoys an excellent working relationship with our local MEPs, and has a strong working relationship with sister UK and Irish local government associations – we are committed to build upon, and strengthen these critical relationships. The sector's Association, NILGA, is an axis to all of the above.

Local government has active representation on a number EU Institutions and bodies including; the Committee of the Regions (CoR), Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe (Congress) and Council of European Municipalities and Regions of Europe (CEMR), but we need to maximise the full dynamic EU investment that the Barroso Northern Ireland Task Force has afforded our region.

To achieve this, the two tiers of government in Northern Ireland must pool together their collective experience and resources to focus investment where it is needed most, delivered under the principle of subsidiarity, and in doing so, meet local community and business needs.

Northern Ireland has a lot to offer the European investor as a vibrant place to work, live and do business. The taskforce has given us a local platform to improve competitiveness, create sustainable employment, and to mobilise the services of the European Commission to energize growth. We must also reduce our dependency on the public sector, and encourage the creation of a more dynamic private sector. This will develop a culture of self – help and post Barroso enterprise.



The two tiers of Northern Ireland government working on shared EU interests represent a powerful force. Councils are key partners in the delivery of EU money to those communities and citizens that are in most need. Councils are the arbiters of new Community Investment Plans from April 2015 in NI. These enable Councils to optimise local delivery of multiplicities of funding in a way that creates local, economic prosperity, real jobs and safer more cohesive communities.

The local government sector in NI adds significant material value to local / sub-regional business growth through the established range of national, EU and international economic collaborative networks.

NILGA has presented (31st March 2014) a submission for all of NI, co-driven by the Invest NI team at central government level, for the European Entrepreneurial Region Award for 2015. This – in itself – is a fitting legacy and challenge in terms of post Barroso actions, and demonstrates integration of entrepreneurial effort. All 3 NI MEPs have supported the application, on a cross Party basis.

Councils offer the NI economy the knowledge and investment linkage and partnership required for sustainable growth:

- **Knowledge** – An understanding of local need including sub-regional business cluster, supported by locally elected community champions; and
- **Investment** – Councils have greater fund raising powers than NI Assembly (and Departments), and play a significant leadership role with the NI Executive, private / third sectors in transforming local communities and businesses. Councils can also facilitate applications for EU funding under elective funds such as Horizon 2020.

There is a strategic business case for the two tiers of regional and local government to build closer working relations with OFMDFM – particularly in light of Local Government Reform 2015 - at sub-regional and regional levels in order to maximise our EU opportunities. In particular, in shared areas of interest, such as illustrated in table 1:

Table 1 Areas of Local Government cooperation and benefit.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2014 – 2020 EU funding programmes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proposals on the Lisbon Strategy and 2020 Agenda for growth and jobs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local economic development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CAP, fisheries and rural development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EU Budget Review & measures to address the impact of the economic crisis (including social housing, broadband, and energy) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sustainable development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recycling and waste, including the WEEE Directive and policy on biodegradable waste 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Simplification of EU Programme State aids rules;
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Energy and climate change, including adaptation to climate change and agreeing EU targets on the use of renewable energy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sustainable transport policy
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regional policy, including territorial cohesion; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tourism and culture
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proposals on the Lisbon Strategy, Horizon 2020 and 2020 Agenda for growth and jobs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • E-government



Northern Ireland Strategic European Partnership Panel

There is also a priority to identify a material legacy for the Northern Ireland Barroso Task Force (which ends in late 2014) that acknowledges and builds upon the Task Force's work.

It is proposed to establish a regional and local government small, focussed and representative Northern Ireland Strategic European Partnership Panelⁱ in partnership with OFMDFM, championed by and overseen by Junior Ministers and the OFMDFM Committee.

The Panel would bring together senior decision taking representatives from government departments and local councils, but would also provide high level information to and receive the same from, MEPs, other public service agencies such as Invest NI, the regional representative bodies for the voluntary and community sector (such as the Rural Community Network and the Community Foundation for NI) so that we are all **'strategically connected'** through a regional platform on European investment and policy.

This Panel would also seek evidence and issues from the strong networks and the EU information, funding and related products and services made available through the NIO et al, together with regional operational bodies, such as the diverse Northern Ireland European Regional Forum, the NI Taskforce and the Committee of the Regions, to name but three.

The Panel would have membership from OFMDFM, other investment Departments and NILGA, and will facilitate regional cross-government / sector Infrastructure and Pipeline Project opportunities, implementing annual work plans which would themselves be driven by the cycle of Assembly corporate / election governance. It would report directly to OFMDFM Committee and subsequently the NILGA Executive. Primary Panel governance is retained by OFMDFM Committee. See Diagram 1.

It would, in microcosm, reflect the Political Partnership Panel which is written into legislation under the Programme for Government / Local government Reform Bill.

Diagram 1. Draft Northern Ireland European Strategic Partnership structure



The Aims of the Northern Ireland Strategic European Partnership

- To facilitate **investment planning** and related collaboration between local, regional & national government (and wider stakeholders) and the European Commission - developing a regional strategic approach to planning and delivering our engagement with Europe, for the investment and infrastructural benefit of the region;
- To facilitate a cross-governmental / sector platform for action on European investment and **policy intervention** issues among partners in the region (for example, the UK's retention of the 100% NI's assisted EU areas status coverage would be a primary focus, tailored to NI by the Panel);
- Engage and communicate with local, regional and international stakeholders; and
- Act as a conduit for policy proposals to and information sharing between the European Commission / European Parliament, National governments (both UK and IRL), Departments such as Department for Business, Innovation & Skills, HM Treasury and local and regional partners.

Additional comments

NILGA is committed to work with OFMDFM (and all NI Departments) in maximising the full benefit of shared approach to regional business growth, and more devolved investment to our local communities.

Our strategic priority for the next round of regional EU Programmes is to align investment where it will have greatest impact and to remove economic and administrative 'bottlenecks' preventing the present and proposed EU 2020 targets from being met.



We want to make it easier for local communities to access all elements of regeneration funding, including Barroso task force investment and its legacy.

In keeping with the UK Local Government Group and our Irish sister association the Association of County and City Councils, we are committed to giving localities and communities greater control and greater influence over programmes and services delivered in their areas – in order that local people and businesses can influence the shape of future programmes and see local level investment returns.

Whether termed Localism, Total Place, Subsidiarity or similar, NILGA offers a route to design the delivery and implementation of operational programmes which will be accountable, innovative and inclusive.

The Northern Ireland Local Government Association is prepared to play its part in developing sustainable EU working partnerships, and maximizing the opportunities the task forces have offered Northern Ireland.

NILGA has presented to the OFMDFM scrutiny committee formally, and seeks to develop this opportunity – ensuring that local government can utilise its LOCAL EU knowledge, delivery and experience to drive forward growth, social cohesion and partnership between all tiers of government and for the benefit of all communities – satisfying not only the Barroso legacy requirement, but, significantly, contributing to the next Programme for Government which will require three pillars of success – jobs & investment, social cohesion, and sustainable development.

Dr Ken Bishop
Head of Programmes (Investment and Partnership)

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ken Bishop', written over a large, faint, diagonal watermark that says 'DRAFT'.

4 April 2014

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ⁱ The Partnership Board would, indicatively, seek membership of around 12 – 14 members, with the Chairs and Vice Chairs developed between OFMDFM and NILGA if desired - to emphasise the shared purpose.

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New local government districts

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— 11 new local government districts

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