



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

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**COMMITTEE  
FOR THE OFFICE OF THE  
FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY  
FIRST MINISTER**

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**OFFICIAL REPORT  
(Hansard)**

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**European Issues**

2 March 2011

**NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY**

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FOR THE OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND  
DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER**

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**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Mr Tom Elliott (Chairperson)  
Dr Stephen Farry (Deputy Chairperson)  
Ms Martina Anderson  
Mr Allan Bresland  
Mr William Humphrey  
Mrs Dolores Kelly  
Mr Danny Kinahan  
Mr George Robinson  
Mr Jimmy Spratt

**Witnesses:**

Mr Stephen Graham                    )  
Mr Gareth McGrath                    )       Northern Ireland Assembly Commission

**The Chairperson (Mr Elliott):**

Gareth and Stephen, you are very welcome. If you like, you may give a short presentation and then take questions. I should add that the evidence session is being recorded by Hansard.

**Mr Gareth McGrath (Northern Ireland Assembly Commission):**

Thank you, Chairperson. I will give a quick introduction.

The Committee's report on its inquiry into the consideration of European issues made a number of recommendations, including one that the Assembly Commission should develop a European engagement strategy. The development of that strategy commenced last year and work was largely completed by the autumn. However, a key recommendation of the report was that the Assembly Commission should appoint a parliamentary officer based in Brussels, subject to the necessary funding being available. Consideration of the recommendation in the context of the spending review resulted in the strategy being delayed.

As soon as the Assembly Commission finalised its budget, the draft strategy was brought to the next available Commission meeting, which was on 22 February 2011. Recommendation 2 in the Committee's report was:

"The Assembly Commission should consult with the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister before making decisions with regard to the European institutions."

It is in that context that the draft strategy has been brought to the Committee today.

I will now hand over to Stephen Graham, who will summarise the main points in the strategy.

**Mr Stephen Graham (Northern Ireland Assembly Commission):**

Gareth has outlined the background. One of the starting points was the fact that a joint delegation from the Assembly Commission and this Committee went to Brussels in June 2010. One of the commitments that the Speaker gave at that time was to involve the three MEPs in particular in the strategy's development. Therefore, there has been a great deal of engagement with the MEPs and with members of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), as well as with many other interests. Those people are all listed in appendix 1 of the draft strategy.

I will go through each of the sections in turn. Section 1 sets out the strategy's objective, which is:

"to ensure that the Assembly Commission develops and exploits the resources available to better enable the Assembly, its Committees and its Members to engage on European issues."

To that end, the strategy addresses the recommendations that were directed towards the Assembly

Commission. They focus on early identification of European issues by the Assembly; developing and improving a variety of key relationships with the EU institutions; preparing and delivering capacity-building measures for MLAs and secretariat staff; and consideration of establishing a parliamentary presence in Brussels.

It is important to say at this juncture that the Assembly's strategy is intended to supplement and complement the Executive's strategy in how it approaches Europe, through earlier engagement and better scrutiny of the Executive by Assembly Committees.

Section 2 gives some context and outlines the impact that Europe has had on Northern Ireland, including details of funding, and it also looks at what the future might bring, particularly in the context of enlargement.

Section 3 reflects on the scope for engaging with European institutions, in particular the European Commission, the Council of the European Union, the European Parliament, and the Committee of the Regions. It proposes that the Assembly Commission ensure that greater use be made of the resources in the European Commission's offices, including exploring the potential for secondments to the European Commission.

In the context of the European Parliament, the strategy majors on the relationships and contributions that can be made with and by the MEPs. In the context of the Council of the European Union, the strategy is looking to ensure that Committees are fully supported to undertake effective scrutiny of the Executive and of its relations with the UK Government on devolved issues.

The strategy also provides for the Assembly Commission to consult with members of the Committee of the Regions and the potential to offer them greater support; for example, through the Assembly's Research and Library Service, when members of the Committee of the Regions are acting as representatives of the Assembly. Towards the end of section 3, the strategy refers to the value to be gained from attendance at key events and through networking and developing relationships.

Section 4 deals with the principle of early engagement. It has been acknowledged that the Assembly has not been doing that terribly effectively, and section 4 describes what is now being done by the Assembly's Research and Library Service to provide support to Committees with horizon scanning, and so on.

Section 5 deals with capacity-building measures. There have been discussions with the Leuven Institute in Brussels. The recommendations include a capacity-building programme for MLAs to be incorporated into the Members' development programme. However, it is suggested that its commencement should be deferred until May or June 2011, and it should be targeted at those who serve or expect to serve on the Statutory Committees that have a specific interest in European matters.

Section 6 deals with the issue of an Assembly officer in Brussels. It outlines the arrangements in other legislatures and provides a menu of options and associated costs. However, I suppose that those are more matters of concern to the Assembly Commission.

Finally, section 7 deals with the arrangements for implementation, timetabling and review.

**Mr McGrath:**

I will take this opportunity to highlight to Members that, although we do have a draft strategy, we have not been idle in this matter. A range of initiatives has been progressed, to a greater or lesser extent, over the past year. Stephen has already referred to the new services that are being provided by the Research and Library Service, including the screening of the annual European legislative and work programme (LWP) and a weekly screening of communications from the European Commission. We have also established a new page on the internal Horizon system to provide information on matters that are coming out of Europe.

The Assembly Commission is currently partnering the Parliament of Estonia, supported by the Parliament of Lithuania, the Houses of the Oireachtas and the National Assembly for Wales, in a project to support the accession of Kosovo to the European Union. Subject to funding from the European Union, that project will facilitate a significant number of secondments from the Assembly Commission secretariat to work with Kosovo, working closely with the European

institutions, to support it in the accession process. That is a good opportunity for secretariat staff in the context of the current spending review and is an area in which we have tried to be slightly more innovative.

The Northern Ireland Assembly and Business Trust (NIABT) has taken forward some work on Europe. For example, the trust has worked with the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment to support European small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) week. The trust has also arranged three study visits to Brussels, with a fourth planned for November 2011. A number of MLAs have participated in those visits.

Therefore, although we do have a draft strategy and are here today to consult formally the Committee, the strategy will go back to the Assembly Commission at its next meeting on 22 March and be finalised at that stage, taking into account any views from the Committee.

**The Chairperson:**

Thank you very much. Where are you with the Assembly Commission on all this at the moment?

**Mr McGrath:**

The Assembly Commission discussed the draft strategy initially last week and was broadly content with it. It is fair to say that the primary concern at this stage is the recommendation for a parliamentary officer. Obviously, the Committee attached a caveat that the appointment of a parliamentary officer should be strongly encouraged, subject to funding. Funding is a significant issue, with the Assembly Commission facing 17% cuts. To fund a parliamentary officer immediately would require significant cuts elsewhere. That being said, the Assembly Commission is very supportive of the appointment of a parliamentary officer. However, it may be minded to go for an initial option, which would be to enhance further the service provided by the Research and Library Service and perhaps to review the matter early in the next mandate, when the new Assembly Commission is in place.

**The Chairperson:**

The Assembly Commission has not really made any decisions, Gareth, has it?

**Mr McGrath:**

No, not in the matter of a European officer. The Assembly Commission was very keen to make sure that the Committee had an opportunity to input into the draft strategy before it went any further.

**The Chairperson:**

What timescale are you talking about for the strategy and how do you see it being taken forward?

**Mr McGrath:**

The intention is for the strategy to be finalised before the end of March. It is a working document, so it will continue to be refined and developed. However, it would be agreed by the Assembly Commission before the end of March.

**The Chairperson:**

I did not see any reference in the strategy to the Barroso task force. Did I miss that, or is that totally outside the terms of reference?

**Mr Graham:**

It is possibly not in the draft that is before you. Lots of issues were identified as I talked to people. As I said, the development of the strategy was an iterative process. I suspect that the Barroso task force fits more appropriately into the action plan that will come after the strategy is agreed and endorsed. Equally, however, given that the task force is coming to Northern Ireland again, there is a view that there should be some sort of engagement with the task force when it is here.

**The Chairperson:**

OK. I am sorry for pressing you, Gareth, on the issue of timing, but, from what you are saying, it seems that the Assembly Commission has not taken any decisions on the draft strategy and would like our input as well. Are you hoping that the strategy will state that we will definitely have a library and research facility provided in Europe or that we may have a permanent office there? Are you hoping to go that far in the strategy and point to one particular outcome?

**Mr McGrath:**

Yes. The Assembly Commission has been apprised of the various options and has given its initial view, which is that it entirely supports the Committee's recommendation to appoint a parliamentary officer. However, funding is still an issue.

**Mr Spratt:**

Thank you for the presentation, Gareth and Stephen. The Assembly Commission fiddles while the city burns, basically. I think that it is appalling that you come here to tell us that the draft strategy went to the Assembly Commission only last week. It is not a new problem; it has been an ongoing situation for some considerable time now. To be frank, the Assembly is fiddling while we are losing out massively. I hear what you say about the Research and Library Service, communications and the internal Horizon system. I would like you to put a bit more meat on the bone on some of the areas in which Research staff are involved.

One issue that has been consistently coming through to this Committee, no matter who comes to it, whether it be Mike Smyth or our representatives Francie Molloy, Jonathan Bell and others, who go out there with basically no support whatsoever and try to do their bit for Northern Ireland. All of them are saying that we are losing out massively, while you continue to talk about the 17% cuts that you have to make. Frankly, that seems to be the only thing that is in the mind of the directorate at the moment. You have only been told about the cuts recently, so the question has to be asked: what were you doing before that?

My understanding is that one of the main areas in which we can get money is through research and development. We have got something like only €25 million out of a substantial pot of money. You need to be partnering with other people. We have universities here that can partner up, and they are now leading. Look at the announcement the other day about Queen's University on the cancer stem cell stuff for breast cancer. It could be partnering with pharmaceutical companies and all sorts of people on this island and beyond to try to bring more and more stuff into Northern Ireland to help everybody right across the board.

It seems to me that the report is all about strategy and maybe. We are talking about around £70,000. You know what? Find the £70,000 from some other place, because there are plenty of



areas of the Assembly in which you could find savings. Let us get down to doing the work that we are supposed to be doing. We have fiddled for four years while the city burns, and that does not reflect well on you folk. I am sorry that I have to say that to you. I know that you have not been in post for four years, but the bottom line is that nothing has been done. I think that the Assembly Commission and the directorate bear a very heavy responsibility for that.

The research stuff and all the rest of it may be good, but there is so much crossover from Committee to Committee. We are supposed to be looking after the European stuff, and other Committees are dealing with their bits — agriculture and this, that and the other thing — but nobody seems to know exactly what to do. We are missing out, because we are not getting in there. What everybody is saying is that we are not getting in there soon enough. It is our responsibility to be doing that, but it is the Assembly Commission's responsibility to make it happen and to make somebody available to do it. There are plenty of areas on which, I believe, money is foolishly spent. The sort of figures that we are talking about can be found there and the money spent on work that would benefit all our communities.

**Mr McGrath:**

It is fair to say that, while working on the strategy, Stephen and I have increasingly come to the view that, in the same way in which many other regions throughout Europe have a parliamentary officer, the Assembly should have one as well. The Assembly Commission is also very supportive of that view, so we will absolutely take that message back to it.

**The Chairperson:**

I sense from this and other evidence sessions regarding Europe that there is an almost general frustration among the groups and individuals from which we hear. There is no joined-up approach or connectivity in dealing with European issues. We cannot get any concerted direction, because our MEPs, by and large, do their own thing in the European Parliament. Jane Morrice and Mike Smyth do their thing as almost a heavy lobbying group, and the Committee of the Regions is, broadly, another lobby group. That is the general frustration that I sense about it. We are looking for something that will join all that together from the Assembly's perspective. Even when some of those whom I mentioned gave evidence, there did not seem to be much co-operation among organisations and groups with the Office of the Northern Ireland Executive in

Brussels (ONIEB). That is how I see it. I do not know whether that is the same point that Jimmy is trying to make.

**Mr Spratt:**

I did not get any meat on the bone in reply to my query about the Research and Library Service. Most of us around this table are probably not all that aware about what is going on there. We are told that stuff is going on with communications, Research and Library Services and with internal Horizon, whatever that is. There is also the Estonia thing. You know, that is another country being brought in. I do not know where the benefit —

**Dr Farry:**

Kosovo.

**Mr Spratt:**

Sorry?

**Dr Farry:**

Kosovo.

**Mr Spratt:**

Kosovo. I do not where the benefit is to be derived from the Northern Ireland Assembly working with Estonia at this moment. We are able to staff that but not the crucial bit, and I think that that leaves you with a major question to answer.

**Mr McGrath:**

The benefit of the Northern Ireland/Estonia link-up is that it is entirely funded by the European Union. There is no outlay from the Assembly. Any such secondments, and secondments are a key part of the Committee report, are entirely funded.

**Mr Spratt:**

That was not the question. What is the benefit? What is the benefit for the people of Northern Ireland? What is the benefit for the Northern Ireland Assembly? How does it benefit our getting

more money for research and development, and all the rest of it?

**Mr McGrath:**

From the Committee's point of view, the benefit is that one of the recommendations was about secretariat staff going on secondments and working more closely to gain a better understanding of European institutions. That is the link there, but I absolutely take your point about the other matters.

**The Chairperson:**

Although I think that it is different from what you pointed out, Jimmy, one of the action points from our report was:

“Research and Library Services will screen the annual European Legislative and Work Programme and produce a prioritised menu of scrutiny topics relevant to each statutory committee. For those scrutiny topics which are of particular interest to statutory committees, the Research and Library Service should monitor the development of policy at European level and provide regular information updates which would, amongst other things, identify all relevant draft legislative acts.”

I understand that staff in Research and Library Service are already doing that, but, again, I think that that is different from your point, is it not? You talked about what benefits will come.

**Mr Spratt:**

With all due respect, what the Committee was looking for in the area of engagement was to send officers out to Europe to engage. It was our view that they should engage to be helpful for Northern Ireland. We did not want them simply to be up to speed on European issues. We wanted them out in Europe to do something positive for the Assembly and for Northern Ireland, not to help to bring another country into the European Union. I do not see the benefit in that for us. We might be getting funding for that, but what is the benefit to the Northern Ireland Assembly? If you have staff to do that, you must have staff that will be capable of doing the other work, and the only thing that you are left with is the funding.

**Mr McGrath:**

That is just an example to highlight to the Committee the fact that there are things under way.

**Mr Humphrey:**

Thank you, Stephen and Gareth for your presentation. I will centre on sections 2, 3 and 4 of the

document. Section 2 is about relationships between the European Union and Northern Ireland, and the Chairperson and Mr Spratt talked about that. The document lists all the key players who play a role for Northern Ireland in Europe, and we have listened to evidence from the European Commission, the two representatives of the European Economic and Social Committee and two of the representatives from the Committee of the Regions. It struck me that, when Mr Bell and Mr Molloy were in front of the Committee, they suggested that they were, effectively, paddling their own canoe. If I am wrong about that, I am sure that I will be corrected. I am concerned about that suggestion.

In contextualising, the report makes clear that Northern Ireland is a small place, but it is not without influence. The First Minister and deputy First Minister were able to get the President to come to the opening of our new office, and I commend the office and the staff on the work that is done there. Clearly, there has to be more co-ordination, co-operation and joined-up work across all of the key players, from the MEPs to those who sit on and are involved with the European Commission, the Executive office, the European Economic and Social Committee and those who sit on the Committee of the Regions. If we do not do that, we are not delivering to the maximum for Northern Ireland.

Members will be bored from listening to me make this point, but, at an event recently in Belfast City Hall, Colette Fitzgerald said that, next year, Northern Ireland could expect to get €25 million while the Republic of Ireland could potentially get €600 million. Our nearest neighbour, the Republic of Ireland, has a population of around 3.7 million, and Northern Ireland's population is around 1.7 million. It is a sovereign nation, and its Government has a longer track record of lobbying, while we are part of a larger sovereign nation. Nevertheless, much more needs to be done and much more can be done. Can you provide clarification on how the co-ordination and co-operation is progressing?

The document deals with engaging and the concept of engaging early, which is vital, given the competition in Europe for resources. Money from Europe can be used to alleviate some of the cuts that our national Government has enforced on the budgetary situation. That links into the issue of capacity building, which will leave a legacy with the staff and Assembly Members in this institution that will ripple out into communities and have the effect of making Northern Ireland

much more savvy about Europe than it is currently. Can you provide more information about how that is progressing?

We have received presentations over the past number of months, and the Chairperson and Jimmy articulated their views on the relationships between Northern Ireland and Europe. There is no confidence that joined-up working, co-operation and co-ordination are being addressed to a satisfactory conclusion.

A parliamentary officer is required, because someone is needed to co-ordinate everything. These issues are not just the responsibility of the Department that we scrutinise. For example, SEUPB is directly under the bailiwick of the Department of Finance and Personnel. Of course, all of the other Departments have European elements. Someone has to co-ordinate all of that, otherwise things will slip through the net, as they have been doing, and will not be addressed. None of this is irreparable, but the issue has to be addressed very quickly, because we are continuing to lose out.

**Mr McGrath:**

You raised a number of different matters, which I will try to cover.

On the issue of co-ordination and co-operation, one of things that has significantly improved over the past six or nine months is the way in which we, as members of the Assembly Commission, work more closely with our colleagues on the Office of the Northern Ireland Executive in Brussels and the European Commission Office in Belfast. There is a much closer working relationship between those three bodies, and a lot of the work that Stephen has done over the past six to nine months has helped to build those relationships.

In respect of capacity building, the Commission would be keen, if the Committee is content, to make sure that there is a European dimension to the Members' development programme. The Commission is working on that at the moment. That is being done with a view to focussing on Members.

**Mr Graham:**

Some of the points that were made by Mr Spratt and Mr Humphrey, particularly around R&D and the issues that the Assembly and its Commission should be looking at, were probably informed by the key targets for the EU for 2020. For example, the target on employment is for 75% of 20-to-64-year-olds to be employed; 3% of the EU's GDP is to be invested in R&D and innovation, which is the point that Mr Spratt made; in the area of climate change and energy, the targets are on reductions in emissions, more energy from renewables and increased energy efficiency; and, in education, the targets are for drop-out rates and poverty and social exclusion to be reduced.

Those targets fit into the remit of six or seven of the Assembly's Committees, which is why Gareth made the point about building the capacity of those Committees so that they are able to take on the European dimension. I suppose the issue comes back to the point about the level of information. At the moment, the level of information is generated through the Assembly Research and Library Service briefings.

Gareth also made the point that parliamentary officers in other legislatures are giving information back to their institutions earlier. We are as convinced as anyone else about the need for and the virtue of having a parliamentary officer, but that is a matter that has to be resolved with the Assembly Commission.

**Mr Humphrey:**

In a given year, is there ever a point at which all of the key players listed in section 2 as having a role in battling for Northern Ireland in Europe are in a room together to work on clear objectives? Do you ever get them together for a day and not let them out until they have set out clear, and hopefully achievable, demands for Northern Ireland so that everybody has a clear vision of what they should be striving for? Does that ever happen?

**Mr Graham:**

In my experience, it does not.

I have had meetings and conversations with people on developing the strategy, such as the meetings that I had with Ken Bishop from the Northern Ireland Local Government Association

(NILGA) and the officers from Belfast City Council. All of those people said to me what they said to this Committee and to others: There is a need for some connection and a joined-up approach. If there was additional resource put in, I suppose that there might be an opportunity for the Assembly to be the facilitator for something like that.

**Mr Humphrey:**

That would very quickly pay for itself.

**Mrs D Kelly:**

Apologies for being late and arriving in the middle of your presentation.

I found your report useful in setting the context and some of the costs. Many members of this Committee are keen to promote the work of European engagement because that is a clear responsibility of OFMDFM. Therefore, as the scrutiny Committee, our role is to look at that.

I have concerns on two fronts. The first is on the political direction. The work can go only as fast and as far as the political masters dictate. I was very concerned yesterday to hear a comment from a voluntary organisation suggesting that more funding would have been available and was offered to a particular Department, but officials turned it down rather than form a 50% contribution to a 40% because they did not want the extra work. That explains why there ought to be a representative of the parliamentary body there, as opposed to departmental officials. That news is currently going round a range of community and voluntary groups, and I believe them. I believe that could be the case; that some people just want an easy life, want to get through their nine-to-five jobs and do not really care about the long-term legacy of missed European opportunities. I am keen to hear what the next steps are. Will this be put on the long finger, as Jimmy said, for another four years, or are we going to see some affirmative action?

**Mr McGrath:**

Those are decisions that the Assembly Commission will make at its next meeting. We will continue to reinforce the Committee's feeling that the option of having a parliamentary officer is strongly favoured. Stephen can confirm that, through his discussions, he is aware that Scotland and Wales have not decided to withdraw their parliamentary officers at this point, in spite of the

cuts that they face, so they clearly feel that there is a case to be made.

**Mrs D Kelly:**

Invest to save.

**Mr Graham:**

That is absolutely the case. I have not had recent conversations with them, but I always had the impression that they felt that there was value added. Mrs Kelly's point about scrutiny of the Executive and Departments is one I touched on when I tried to answer some of Mr Humphrey's questions. There are six or seven Committees involved, and I am thinking specifically of the Committees for Agriculture and Rural Development; Employment and Learning; Enterprise, Trade and Investment; Environment; Finance and Personnel, in the context of SEUPB; Justice, increasingly and in an emerging manner; and, of course, this Committee. There is a lot there.

One message that I, the Committee and the joint delegation heard was of the virtue and value of focusing and concentrating on a number of specific issues rather than trying to spread the resource too widely. That message has been recognised and was rehearsed with the Assembly Commission last week.

**The Chairperson:**

I can tell you one thing: If a parliamentary officer is appointed, he or she will be under some pressure to deliver.

**Mrs D Kelly:**

You are right, and so there should be.

**The Chairperson:**

The Executive have representatives there, and, although I have not seen it working, I wonder what the level of co-operation is between their office and some of the other bodies. I know that there is co-operation in some instances, but the Committee of the Regions representatives told us that they never get briefings from anybody.



**Mr McGrath:**

All I can do is refer to the way that some of the other devolved regions work. They have very different models and quite different views as to how these things should work. Some are more on the research and library side, some are more on the networking and engagement side, but the one flavour we get from anyone who we talk to is that there has to be some sort of mechanism to tie all these things in together.

Another message that came through from Scotland and Wales was that they each have one person who works on their own in Brussels, and, although they have one person on the government side, there are a multitude of people. There always has to be an onus on the Executive. Therefore, there is an onus on the Committee to scrutinise the work of the Office of the Northern Ireland Executive in Brussels (ONIEB).

**Ms M Anderson:**

Thank you. I apologise for not being here for your presentation, but I will be able to read it in full in the Hansard report.

You are probably getting a sense of the frustration of members such as Dolores, William and Jimmy. In going through this process, we have spent a lot of time looking at the networking, or the lack of networking, across a number of Departments. Forgive me but, between carrying out our inquiry and now, our confidence in you collectively has dipped. We expected a more robust, dynamic response than what we have been given.

Our dip in confidence and disappointment is married with frustration — as you heard from Jimmy — that, across a range of matters, we are missing opportunities that would benefit people here in the North. We went to Scotland, Wales, and Leinster House. We got a real understanding of what happens in those places and the benefits that are accrued as a result. One of the areas that you talked about is shared service arrangements, for which no costing was provided. Have you had any discussions with Scotland, Wales and Leinster House about how you can network to share those arrangements?

SEUPB was referred to, and there are a number of structures and organisations out there.

Conversations about the all-Ireland parliamentary forum are taking place. This could be an issue that a forum such as that could deal with. There would be mutual benefits here if we all came together. William talked about the money being secured in the South compared to what we have here, for example.

I looked at the action plan and the six recommendations. I fully support what Jimmy said about exploring, with the European Commission office in Brussels, the potential for secondments to the European institutions. That has to be done with the purpose of assisting all of the above. Obviously, we need to build the capacity of the individuals concerned. However, it is not just about building the capacity of the particular civil servant, as important as that is. We need to ensure that the purpose will be to assist all of us and all the Departments as far as possible.

I expected some of this to have been done already. We are nearing the end of term. We carried out two inquiries and have made a number of recommendations. However, we are not even at the point where there is some sort of infrastructure in place for the next OFMDFM Committee. It may not have been possible to achieve everything in this term, but that would have meant that we were, at least, on the road to delivering it. Forgive me; I did not hear all of the presentation. However, from what I heard of the questions asked and the answers received, I do not feel as though we are even close to building the kind of infrastructure that is required. That is a massive disappointment.

**Mr McGrath:**

We have done some work on the action plan, particularly on the Research and Library Service side, to ensure that we have much more capacity and that, in respect of an early warning, we provide that information at a much earlier stage than has been the case previously.

**Ms M Anderson:**

Will that early warning or red flag go to the relevant Committee, so that that Committee is alerted to it?

**Mr McGrath:**

Yes.

**Ms M Anderson:**

Is there an engagement with that Committee, as opposed its being just a take-note item? There needs to be some correspondence between you and the Committee in respect of an action that will come out of it.

**The Chairperson:**

To be fair, Martina, that would be up to the Committee to decide. At least, that is my thinking on it. If it goes to the Committee, it is up to the Committee to decide whether it thinks that it should engage.

**Ms M Anderson:**

I am assuming that it is not just this Committee but other Committees.

**The Chairperson:**

Yes.

**Ms M Anderson:**

Is the process effective? Is it working?

**Mr McGrath:**

The Committee may wish to consider getting Tim Moore from the Research and Library Service to come along to give a briefing update on how that system works, how the information is disseminated and what happens with it.

You also mentioned the possibility of a shared service. Stephen and I have considered that area at length. There are two aspects of a parliamentary officer's job. The first is gathering information, disseminating it and making sure that something happens with it. The second is networking and engagement. The second area is where the difficulties start because, with the best will in the world, a parliamentary officer can represent only one legislature at a time. That is the difficulty, but we considered it at length. We did not have detailed discussions with Scotland or Wales about that, but it is difficult for the parliamentary officer —

**Ms M Anderson:**

I want to tease that out. I appreciate that it probably would be difficult for any individual, but there is a network, including the MEPs, the Committee of the Regions and the OFMDFM EU unit. The people who are working there, particularly the civil servants, form a support background. Colette Fitzgerald was mentioned. That girl would blow you away with her enthusiasm. She is quite keen to drive that agenda. There are dynamic and robust individuals in that office who are keen to take that forward. Barroso is reaching out a hand to the North in a way that he has not done for anywhere else. There are also the MEPs and the MLAs who are on the Committee of the Regions. It appears that that person would have a ready-built team around them. They will not be alone and will not be starting from scratch, so I do not agree with you. You said that there are two elements and that the second one is difficult because that person is almost a stand-alone individual. That would not be the case.

**Mr Graham:**

We may be talking at cross purposes. The reference that was made in the document to a shared service was a shared arrangement among the Welsh Assembly, the Scottish Parliament and the Northern Ireland Assembly. It was not explored at all. Your point about networking and building relationships with all of those individuals was well made and is well recognised. In fact —

**Ms M Anderson:**

Would you not look at that shared services arrangement in the context of the personnel that you have to assist that and make it happen?

**Mr McGrath:**

Do you mean a shared service between the Assembly and the Office of the Northern Ireland Executive in Brussels?

**Ms M Anderson:**

There is Wales, Scotland and what is happening in Leinster House. There are people there who could share their understanding of what is happening, their contacts, how they process and how they tap in to opportunities. Surely, if there is going to be a shared service arrangement, we could

look at how that could be achieved with those relevant bodies, as opposed to it just being networking.

**Mr McGrath:**

Absolutely. One of our views was that a parliamentary officer should, as far as possible, be embedded and should work closely with the Office of the Northern Ireland Executive in Brussels. There will always have to be a separation for obvious reasons, but, for a number of reasons, people who are there have their own networks. It would be silly to try to build from the ground up.

**Ms M Anderson:**

They should not reinvent the wheel, but, if somebody from Scotland or Wales was already pursuing a matter, there is no point in duplicating that. That is where that kind of information and service could be shared so that we could benefit from it here.

**Mr McGrath:**

Absolutely.

**Mr Graham:**

On your point about the level of detail in the strategy, I made the point in the initial presentation that developing the strategy has been a bit of an iterative process. There is a lot of documentation available that could fit into the action plan that would put the strategy in place and start the work on it. Perhaps that could be teased out a little bit more in the strategy if that were helpful.

**Ms M Anderson:**

Yes.

**The Chairperson:**

For clarification, Martina, are you saying that we should not have our own parliamentary officer?

**Ms M Anderson:**

No; we should. I am saying that they would not be on their own. We could tap in to others that

are there.

**Mr Kinahan:**

I am not sure whether I am aiming this point at the Committee or you, Chairperson. As the new boy listening to all of this, I think that we are going round in circles. We know what we need; it is a question of how strong it should be and whether we go for a parliamentary officer who will make regular reports on various bodies, like the library one. How do we get it to happen? We know what we want, but we need to start putting dates on when decisions will be made.

**The Chairperson:**

In fairness, Danny, the witnesses said that the proposals have to go back to the Assembly Commission on 22 March. It is the Commission's decision, but it wants opinions from us, and that is what we are gathering today.

**Mr Kinahan:**

It is hugely important. We want someone there who punches above their weight and gets all the information to us as often as possible.

**Dr Farry:**

I was going to raise the shared service aspect, but Martina has already raised it, so there is no need to echo it. There are 90-odd fellow regions across the European Union, and some of those regions have some sort of devolved structures. Do the Catalan Regional Assembly or the Baden-Württemberg region of Germany have parliamentary officers? Are they fairly common across the European Union?

**Mr Graham:**

There is a high level of investment of resource by some regions. You mentioned two in particular, and I know that the Committee has met representatives from them and built on those relationships. Other regions may have financial pressures that do not allow them to invest as heavily, but they are clearly getting value for whatever they are doing, and they are continuing to invest.

**Dr Farry:**

Are we trailblazing when we talk about having a parliamentary presence?

**Mr Graham:**

Absolutely not.

**Dr Farry:**

So we are playing catch up with regard to what others are doing.

**Mr G Robinson:**

The draft strategy states:

“It has already been noted that if the Assembly wishes to better engage on European issues, it will be necessary to increase the capacity of MLAs and the Assembly Secretariat in a way which is commensurate with the objectives of the strategy.”

Where do the MEPs fit into that? There are three elected MEPs. Surely, there is a greater role for them.

**Mr Graham:**

The capacity building is directed towards trying to better inform members on some of the specific Committees in the Assembly that scrutinise the work of Departments. However, I am aware that there is a more joined-up approach with the MEPs and the regular briefings that they give to the Committee. My understanding is that they often attend party group meetings to give updates on European related issues, so that members of each of the political parties are aware of emerging issues. However, perhaps it comes back to the point that Mr Humphrey made about getting everybody in the room from time to time. There is a gap, but the question is whether it is the Assembly's role to fill that gap. That might need to be teased out a bit more. However, without question, wherever you go, people will say that MEPs have a role, members on the Committee of the Regions have their role, and so on, but, to come back to Ms Anderson's point about making it more joined up and building those relationships, that is, without question, central to the thinking behind the strategy. The action plan would then tell you how to go about that. However, it requires the Assembly Commission to dedicate a suitable level of resource to sustain the level of work and activity that there would be. As Gareth said, that is a matter for the Assembly Commission.

**The Chairperson:**

Jimmy, you want some points of clarification. I ask you to be specific.

**Mr Spratt:**

During the briefing, somebody mentioned that the MEPs have been consulted, but I cannot see anything in the paper to say that they were consulted. I just want to know their views on the parliamentary officer. Why are those views not included in the document that is in front of us? I suspect that they are the key players for Northern Ireland in this matter.

Gareth, I think that you mentioned that there was co-operation between the Assembly and the Office of the Northern Ireland Executive in Brussels and the Belfast office. What is the extent of that co-operation? How often does that co-operation occur, and who is specifically involved in it? How is that then cascaded to the rest of the Assembly?

**Mr Graham:**

At the top of page 4 of the draft strategy, there is an acknowledgement of the role that the MEPs played. I certainly had a number of conversations over a six- or eight-month period. The MEPs essentially said that, if there were to be a parliamentary presence or parliamentary officer based in Brussels generating intelligence and information, the Assembly would also need to be sure that it had the capacity to make the best use of that information and intelligence. That relates back to the capacity-building that we have mentioned from time to time, and particularly to those members who would be serving on Committees that have a particular European dimension.

**Mr Spratt:**

And with the people who are involved in the Committee of the Regions?

**Mr Graham:**

Absolutely.

**Mr Spratt:**

They generally thought it to be an idea that was a must and that we should have a parliamentary presence?



**Mr Graham:**

They recognise the value of a parliamentary presence, but they temper that by saying that, if the information comes back to the Assembly and the Assembly does not make the best use of it, in some ways it is potentially a waste of resource if the information is not passed on to Committees. As I mentioned, in my view, six or seven Committees should have a focus on European issues. The Chairperson made the point that it is always a matter for Committees to decide what they do, whether that be a paper from Research and Library Services or a report from a parliamentary officer, if one were to be appointed.

**Mr McGrath:**

It is fair to say that the co-operation at this stage is informal, in the sense that we now have a much closer working relationship than has been the case in the past. That has happened as a result of preparing the draft strategy. I take on board your point that we need to formalise co-operation.

**Mr Spratt:**

Gareth, you told us that there was better co-operation. I asked you the specific questions: what is that better co-operation, who is involved in it and how is it cascaded o the Assembly? To be frank with you, I think that you are just skirting around the issue and telling us what we want to hear. I have asked you a direct question and have not got a direct answer, so I am asking you the same direct question again.

**Mr McGrath:**

The answer is that the co-operation is informal.

**Mr Spratt:**

Who is involved in it?

**Mr McGrath:**

For example, Stephen has met the head of the European Commission office in Brussels on a number of occasions. The secretary of the Northern Ireland Assembly and Business Trust

regularly meets her counterparts in order to inform visits to Brussels by Members and others and to make sure that there is a full and comprehensive programme for that. Stephen has also regularly met Gerry Mulligan from the Office of the Northern Ireland Executive in Brussels. Gerry Mulligan is also here regularly.

**Dr Farry:**

Can I just say a word on that? I will just stir it around a bit further. It is important that we look beyond our own immediate situation to see what we can do to assist enlargement and bringing in new countries. I know that there is a very strong desire in the European Commission to bring Kosovo and others in.

Whether there are informal or more formal contacts, it is in our wider interest to do so, because we have done very well out of Europe. We are regarded as being a great success story in conflict resolution, and the European Union takes a lot of pride in the assistance that it has given towards that. It feels that it is part of that success. We are still dining out on that, to an extent, in relation to our access, whether for something such as future Peace IV funding or the Barroso task force. It is incumbent on us to try to give something back, and this is something that is fairly small and low key. It is important that we say that.

**Ms M Anderson:**

So that I might understand, are you telling me that, until you have a parliamentary officer in place, nobody within your remit has the authority or the responsibility to pull together in one room Gerry Mulligan, the EU unit, the MEPs, Maurice Maxwell, the MPs and all the other players to have a plenary discussion? Do we have to wait until such a point before that can take place? We have met all the people whom you named, Stephen, and we are here at this Committee only once a week. We are also off doing a million and one other things, but we have met all those people, and we have had all of them in this room. We have had the same discussions and conversations.

**The Chairperson:**

There may be a responsibility on us as well, because one thing that we have not done is to bring them all together at once. I do not think that anybody has done that.

**Ms M Anderson:**

No. That is what I am asking. Who has responsibility for that? We could do that or facilitate it. However, are we saying that the action and follow-up cannot happen because no one has the real authority? Although we could suggest that, arrange it and make it happen, can no one in your office, Gareth, make that happen?

**Mr McGrath:**

One of the clear actions that we will take away from today is to make sure that that happens and that those relationships are formalised. We will take that away and reflect it in the action plan.

**The Chairperson:**

I assume that you cannot force them to come together.

**Ms M Anderson:**

No, you can only invite them.

**The Chairperson:**

You can at least facilitate it. Perhaps, as a first step, we should facilitate a round-table meeting of all interested parties. That may be the starting point.

**Mrs D Kelly:**

We tell all other organisations to pool their resources to maximise the benefit for everyone. We should set an example.

**Ms M Anderson:**

Yes.

**Mr Humphrey:**

It is fine to get everybody in a room, but there must be a mechanism to take the thing forward so that there is a vision and then a strategy to deliver on the ground to maximise the benefit for Northern Ireland. That cannot be, nor is it, the responsibility of this Committee. We need to

establish how to achieve that.

**The Chairperson:**

To be fair, William, from what I hear, it is the responsibility of nobody.

**Mr Humphrey:**

I accept that.

**The Chairperson:**

I am saying that we should set an example by bringing them together, and we may find that a mechanism emerges from that. Is that not reasonable?

**Mr Humphrey:**

It may be an unfortunate use of the term, but I mentioned in Committee that Northern Ireland may need a European tsar. Whether the parliamentary officer for Europe is that person, I do not know, but someone needs to have the authority to give clear direction to enable all those disparate groups and individuals to come together. I do not mean to be negative — many people are doing much good work, I am sure — but there must be duplication in much of the work that goes on. To maximise the benefit, there must be clear co-operation and communication.

**Mrs D Kelly:**

Team NI in Europe.

**The Chairperson:**

OK. I think that Gareth and Stephen have got a fair flavour of the Committee's thinking on the issues.

**Mrs D Kelly:**

Could do better.

**The Chairperson:**

I suggest a couple of things. First, with the Committee's agreement, we will make the Hansard

report available as soon as it is ready. Secondly, although it may be a role for the Assembly Commission, I suggest that we correspond with the Commission as soon as possible, and before you finalise your strategy, in an effort to get as many as possible of those we talked about around the table before 22 March. Is that reasonable?

**Mrs D Kelly:**

Go for it.

**Ms M Anderson:**

We have an opportunity to do that. It will be a bit of a difficulty for some people, and not all of them will be there, but do we not have a plenary debate on the report on Statutory Committee activity on European issues coming up?

**The Committee Clerk:**

That is on Monday.

**Ms M Anderson:**

OK. Bang goes that idea. That is too soon. I thought that that might have brought about an opportunity to bring people into the same room. Something may emerge in the outworkings of whatever is said in that debate.

**The Chairperson:**

OK. Are members content that the Committee write to the Assembly Commission to establish whether, between us, we can arrange such a meeting?

*Members indicated assent.*

**The Chairperson:**

OK. Gareth and Stephen, thank you very much.