



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Employment and Learning

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Northern Ireland Executive Office Thematic
Priorities

4 July 2012

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Basil McCrea (Chairperson)
Mr Thomas Buchanan (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Jim Allister
Mr Sammy Douglas
Mr Chris Lyttle
Mr Fra McCann
Mr David McIlveen

Witnesses:

Mr Colin Jack	Department for Employment and Learning
Ms Andrea Quail	Department for Employment and Learning
Mr Gordon Browne	Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

The Chairperson: We move on, colleagues, to our last briefing, which is from the Northern Ireland Executive Office on thematic priorities in Europe, which is fitting, apropos the research paper we have just had. Colin, Andrea and Gordon are here to say hello and tell us what they are doing to deal with the great amount of work. Colin, over to you.

Mr Colin Jack (Department for Employment and Learning): Thank you, Chairman.

The session this morning resulted from an invitation from the Committee to Gordon Browne, our newly appointed desk officer in the Northern Ireland Executive Office in Brussels. He is leading on the priority for the Barroso task force working group, which was part of the Executive's European priorities in 2011-12 and part of the 2012-13 document, 'Winning in Europe'.

That document was launched by the junior Ministers in the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) in a statement to the Assembly on 28 May, but these are priorities that we have been working to for some time.

There are four priorities: competitiveness and employment; innovation and technology; climate change and energy; and social cohesion. There are four subgroups of the Barroso task force working group; the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) chairs the competitiveness and employment subgroup, but there are a range of other Departments and organisations involved as well, including the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI), the Department for Regional Development (DRD), the Department of Education (DE) and Invest Northern Ireland.

In a sense, Gordon represents all our interests in the Northern Ireland Executive office in Brussels. He took up his post at the beginning of March. He has travelled from Brussels to appear in front of the

Committee today, although we have taken advantage of his being here and have organised a full programme of meeting for him over a couple of days, as has OFMDFM. I will pass over to him to focus on his role and his work to date, and his plans for the future.

Mr Gordon Browne (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): I will give the Committee a brief overview of my role, as stipulated by the thematic group, and my key responsibilities, after which I will focus on DEL's work through the Barroso task force.

Colin mentioned that I have been in post for nearly four months now. The key responsibilities of my post are to identify funding opportunities and to facilitate any application process that goes on. You will be aware that there is a ministerial target for the Barroso initiative to increase drawdown on elective funding by 20% over the period.

A key aspect is the level of engagement and building contacts and networks with key EU officials and other member states' regional offices, with a view to advancing the engagement of Northern Ireland in Europe.

Another key responsibility is drafting work programmes and strategic documents; briefing Departments, as Colin mentioned this work cuts across several Departments; extracting and disseminating the best practice that goes on in Europe with a view to improving how we do things at home; and providing information and advice as appropriate to requests that SMEs or the community and voluntary sector. We are there to serve Northern Ireland.

I will now focus on a few of the DEL-specific areas of my work programme. This was developed prior to my posting in Brussels, when I met the key policy leads in DEL to discuss employment and further and higher education, and they told me their priorities. This was signed off by the thematic group that is overseen by DEL.

One of the main elements of that is youth unemployment, which is obviously a key area of interest in Northern Ireland and in the Commission. Again, we are looking at best practice and opportunities that are arising. In a few moments I will go into a wee bit more detail about something that is in the pipeline.

Skills and industry is another of the main elements of the work programme. The Department currently has a live progress funding application. We have not been able to investigate too much further because it is a live application, but we will look for further opportunities with that in the future.

Under the heading of further education, we want to maximise opportunities in lifelong learning and look to the next programming period with the proposed Erasmus for All programme.

In higher education, as the gentleman who spoke to you earlier mentioned, there is the current FP7 programme and the upcoming Horizon 2010. We are looking to maximise the involvement of the universities, and we work very closely with —

The Chairperson: You teased me there, Gordon, by saying that you were going to go into some specifics.

Mr G Browne: I am sorry.

The Chairperson: I do not mean to be contrary. We will get all the general stuff about FP7 and Horizon 2020, and we will take note of that. I want to know about the things that we need to concentrate on. Where are the opportunities, and what should we be looking at? It is not a reflection on you, but we get loads of things where people tell us that everything is going OK.

Mr G Browne: I mentioned employment and youth unemployment. As part of the engagement programme that took place in late March, I, along with two senior DEL officials, met the Directorate General (DG) for employment, which announced that there will be a youth guarantee preparatory action. It was instigated by President Barroso himself.

The Chairperson: What is that? What does "youth guarantee" mean?

Mr G Browne: It is similar to the scheme that DEL runs, whereby there is a guaranteed place for 16- and 17-year-olds on training schemes and so on, but with a view to address some of the issues across Europe with youth unemployment. "Preparatory action" is usually a Commission way of testing the water, so to speak, for the next programme and period with a view to pilot projects across member states and regions. Obviously, it will be evaluated at the end of that, with a view to shaping what way future programmes could work. A call for proposals was expected around the end of June. Last week, I discussed that with the DG for employment, and it informed me that it will now take place in mid-July. It is worth €4 million and they expect 15 pilot projects. Again, the Department has indicated that it is quite interested in it, but until we see the bones of it, it is hard to tell where it fits.

Mr F McCann: It is interesting, obviously, that there was a scheme announced recently to deal with youth unemployment. Are the schemes the same in all member states as they are rolled out? Is the compensation for young people taking part comparable to a wage in the different member states?

Mr G Browne: For this call for proposals, it is up to the member state or region to put forward its proposals as to how the problem is best tackled.

The Chairperson: These are pilots?

Mr G Browne: Yes. Are you asking what sort of schemes go on at present across the various regions?

Mr F McCann: Yes.

Mr G Browne: I have not looked into that yet.

Mr F McCann: You were talking about the work programme and the support for it. That is being rolled out. I think you have answered my question. The region has the right to run its own scheme, rather than there being a fixed scheme that runs right across all 15 —

Mr G Browne: It is a way for the Commission to find best practice across regions and member states. We met with Commission officials and they were very keen to hear from Mr Andrew Hamilton, who told the Commission officials the sort of things that Northern Ireland is doing. The Commission is keen to learn and see what works, because what works for us will not work for everyone.

The Chairperson: The \$64,000 question is: are we pitching for a scheme?

Mr Jack: The Department still needs to decide that. The Commission has expressed interest in the training guarantee that we already offer, a training place for every 16- and 17-year-old in Northern Ireland who wants it. The Commission is interested in the Northern Ireland model, in learning from it and in spreading best practice elsewhere in Europe. There was discussion as part of the outward visit by the junior Ministers and officials across Departments at the end of March. There was engagement with the Commission on that. There is potentially an opportunity there, which the Department needs to consider.

Mr F McCann: You have answered my question. The scheme here was first.

How do you define a young person? We have set that at ages 16 and 17. Different member states or regions look at that differently.

Mr G Browne: I think that, from some of the discussions that we have had around that issue with the Commission, the Commission sees that as the initial target group, but, in future, it may widen it. As you say, the target group should include 16- and 17-year-olds, but people aged 19, 20 and 21 are still quite young people.

Mr F McCann: When you are 25, you are starting to get old and you are treated completely differently.

The Chairperson: Jim has indicated that he wants to come in. Given that we are now asking questions, we will take some questions from Jim and Sammy. However, if there are other bits of the paper that you want to talk about, we will come back to them in the round.

Mr Allister: I have a couple of points, but before I ask them, I cannot resist asking you whether the name "Gordon Browne" opens or closes doors here? *[Laughter.]*

Mr G Browne: There is usually a look of disappointment when I turn up.

Mr Allister: Are a few doors slammed in your face?

Mr G Browne: People remember my name, but I have always to remind them that there is an "e" on the end of it.

Mr Jack: One of the other four desk officers is called Alastair Campbell.

The Chairperson: When you lose office, you end up as a desk officer.

Mr Allister: Is that by design or accident? Are you trying to sabotage this operation, Mr Jack? *[Laughter.]* At the beginning, you gave a quick resumé of what you do and you talked about identifying funding opportunities, etc. When I listened to the list, I thought that the one thing that was missing from it was tracking policy development from an early stage, seeing where policy was evolving and how it might impact on Northern Ireland. You did not mention that at all. Do you not do that?

Mr G Browne: It is in the points that I am coming to. Yesterday, in our group, I mentioned that due to the nature of our posting, we were totally engulfed in and focused on the engagement programme for the first month. Then, due to the way in which calls for proposals originate through the Commission in the first half of the year, it was important to focus there in the first half of the year so that we did not miss out. Policy and directives are in my work programme, where it has been highlighted by various policy areas.

Mr Allister: Do you sit in on and follow the work of relevant European Parliament committees, for example?

Mr G Browne: Yes. As I said, I have been there only twice, due to the focus and our initial hosting, to develop contacts and calls for proposals. Of course, they will cease in July, as August is quiet in Brussels.

Mr Allister: Therefore you have been to the relevant parliamentary committee only twice in four months.

Mr G Browne: Yes.

Mr Allister: It will have met at least two days a week every month, and sometimes more often.

Mr G Browne: It was through consultation with the other groups and with the office that it was felt best to focus on the aspects that I have highlighted.

Mr Allister: I want to ask you this to get a picture of what you are doing: how many DGs, for example, have you had meetings with?

Mr G Browne: When we got there, we were tasked with meeting every Barroso task force member across all the DGs. Some were more co-operative and had more of an interest than others. I have met the DG Employ, DG Education and Culture (EAC), DG Enterprise, DG Research, DG Regio, DG TAXUD, DG AGRI and DG Maritime and Fisheries.

Mr Allister: Are those more than, "Hello, I am here" meetings?

Mr G Browne: Yes, very much so. I have probably met several of them almost 10 times, especially Employ, Education and Enterprise. As I said earlier, one of my key work areas is DETI and Invest NI, which have an interest in the SME angle and in competitiveness through the Enterprise.

Mr Allister: It might be difficult to say, but how does your work divide between the DETI interest and the DEL interest?

Mr G Browne: There has been quite a bit of work done for DETI in the recent month. It wanted us to look at a tourism angle, with regard to the policy that is developing in Europe, the current funding opportunities, future funding opportunities, key networks and key Commission officials. That has probably slanted it slightly towards DETI. However, there have been discussions with the Department for a similar research paper to be looked at, and, perhaps, one of the areas to be considered will be the further education sector and how it can maximise its opportunities as well. It is difficult to quantify. There has been significant DEL work, but there has been a focus on DETI, due to the tourism angle.

Mr Allister: Finally, at this point anyway, how responsive are you finding your engagement with the DGs?

Mr G Browne: Initially, we were tasked with contacting all Barroso task force members. It is our first step in, and, obviously, they can send you the details of who to speak to, who deals with tourism, for example, or who deals with policy here, there or across their units. Some DGs are not responsive, although those that work under my competitiveness and employment area have been. I also had the chance to meet some prior to posting. One of the individuals is a desk officer for the current European social fund (ESF) programme. Employ, EAC and Enterprise have been very responsive. You will probably know that certain commissioners see us as a region, and they will deal with member states.

Mr Allister: That is the point I was coming to. Are you getting that reaction?

Mr G Browne: I think that Northern Ireland gets viewed quite positively. We drop in the Barroso task force name tag to try to gain access, and, to date, most individuals have been quite responsive. I know from some colleagues who worked on environment, energy and so on, that perhaps other DGs, such as DG MOVE, are not quite as responsive. Again, it depends on the individuals.

Mr Allister: I did say "finally"; this is finally. You have been there only a few months —

The Chairperson: Jim could be a Presbyterian minister. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Allister: You have been there only four months. It costs the Exchequer to keep you there. How can you convince us that your presence there is value for money?

Mr G Browne: I mentioned the fact at the very start. We have been informed by junior Ministers that we will be judged solely on how much money we bring into Northern Ireland. The baseline on elective funding was set at about £10 million, and they are aiming at a 20% increase. I think that the first year was more than that, which would more than cover four desk officer posts many times over.

Mr Jack: It is worth —

The Chairperson: Hold on a second, Colin. That is their target for what you do; Jim is asking that you sell it to us. What good are you doing out there? I will let you come in, Colin, in a minute. I want to hear from Gordon.

Mr G Browne: You will know from your time there that there are regions and member states that have been very active, engaged over decades and have built up a real expert base. We have met DG Research on FP7 and so on. The Commission official was quite frank with us: those who do well are those who up at conferences, get their face known and get the inside know-how on applications. You need to build up a presence and expertise to see long-term benefit.

The Chairperson: That is useful.

Mr G Browne: That is where it is. One main selling point across Departments was to increase the visibility of Northern Ireland. It is about not just looking for funding opportunities, which is what we will be judged on, but showing what we do well and selling that to Europe. We are a small region in European terms, but we probably have quite a high European visibility due to the nature of Peace programmes and so on throughout the years. We are well known in the Commission, and it is important to build on that.

Mr Jack: The recruitment of the desk officers enables a very significant expansion, probably a doubling, of the capacity of the Executive's office in Brussels. It allows for much more detailed engagement on committees and with the people from the Commission who run funding programmes. Up to now, there has been a very strong steer from the junior Ministers in OFMDFM on the target to increase the uptake of competitive funding by 20%. For example, engagement on what employment law-related directives are coming down the line, and learning about policy developments and good practice in other regions, is all part of Gordon's work programme and will be taken forward over the next year.

Why the focus on FP7, as was discussed with Eóin previously? The Committee wrote to the Department about a paper that it received from the Committee for Finance and Personnel on the future of structural funds. The total amount from structural funds anticipated in 2014-2020 is €375 billion, although that is only a proposal at this stage; in the current round of funding, FP7 is €50 billion. It is a significant source of funding. If the Committee, and the Department, is to focus its efforts in a particular direction, one issue is that 70% of the FP7 funding that has come to Northern Ireland to date has come to the universities. However, the group of organisations and potential beneficiaries from FP7 is much wider. In the DEL area, we would like to see FE taking up more.

The Chairperson: I probably cannot find it now, but I saw, in either Eóin's paper or in this paper, that the FP7 contribution for SMEs from 2007 was a paltry €3.3 million.

Mr G Browne: That point was raised with the Commission official with whom we discussed this in DG Research. Although I do not have the figures to hand, I know that the SME sector in Northern Ireland, compared with Scotland and Wales, is very small. That official saw it as an area that we should look to improve.

The Chairperson: That was my first look at it.

Mr Douglas: I wish you well in your work. We have raised the question before that Northern Ireland seems to be punching below its weight in EU funding. We understand that it is not in the spotlight as it was in the middle of the conflict. The other thing is that it has been raised here just how well Wales has done. Have you any links with the people managing this in Wales?

Mr G Browne: We have links with Wales. All the devolved Administrations met, and we work very closely with the UK and Irish representation; they are in the same building as us. Some of the other secondees are in UKRep and others are with the Irish representation. Therefore we have a foot on the inside, you could almost say. We meet them regularly.

Although you say that Wales does very well, they say that they have problems. They do not think that they are doing as well, so it is interesting to hear different perspectives. However, we work very closely with them. Many of the matters going through Council at the minute, with future programmes, are member-state issues. The recent paper for DFP referred to the fact that Northern Ireland is very keen for future structural funds, yet the UK position is very much about keeping the overall EU budget down and rebate issues. Our position is always made clear every time we meet them. However, there is only so much you can do.

Mr Douglas: You also mention the 20%; is that a 20% drawdown until 2015?

Mr G Browne: Yes.

Mr Douglas: That seems ambitious, although perhaps it is not ambitious enough. Nevertheless, it is a big percentage to be changing people's perspective or perceptions —

Mr G Browne: It is very much elective funding. Of the sheer volume of EU funding that comes to Northern Ireland, a huge proportion is structural funds and rural development programme and so is outside the role of the Barroso task force. In my notes on some of the DEL work areas, I mentioned that I keep a watching brief on ESF. However, in the letter of the law, my post is not with regard to ESF. Some of the contacts that I deal with deal with it, so they will drop me a snippet here and there.

Mr Jack: Therefore of the overall funding coming into Northern Ireland, the European social fund, the European regional development fund, any new Peace package, any cross-border territorial co-operation run by INTERREG, are not the funds for which the 20% target has been set. That target is

set for funds for which Northern Ireland has to compete with others. The other funds we get as of right, based on our relative GDP.

Mr G Browne: The funds in question are things such as lifelong learning, exchange programmes, and the Erasmus programme. The future thinking is the Erasmus for All programme, which will broaden mobility; education from the Europe 2020 strategy is really moving to the centre. Indications are that there will be a larger budget for training and education. Moreover, in the future, we have Horizon 2020.

Interestingly, I had a discussion with a colleague in Invest NI. There is a huge section on societal changes in Horizon 2020, for climate change and so on, but there is a section for SMEs as well. There are possible linkages with the FE sector and so on, and there could be opportunities but, again, we are going through Council and nothing is set in stone as yet.

Mr Douglas: It would be good if the Committee were kept informed of progress. I do not know whether that would be through social media such as Twitter. Could you tell us about programmes that are coming up? There is so much happening in Europe.

Mr Browne: It is something that we are looking into in the office in Brussels. We are hoping to revamp the website and we are looking at Twitter feeds and so on to keep people involved. As I mentioned, we have a strong departmental steer, but we are also dealing with the Local Government Association, Belfast City Council and so forth, as it is good to keep everyone informed of what is going on.

Mr Douglas: Will Laura Leonard have a press office?

Mr Jack: Yes. It is important that, if Northern Ireland is to draw down more of this funding, it is not all down to government; much of it is down to businesses, local government, voluntary and community organisations and others to apply.

The Chairperson: We talk about this information going back, and there is a danger that you spend your entire time communicating with people and not enough time doing what you are doing over there. I also hear all the time — it is a pity that Mr McElduff is not here — about videolinks and videoconferences. It is useful that we have had a chance to meet you, Gordon, but you are over there most of the time. Can we not set the Committee up to have a videolink or briefing from time to time?

Mr G Browne: I had a videoconference with DEL only last week; we use them regularly.

The Chairperson: The Committee is increasingly interested in getting to talk to you, in whatever way is appropriate, without your having to come back here all the time. It does not have to take long; we could have a 15-minute chat about the items that are on your agenda.

Mr Jack: We can certainly consider the logistics of that with the Committee staff. Gordon is working in support of the competitiveness and employment thematic group, which will meet approximately once a quarter, and he will take part in those meetings, sometimes in person.

The Chairperson: This is where I get a wee bit parochial, Colin. The members of the Committee have expressed an interest in these matters, and they need to be informed in a particular way, because time is short. We can do videolinkages into the Committee. It would not be problematic for me if, once every four weeks — I do not know what the appropriate time frame is — we schedule a chat. You could be there yourself to see what is going on. It is difficult for us because Gordon will go away to Brussels and we get the occasional missive to say that things are going great. We want a bit more engagement than that.

I would like to ask a couple of specific questions —

Mr Douglas: I just want to ask about communication. I was thinking about how we could support the team in Brussels. The Northern Ireland Assembly Business Trust is a good example, because a number of businesses are linked to it. As Colin said, programmes may come into being under the aegis of the competitiveness and employment thematic group. It is about you alerting us to ask whether there are businesses in east Belfast or Lagan Valley that can be supported.

The Chairperson: Sammy, I support that, but I want to move on. We were told earlier about EU employment week, which took place in November 2011. Without being funny, does it help or hinder if the Committee comes across? You talked about engagement, but is that the time when you are so busy that you wish that the Committee would stay away? What helps?

Mr G Browne: Every week in Brussels is a different European week. If the office were putting on its own event, it would usually be just for a day. They happen across all the regions, and if it is your policy area, you will hope to catch up with as many as possible. They are usually open to anyone. Do you mean that it would hinder us if you came for that week?

The Chairperson: Yes. Does it help? The Deputy Chairperson and I were over for the Business Trust last year, and because we were there, we picked up a day on the European employment issue. Tom and I found it interesting and useful. It was mainly because we were there that we went to see it.

Mr G Browne: It would not hinder us as such. Recently, we had a visit from the Committee for Regional Development. It may be of more interest to the Committee to visit on a week such as that.

The Chairperson: All right, have we anything else? You might have more to say, Gordon, because I interrupted you. Is there anything else you need to tell us?

Mr G Browne: I think that we have covered most of the areas. Yesterday, we had a thematic group meeting across the Departments. We are trying to be fluid about new challenges and opportunities.

The Chairperson: Parliamentary officers? Some regions have them. Do we have any integration with them?

Mr G Browne: We have met our own MEPs and their assistants.

The Chairperson: The Scots have Ian Duncan.

Mr G Browne: Yes; I am aware of that. I do not think that we have them.

The Chairperson: No, but you should at least be meeting and apprising —

Mr G Browne: Scotland is a slightly different case, in that it is positioning itself almost as a future member state. Scotland has rather more resources than we do.

The Chairperson: The question for us is one of effectiveness. Although we ask critical questions, we will also support things that are genuinely having an impact. I agree that different people will have different objectives and, potentially, different resources. However, we need from you —

Mr G Browne: As Colin said, as part of the roles, an evaluation is due shortly on the process and role of the desk officer, support at home and what is missing in the links. That may be an opportunity to tease that out.

Mr Jack: If I can talk on behalf of my former colleagues in OFMDFM, which runs the office in Brussels, it is very much a resource for the region as a whole. It is called the Office of the Northern Ireland Executive in Brussels, but part of its function is to support visits by Assembly Members, Committees, Ministers and business.

The Chairperson: We know that. I am trying to work out how we keep the communication going with the appropriate bits. Who gets the minutes of the thematic group meeting that you had yesterday?

Mr Jack: It is an internal Civil Service meeting.

The Chairperson: Therefore elected representatives do not need to know, because it is an internal Civil Service meeting.

Mr Jack: We make available progress reports on the achievement of European priorities. There is an implementation report on the priorities for 2011-12, which was published at the same time as the

2012-13 priorities. There are regular reporting mechanisms on the progress with the Barroso agenda. We would have no problem letting you have the minutes, but you might get swamped in detail. The important thing is that we get the target setting right, report on the achievement of the targets that we set and that they are the right targets to achieve positive outcomes.

The Chairperson: At this stage, I am just flagging up that we are interested in how we engage effectively. A fair amount of ESF comes through DEL, so we are interested in that. We will take a couple of very quick questions to close. You listened to the report by Eóin from the research department. What was your opinion of its value? I do not mean whether you thought it was good or not. Part of Gordon's brief might be, as Jim suggested, to look at the legislative programme. Is that something you should do? Is it helpful that Eóin is doing it? How do those interact?

Mr Jack: We have many sources of information about what is happening at a European level. It is important to make sure that we get the best use of Gordon's time, because there are things that he is uniquely positioned to do. For information about the forthcoming legislative programme, particularly in areas such as employment law, which is where much of the European legislation relevant to DEL comes through, we have existing channels of communication through our counterpart Whitehall Department, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. It has the resources of UKRep, which is much bigger than the Northern Ireland Executive Office, keeping an eye on all that. We get regular reports.

The Chairperson: Colin, I am fed up to the back teeth of getting regular reports; what I need is someone to tell me what the relevant issues are. We cannot concentrate on every issue, but we get frustrated sometimes when legislation appears, and we go, "Well, nobody told us this was coming through" and then people say, "Oh, this is some sort of rule from Europe." Therefore what I need, as Eóin very usefully highlighted for us, are certain things that may be of interest or relevance, and somebody who has the knowledge to sit down and wade through all the bits of paper, and say, "You don't need to worry about this, this and this, but this is worth looking at."

Members are, of course, absolutely entitled to look at issues that were not highlighted and say that they would like to look at those as well, and that is OK. However, I need some means of sifting information; otherwise we get buried in detail. I hate getting the usual reports coming through from the usual people because you never get to read them. You need someone to say, "This is important; this is what you need to know." I just wonder whether that is a role that Gordon could undertake.

Mr G Browne: My only issue, and I think that it was flagged by our head of office, is that if I was to cover every policy area for four Departments, that would be my full-time job; I would do nothing else. If you, or the Committee, want the key points to be sifted, there may be an issue about whether my resource is the suitable place for that.

Mr Jack: I do not have the advantage of having seen the researcher's report, but it sounded as if it was useful, identifying the forthcoming direct response —

The Chairperson: We will send it to you. Perhaps it is a case of in the land of the blind, the one-eyed man is king. It would be useful just for me to get some — I do not want to go on too long because members have other commitments today.

Mr Allister: Surely the person seconded to the UK permanent representation would have the best overview.

Mr G Browne: We get the read-out of that, and it is sent to the Department as well, so it may be a case of the information not coming through in the format that you require.

Mr Jack: There are different audiences for which different reports are useful. The Committee needs concise information, I suspect, about the key issues that it will have to focus its business on.

The Chairperson: Between you, could you have a look at the issue, whether it is the UK bit or whatever, but we need to have some way for the information to come through. We will send you the researcher's analysis, and you will have a copy of the Hansard report, so that you can recommend to us how to set up an appropriate communication channel that does not overburden you but which keeps members with a statutory responsibility informed. The final question is: Andrea, what are you here for?

Ms Andrea Quail (Department for Employment and Learning): I manage the work of the Barroso task force in competitiveness and employment.

The Chairperson: Is that all? Tell us what that means.

Ms Quail: I co-ordinate the meetings and documents for the group throughout the Departments in the group and across the Department to ensure that all information is reported in good time to OFMDFM.

The Chairperson: OK. Do you have anything about my thirst for information? Can you suggest a better way of giving us information?

Ms Quail: There will be progress reports based on the targets that will be set for Gordon, and, at some stage, probably quarterly, they can be communicated.

The Chairperson: OK, all right. I just wanted to find out what you were here for.

Mr Jack: Andrea manages the European policy unit and the certifying authority in relation to the European social fund.

The Chairperson: Well, a few people could be certified here as well. Right, I think that is enough folks, is it? Finished. Thank you very much, Gordon. I wish you all the best. We will look to engage more, and if you just find out the appropriate way. I am interested in that video link if we could set it up on a semi-regular basis.