



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for the Office of the First Minister
and deputy First Minister

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

European Issues: Barroso Task Force
Working Group Update

4 July 2012

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mike Nesbitt (Chairperson)
Mr Chris Lyttle (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr William Humphrey
Mr George Robinson
Ms Caitriona Ruane

Witnesses:

Mr Gordon Browne	Barroso task force working group
Dr Paul Geddis	Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister
Dr Gerry Mulligan	Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister

The Chairperson: We welcome Dr Gerry Mulligan, Dr Paul Geddis and Mr Gordon Browne from the Office of First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM). Gentlemen, you are all very welcome. Gerry, do you want to give us some thoughts?

Dr Gerry Mulligan (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): Thank you very much for the opportunity to come and address the Committee. Paul Geddis is head of the European policy and co-ordination unit (EPCU) in Belfast. Gordon Browne is one of four desk officers just appointed, located in Brussels. Gordon also has a name that starts conversations easily in Brussels, so that is useful.

I sent a background paper to the Committee Chair, and, hopefully, Committee members have had a chance to see that. I intend not to go through the detail of the paper but to draw out key points before taking questions. I am also aware that the Committee expressed an interest in what is referred to as "upstream European engagement". I will invite Paul to say a few words about that process before moving on to questions, if that is OK.

In reviewing the year, a number of things stand out. The first is the work done to build on the renewal of the Barroso task force by President Barroso and the First Minister and the deputy First Minister when they officially opened the Executive's offices in Brussels in December 2010. In particular, following the announcement of the renewal of the task force, there was a very successful inward visit by European Commission officials. They came over to renew their acquaintance with officials here, and those who were new to the task force introduced themselves to their counterparts in the Northern Ireland Departments.

Following that, more recently, there was a reciprocal outward engagement programme with representatives from all the Northern Ireland Departments, led by the two junior Ministers, former junior Minister Anderson and junior Minister Bell. Again, that was to explore opportunities for raising particular issues of importance at the most senior level in Brussels. We were doing that as part of the task force, so we were given unprecedented access and had something in the region of over 50 meetings with senior Brussels officials, with an opportunity to raise important issues. Junior Minister Bell made a statement in the Assembly following that outward engagement programme. We will soon be placing a more detailed report, including a synopsis of the different meetings, in the Assembly Library. That should be with the Assembly relatively soon.

Throughout the year, the management structures and processes for co-ordinating Departments have been strengthened to fully exploit the Barroso task force initiative, which is a unique and time-limited initiative. We have the advantage of access to Commission officials, with a view to influencing policy in a manner that no other regions have. There are over 250 regional offices in Brussels. Therefore, in a sense, there is a degree of envy about that initiative. The Commission is quite open about saying that it sees that as a model that it would like to recommend for co-ordinating across directorates-general. As such, it is very keen for it to be seen as successful.

The management structures have been strengthened. We now have a particular focus on four policy areas across Departments and co-ordination of those four policy areas, covering competitiveness and employment; innovation and technology; climate and energy; and social cohesion. Those policy areas map on to the European Commission's own policy priorities and strategies. It is important that there be a line of sight between its priorities and ours. Indeed, the Executive's priorities for 2011-12 were agreed and published in June last year and those for 2012-13 were published more recently, along with an end-of-year report on the progress on the 2011-12 priorities. That stands out as important during the year.

There was increased participation by Ministers in the European Council, and there was a greater degree of involvement by our Ministers in the Council than was the case before, in my experience. Resources have been increased to meet those priorities. In particular, I refer to the appointment of four desk officers who will assist Departments in their work to identify programmes and relevant policies and to influence those policies. That is a significant commitment of new resources by the Executive.

There has also been increased co-ordination across all sectors. I refer in particular to the launch in May by Ministers of the Northern Ireland European regional forum, which Belfast City Council is leading. That brings together all the sectors — academic, local government, business and public — that have an interest in engaging in Europe. That was a very positive development. There are encouraging results from the first year's monitoring against the target of drawing down 20% more competitive European funds. An additional £4 million was drawn down compared with this year.

Finally, looking back on the year, there has been a successful programme of events based in Brussels to help build regional partnerships and promote trade, tourism and the arts. Again, that is dealt with in slightly more detail in the background paper.

Looking ahead, we want to build on the success of last year's promotional work and in support of tourism, the arts, inward investment and trade. Next year is a critical year, because member states are involved in negotiations on policy and budgets that will impact on us during the period 2014-2020. The expectation is that many of those complex negotiations will be brought to a conclusion during the Irish presidency of the European Union, which is for the first six months of next year. Therefore, we are currently working with the Irish representation to see what benefits we can derive from its presidency and what we can do to assist it in that work.

In general, there is a need to work in partnership, particularly with our MEPs, other representatives and friends in Europe to exert the maximum influence in both Brussels and London. On that point, I will ask Paul to say something briefly about the upstream engagement process.

Dr Paul Geddis (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): Chairman, with your permission and that of the members, the Committee has been aware of upstream engagement through the synopsis reports that the junior Ministers provide to the Committee after the Joint Ministerial Committee (Europe) (JMC (Europe)) meetings. What I propose to do is cover the Whitehall upstream engagement process, to say a little bit about the aims of the Whitehall write-round and then to explain how that cuts across into the JMC (Europe) forum.

The first point to make is that this is a Whitehall process, initiated by the Foreign Secretary, who writes twice a year to Cabinet Ministers asking them to report for their Department on their early-influencing priorities and also on their engagement strategies on European policy matters. The Foreign Secretary's letter to Whitehall Departments is usually written in November, and it issues after the Commission's legislative and work programme is published, which usually happens in October and/or November.

As part of the process, it has been agreed recently that the Whitehall Departments will consult with their devolved counterparts. The basis of the list is to inform the Cabinet committee collective decision-making process. That feeds into two Cabinet committees. The first one that it reaches is the European affairs subcommittee, which is chaired by the UK Europe Minister, David Lidington. That subcommittee co-ordinates Whitehall ministerial and departmental activity in European matters. The subcommittee reports to the higher-level European affairs committee under the Cabinet structures, which is chaired by the Foreign Secretary, and that committee is the primary forum for collective clearance of UK negotiating positions and lines to take on European business. That is the November initiation.

In May of each year, the Foreign Secretary again writes to Departments asking them to review and update their priorities list. Devolved Administrations are consulted in June, and the European affairs subcommittee then considers that updated list, usually around July. There is always some flux in the dates, but that is the overall Cabinet committee upstream engagement process.

The aims of the write-rounds are threefold. First and foremost, they provide an overview to UK Ministers of potentially significant European dossiers that have not yet emerged as legislative proposals from the European Commission. Their second aim is to identify cross-government risks and opportunities. Those are things such as: are there proposals that the Commission is working on that might involve financial cost to the UK Exchequer? Is the Commission likely to impose a regulatory burden on business? Are there opportunities to promote economic growth and influence the low-carbon economy? Last, but equally important, are there shifts in the balance of competences between the UK and the European Union?

The third aim is to identify where cross-cutting lobbying support across government would be helpful in achieving the UK's objectives in Europe. It is at that point that we begin to have the overlap between what is effectively a Cabinet committee process and the JMC (Europe). The JMC (Europe), as you are aware, is an intergovernmental forum that considers cross-cutting issues across the four Administrations in the UK. The coalition Government, unlike the previous Labour Government, have made it an objective of their political direction to maximise the UK's influence on new negotiations. That created an opportunity for devolved Administrations to achieve better access to the upstream engagement process, which is being led by the Department's junior Ministers.

The synopsis reports that the Committee has received show that, in October, the issue of upstream was first mooted with the devolved Administrations. Junior Ministers, working in conjunction with their ministerial counterparts in Edinburgh and Cardiff, indicated that they would like access to that process. That was in October, and, at the November 2011 JMC (Europe) meeting, a proposal was on the table, which was accepted, and subsequently, at the February 2012 JMC (Europe) meeting, the process was agreed and there were initial documents on the table.

What we have in that crossover is a fairly young process, which will be developed over time and over the remainder of this year. What it means in practical terms is that there will be a discussion on upstream engagement in the JMC (Europe) every year in February in advance of the early influencing list going to the European affairs subcommittee. It will take the form of a ministerial horizon scan. What that does is facilitate a more strategic interaction by devolved Administrations in the formulation of initial UK policy positions and subsequent negotiating lines on European matters. What we are trying to do is provide a seamless linkage between upstream and downstream items. For instance, devolved Administrations are consulted on the upstream list in December and June, and, at that point, there is developing bilateral engagement between Whitehall sectoral Ministers and their devolved counterparts. The emphasis in the Joint Ministerial Committee (Europe) is on identifying strategic linkages between dossiers and avoiding duplication of some of the bilateral discussions that will have already taken place.

Another objective is that we need to remember that upstream is part of a series of interactions around European proposals. "Upstream" refers to the period before the European Commission publishes a proposal. When the Commission has made its proposals, then there is a negotiation phase, which is followed by a transposition phase, which is followed by an implementation phase. There is some

overlapping between the three later phases. It is part of the objectives of JMC (Europe), and the discussions that take place between Ministers there, to ensure that good practice on upstream carries down into the downstream negotiation phase and, in particular, that there is adequate and detailed consultation with Executive Ministers on the development of UK Government policy positions before an approach is made to the higher-level European affairs committee for formal sign-off. What we have discovered over the course of this Administration is that the approach by means of formal letters that issue from the European affairs committee usually arrives very late in the process, and sometimes Departments here are unsighted. JMC (Europe) is about those multilateral areas and trying to shift that balance forward in time and about ensuring that there is effective bilateral engagement in the first instance.

Dr Mulligan: The general point is that the earlier that you can raise issues with the Commission, the more likely that you are to influence the Commission's position, hence the emphasis on upstream engagement. We invite questions at this stage.

The Chairperson: Thank you very much. First, you said that Barroso is a time-limited initiative. Will you make us very clear about what you mean by that?

Dr Mulligan: It is my expectation that we cannot enjoy the benefits of a task force indefinitely. There has not been a proper line drawn to say that the task force will end its work at a particular date and time, but, realistically, we cannot expect the Commission to have a task force dedicated to Northern Ireland indefinitely. That is why I said that it is time-limited.

The Chairperson: Do you think that the phrase "upstream engagement process" does a lot to engage the people of Northern Ireland in the work that we do?

Mr Lyttle: Good question.

Dr Mulligan: Before I ask Paul to say something about, I would say that that is not our phrase. It is Whitehall-inspired phrase, and I think that —

The Chairperson: It is ridiculous. It means "timely", and people would understand the phrase "timely engagement".

Anyway, Paul you gave us a very detailed analysis, which was all about the input. What does that achieve in outputs and outcomes?

Dr Geddis: At the minute, the process is new. We have just gained access, so if you are looking for a historical perspective of what has been achieved, I have nothing to report. The issue will be in the forward look, and there is, for example —

The Chairperson: OK. As we stand, there is no output or outcome.

Dr Geddis: At this point in time, no.

The Chairperson: Gordon, I am not sure whether you realise how often your position — not your name — echoes around this great Building. There are four new desk officers, and there are huge expectations on your shoulders. Do you want to tell us a little about yourself, your job and how you see things?

Mr Gordon Browne (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): I arrived in post in early March, so I have there for around four months. As you are probably well aware, my duties are to try to maximise funding opportunities for Northern and to increase our visibility in and engagement with Europe. To date, we have been relatively successful in a limited time. During the engagement event that Gerry spoke about, we were integral in organising and facilitating many of the meetings for the departmental officials who came across. Subsequently, we have been able to follow that up and ensure that those contacts are kept up to date.

Some of the aspects that came out of that are some of the preparatory calls for proposals, which are elective funding streams. For example, there is a proposed youth guarantee to tackle youth unemployment. It was accepted that that call would be made in late June. However, I have been in discussions with the Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (DG Employ)

and have been informed that it will be made in mid-July. That sits very well across Europe, and Northern Ireland has a particular problem with youth unemployment. That call is open to regions, not just member states. The Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) has indicated that it wants to explore that further when the call is made.

Another example of work that I have been doing, and will be doing, is specific to the competitiveness and employment group. I did a piece of research on the tourism sector across Europe, with reference to Northern Ireland. That looked at what policies are coming out of Europe and how they fit well with the Northern Ireland agenda. Obviously, there is a big push on tourism here, and this year specifically. The research looked at current and future funding opportunities and some of the key networks that the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) and some of the small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the sector can tap into. From that, we had a very positive meeting yesterday with the Tourist Board regarding a further call for proposals on sector skills alliances. That looks forward to the next programming period and the proposed Erasmus for All programme, which will be the Commission's new skills and education agenda. The Tourist Board has indicated that it is very keen to look at some of the specific skills areas in which they see shortages, such as tour guiding and language provision. NITB has informed me that it is keen for me to start searching out partners when I get back to Brussels on Monday.

Hopefully, that has given you a bit of a flavour of some of the areas of work.

The Chairperson: It sounds busy. Is the title "desk officer" a misnomer? How much time do you spend at your desk?

Mr G Browne: I think that Gerry would agree that the title should not be "desk officer". The first four months have very much been about trying to get out, meet people and build contacts

The Chairperson: Excellent.

Mr Lyttle: I will ask two fairly simple questions. What are we doing to help our small businesses to access European funding programmes, and innovation funding in particular? What progress is being made on negotiations on Northern Ireland's eligibility classification or access to structural funds between 2014 and 2020?

Dr Mulligan: I can certainly say something about each of those. However, I preface that by saying that, for more detailed information, it might be appropriate for the Committee to seek further information from the responsible Department. In the case of SMEs, that would be the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI). In the case of structural funds and negotiations, it would be the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP). Anything that I say does not carry any departmental authority, because we are not taking the lead on that. Small and medium-sized enterprises have emerged as a priority, particularly in the context of research and development. That is recognised by the Commission in its proposals for the next round of funding. Under the research and development programme 2020, it has ring-fenced a specific part of the funding of £80 billion that it is proposing for SMEs.

DETI has taken on board the need to build the capacity of the SMEs to participate. As you know, Chair, it has announced funding for additional posts in the universities to try to strengthen the links between SMEs and the academics involved in research. That is a very encouraging sign. However, I also note that it has a specific strategy in mind. You may wish to follow that up further with the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment. The Department is certainly exercised by the need to get SMEs more involved in the next round.

The negotiations on structural funds are under way. At the moment, the focus is on multi-annual financial frameworks. The emphasis is on agreeing the envelope of funding — the actual amount of funding — available for cohesion, policy and structural funds within that. DFP will be involved with its counterparts in the Treasury, which will be in the lead along with the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) in the negotiations.

We are also briefing at a senior level in the Commission on the need for the region to be recognised as transitional. As you know, our most recent GDP figures put us at, I think, 86.4% of the European average, which moves us from a developed region to a transitional region. We are very anxious that that shift open up opportunities in structural funds that would not otherwise be available to us, particularly for investment in infrastructure.

Those are the sorts of discussions and negotiations that DFP is taking forward with its counterparts in Treasury. However, if you wish to have more detailed information, perhaps the Committee for Finance and Personnel can provide that information.

Mr Lyttle: That is helpful. As a result of our visit to Brussels, the developed/transitional differentiation was a significant concern. Do you think that the amount of funds that we have access to between the two categorisations can change significantly?

Dr Mulligan: Yes.

Mr Lyttle: Perhaps we can take that up with the relevant Departments and see where the negotiations are at.

Dr Mulligan: I suggest that that would be right.

Mr Kinahan: My question relates to the outcomes, in that there is a very good monthly Irish brief on all the things that are going on. Have you any plans to produce something similar that pulls together from Whitehall? The Irish brief is very good and very much appreciated. We saw something similar here.

As you have mentioned, Belfast City Council has strong relationships. When I mentioned it to other councils, we rather felt that we should be expanding that linkage so that other councils are included. It is an outcome.

You have such a huge job. Is there anything that you are not covering that you wish you were?

Dr Mulligan: I will deal with the consolidated brief that is produced by colleagues in the Irish regional office, which is the document that you refer to. We work very closely with colleagues in the Irish regional office. They are just a couple of floors above us in Brussels. We see that brief and we use it. We draw on it as part of the information that the desk officers will send back to their Departments. I am not convinced that it would be a good use of time to duplicate that. They do not mind us plagiarising the information that they have — they are very happy that we plagiarise it — but the important thing is that the information that is in that brief goes where it needs to, and the desk officers would certainly make good use of it.

Mr G Browne: It is often the case as well that we send those calls home when they are published in the brief. I can see how it is easy for end users: it is almost a one-stop shop. However, as Gerry said, ultimately, a lot of that information is already sent to the specific Departments and so on who have responsibility, but it is under consideration by the desk officers.

Dr Mulligan: We produce a series of documents that are on the departmental website and are, therefore, in the public domain. One of the things that we produce and update continuously is a newsletter entitled the 'Barroso Bulletin', which summarises the work that has been done in response to the Barroso task force initiative. That is something that I would be happy to share with the Committee if that was of interest. We will keep under constant review what we are putting out by way of published documents, and if there is a need and it would add value to do something different, we will certainly do that. We want to be totally transparent and open in this. Success in Europe depends on raising awareness across all sectors, so we would want to share as much as we know. Brussels is a very open place; there are no secrets in Brussels.

The Chairperson: There is still a disconnect between a Building such as this and where you are.

Dr Mulligan: The European forum that brings together all the sectors, which I mentioned earlier and on which Belfast City Council is taking the lead, will be another good opportunity to improve communication on the opportunities available.

Sorry, there was one question that I did not answer, which was about what we would like to do more of. I would like to have more access to commissioners and I would like to have more than is available to us, but we work on that with our MEPs, who are very helpful in getting us access. You can achieve an awful lot in a short meeting with a commissioner, and that is one area that I would like to focus attention on in the year ahead.

Mr Humphrey: Thank you very much for your presentation. You mentioned that you had access to some, I think, 50 meetings with senior EU officials.

Dr Mulligan: Yes, that is right.

Mr Humphrey: The Barroso connection allows Northern Ireland to have that access and to punch above its weight, if you like. I have a number of questions on your presentation. What tangible benefits for Northern Ireland came out of those 50 meetings? The Chair talked about the disconnect between this place and Europe and I have been banging on about that for some time, both here and in the city council. The council made a very good presentation to us, but unfortunately some members of this Committee felt that the city council was trying to take Europe over in Northern Ireland rather than trying to bring everybody together. Are we at the right point of trying to build the partnership, with everybody in Northern Ireland plc batting for Europe? You talked about an increase of 20% in the drawdown.

Dr Mulligan: Yes, that is right.

Mr Humphrey: Could we have that in monetary terms? I am not sure what that means. If we have a figure, we can use it as a comparator with the Republic, for example. Finally, from what the three of you know collectively, do you believe there will be a new Peace and INTERREG fund?

Dr Mulligan: There were four points, Chair, the first of which was about the benefits of the engagement programme. Given the number of meetings, I cannot comment specifically in detail, but I can give a few general points. It was an opportunity for our officials and Ministers to meet some very key decision-makers in Europe — for example, the new director general of regional policy, Walter Deffaa. It is an early stage for the director general; that is an important time to have his ear and an opportunity to raise issues that are important, such as the change to our economic status from development to transitional. We also had an opportunity to raise with senior officials on the transport side some of our difficulties around the shifting emphasis on rail in the next round of the connecting Europe facility. Potentially, that could prevent us from drawing down money for roads infrastructure, as we have been doing. We would look to a positive outcome on those issues, which would be that we may enjoy exemptions because we are a peripheral region.

That was the start of a process of discussions that will, hopefully, lead to us benefiting from the eventual shape of the policy. The officials and Ministers were at least able to make the point to those with responsibility for the policy.

Another area that came up was the regional aid policy and the new guidance on regional aid, which, as they stand, may prevent the whole region from being covered for regional aid. It may require only a proportion based on the quota system for allocating regional aid. Again, officials were able to point to the special case that we continue to be and the adverse impact that that would have in the region.

Those are examples of where we think that raising the awareness of those issues with the relevant Commission officials will, hopefully, get us to an outcome that is beneficial for us. Of course, we cannot say that any commitments or guarantees came out of those meetings, but it is part of an influence process.

Ministers encouraged the Belfast initiative. It is right that Belfast City Council, given its experience in dealing with Europe, should facilitate that process. The Department has a representative on that forum and Ministers were happy to launch the event. It can be only to the benefit of everyone if different sectors come together to discuss what they are doing in Europe and what they can do in partnership. I do not think there would be a feeling that that is shifting the onus or responsibility away from the Department. The Department is happy to work with Belfast City Council and, indeed, other district councils.

With regard to money, Paul has the exact figures, I am sure, and he can advise you on that.

Dr Geddis: I have figures that the deputy First Minister quoted in response to a question from Mr Robinson. In 2011-12, the 20% target was realised and £15.8 million was secured. That was an increase of £4.8 million over a baseline of £11 million. Over the four-year period of the Budget, that 20% target will, we hope, realise £52.8 million of additional funding.

Mr Humphrey: Compared with the Republic of Ireland, which I accept is a nation state, that is paltry, is it not?

Dr Geddis: It is a challenging target because each year you have to raise £11 million before you can begin to count against your baseline. It becomes straightforward if you already have funding pipelines in place to facilitate that drawdown and appropriate resource. Where that is not the case, it is a challenging target. Also, in the current economic climate, a lot of other regions and interests throughout Europe are competing for the same funding, so it has suddenly got to be a harsh environment in which to access that kind of money.

To bring money down you need to do the preparatory work. That involves asking, first, are you engaging in European networks? If the answer is no, you need to network. Within the networks, are you engaging in partnership building as a junior or senior partner? You need to build your experience up over time. The target is challenging on that basis. Equally importantly, if you are not engaging in networks or the drawdown of money and partnership building, you will not have the resource available to implement your policy effectively. It is a very challenging target. You are beginning to see a substantial shift in the policy arena as the competences required to access that money become much more widespread.

Dr Mulligan: I want to pick up on the question about the likelihood of a further Peace programme. Former junior Minister Anderson, now MEP Anderson, raised this only yesterday in her contribution to the plenary debate at Strasbourg. The current proposal from the Commission is for a set of regulations that covers projects similar to those currently covered in Peace III. This would be as part of the provisions of what is called the transnational programme. Our Ministers would like to see it as a discrete Peace programme and not part of a transnational programme, because the transnational programme also covers INTERREG. The negotiations have not yet reached the stage where that sort of detail has been finalised. I expect that, in due course and as the negotiations progress, our Ministers will make a case for the lead Ministers in London and Dublin to take up the issue.

When Commissioner Hahn opened the Peace Bridge, he made important statements about being fully supportive of a further Peace programme. I am confident that that will read positively into the eventual outcomes. However, detail of the regulations will need to be changed to enable us to have a programme that will, for example, allow the funding of projects within the jurisdiction as opposed to cross-jurisdiction, as was the case with INTERREG. If you were to ask what my expectation is, I would say that I am reasonably positive that, at the end of the process, we will have a further Peace programme.

Mr G Robinson: I thank Gerry and his team for coming along and giving an excellent presentation. How closely do the four desk officers located in Brussels work with the MEPs? How crucial is it that that work bears fruit from Northern Ireland's point of view?

Dr Mulligan: We, as an office, have worked closely with MEPs. I continue the habit of meeting them regularly, informally, to exchange views, provide an informal briefing and take their perspectives on issues. We also involve our MEPs in formal events and will seek their participation. A perfect example is the protected geographical indicator status event that we held in the office and that MEP Dodds spoke about in very positive terms on the radio the following day. That was a good example of our MEPs putting their weight behind an event that was held in the office to celebrate what we do well.

We look to our MEPs to help us. I mentioned getting access to commissioners. In Strasbourg recently, Mr Nicholson and Diane Dodds managed to get meetings with Commissioner Kallas and Commissioner Almunia on very important issues for us. That is another example of how MEPs can be extremely helpful. There is a good working relationship, which we will maintain and aim to strengthen.

Mr G Browne: As regards the desk officers, we have met all the MEPs a few times already. We have formed quite good working relationships on many issues with the assistants especially, so there is contact.

Dr Mulligan: The fact that our most recent MEP was previously my boss also helps with future working relationships.

Ms Ruane: I am sorry that I missed your presentation; we had just received a presentation on historical abuse, and I was talking to some of the victims. I could not leave those discussions.

The work that you are doing is very important. It is really important that we bring together all of the power and influence that we can bring to bear. Paul, your point that we have to build that up and that it does not happen overnight was well made. The South spent decades building it up in Europe. Gerry, you mentioned the point about access to commissioners. From any lobbying that I have done in Europe, I know that that is essential. For better or for worse, they have an awful lot of power in Europe.

We have huge potential in respect of North/South, first to learn from what is happening in the South. It will be interesting to hear about your links with delegations from the South of Ireland. I am not talking only about political delegations but about officials. We can argue over the definition, but, given that North/South is considered transnational, how can we maximise the fact that we have a potential partner for infrastructure, funding and joint programmes? My reading of it is that we are not doing enough with that. One example is that we still do not have a bridge at Narrow Water. We are getting closer to it, but we still do not have it. Recently, I was at the An Bord Pleanála hearing in Carlingford, which was attended by Planning Service and Roads Service officials from the North. I am told that that was the first time that had happened. Will you comment on that? Every person and every body I speak to talks about the frustration of trying to spend EU money and of North and South working together.

Dr Mulligan: I will pick up on that last point about co-operation. We have an advantage in having close proximity to partners. That is considered by the Commission as very important. It meets the criterion that the Commission lays down for partnership development. Of course, in competitive programmes, you will often find that there are quite a number of partnerships, including with other regions in Europe. Where colleagues in Ireland have success, we can learn from them what they have done, particularly in the area of research and development, where the statistics suggest a very high level of success. They have experience that we can draw on, and they are more than willing to offer that experience. That takes place both informally and formally. As you know, 20 councils have formed and signed memoranda of understanding; for example, Louth County Council and Newry and Mourne District Council. That helps in their taking forward work in Europe. Europe gives a high priority to cross-border co-operation, so it ticks that box. We can continue to call on the advice of colleagues in Brussels because the Irish permanent representation will meet our Ministers when they are there. They will meet our officials and brief us on their work in the various working groups and in Council. That gives us an extra insight in addition to that which we get from our colleagues in the UK permanent representation. Therefore, we have the advantage of having briefings from the Ireland permanent representation and the UK permanent representation, and we can benefit from that. We can form partnerships, draw from experience based on the success of the Irish representation and benefit from our good working relationships with those who are involved in Council and the working groups.

Mr Kinahan: You said that you wanted more access to the commissioners; what gets us more access? Is it more visits from our Ministers, including the First Minister and deputy First Minister? Is it through better cross-border working, which we have just touched on? What else can we push for in the Assembly that will get you more access to commissioners?

Dr Mulligan: Reputation. If we have a reputation for excellence in a particular area, the relevant commissioner will want to talk to us about it. Intervention by our MEPs, particularly in Strasbourg, where the commissioners will be, is another practical way in which we can achieve it. The Barroso task force label is effective because, in requesting meetings, we remind those with whom we request them that part of the Barroso task force's objective is to try to give us access. So, we play on that as much as we can. As a region, we do quite well in getting access. We would like to do more, but I think that we do not do too badly.

Dr Geddis: I would add that Commissioner Máire Geoghegan-Quinn's recent visit was a good example of North/South working. A whole series of events culminated in a meeting between the First Minister and deputy First Minister with her, at which they pushed for a unified approach. In particular, a lot of issues around SMEs were raised directly with the commissioner for research. That was a very good exemplar, showing the kind of interaction that we want at this end. There is, obviously, the interactions at Brussels as well.

On the matter of working with Southern officials, I should also mention that the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs offers an EU presidency briefing every six months. That, again, is linked under the banner of the Barroso task force working group. So, we try to spot some of the policy nuances of an

incoming presidency that become evident in relation to the Executive's priorities. Those working links are there and are developing.

The Chairperson: We are a little pressed for time. Gerry, will you drop us a note to update us on the implementation plan about which Jonathan Bell talked to the House in May?

Dr Mulligan: We will.

The Chairperson: Paul, Gordon and Gerry, thank you very much indeed.