



Northern Ireland
Assembly

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

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

European Issues: Belfast City Council

30 May 2012

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mike Nesbitt (Chairperson)
Mr Thomas Buchanan
Mr Trevor Clarke
Mr William Humphrey
Mr Danny Kinahan
Mr Francie Molloy
Mr George Robinson
Ms Caitriona Ruane

Witnesses:

Ms Laura Leonard	Belfast City Council
Mr John McGrillen	Belfast City Council
Mr Christopher Stalford	Belfast City Council

The Chairperson: We welcome Laura Leonard, John McGrillen and Alderman Christopher Stalford.

Mr Christopher Stalford (Belfast City Council): Thank you, Mr Chairman, for the invitation to address the Committee on these issues. I am the chair of the development committee in the City Hall, so I am tasked with providing political leadership for the development department. I will give a bit of background about the committee. All the parties that are on the council are represented on the committee. Councillor Conor Maskey is its deputy chair. For some time, the development department has been responsible for the council's European outlook and European programmes. Specifically, there have been three areas. The first has been policy dissemination, the second has been project delivery and the third, and in my view the most important, has been maximising funding opportunities in the city.

As you will be aware, Mr Chairman, we are in the process of launching the European regional forum, and we are very hopeful that the forum, which is a City Council-led initiative but which extends well beyond the boundaries of Belfast, will connect to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) through the Assembly's own advisory panel and the Barroso task force. We see that there is a clear point of contact there, and we hope that it will be built upon over the coming months.

The city council takes its European responsibilities very seriously, and we have done so for a considerable period of time, in fact, since the 1980s. Up until very recently, we were the only local government authority in the country that had its own dedicated European unit. We have four

permanent members of staff, who work very closely on a range of responsibilities. One of those is to work very closely with the Executive office in Brussels. We have a very close and productive working relationship with the Executive office in Brussels and with the three Members of the European Parliament. We work closely with them to maximise funding opportunities for the city as they arise.

Another part of the role of the European unit is to raise the profile of Belfast in Europe to demonstrate to people that this is a good place to invest very scarce EU resources. As I said earlier, accessing funds and funding opportunities is also a central and important part of the work of the European unit in the City Hall.

Those are my introductory remarks, and I am happy to hand over to Laura Leonard, who is our European manager. She can put some flesh on the bones. She will be followed by John McGrillen, who is the director of our department.

Ms Laura Leonard (Belfast City Council): Thank you, Chairman. I hope that you received our briefing paper that I sent in advance of the meeting. I will not labour the detail of that. We are here to get across two things to you. First, last night, Alderman Stalford and our two junior Ministers launched the Northern Ireland European regional forum. Secondly, we are in an intensive process of developing and articulating our lobby for a role for funding post-2013.

You will see from the paper that we have been engaged in European affairs for over 20 years. Our involvement goes right back to the 1980s, when we engaged in the neighbourhoods in crisis European network through the Belfast Regeneration Office (BRO) and others. That led to the likes of Urban I and Urban II in Belfast over the years and to many other outputs.

We relaunched with the much more user-friendly name, Belfast in Europe, in 2008, and, last night, we relaunched again with the Northern Ireland European regional forum. We did that because we realised that there was no one platform to co-ordinate European activity, that there are so many actors across the region that are engaged in Europe and that engagement with Europe has become much more heightened as a result of the Barroso task force and the targets that have been set for it.

We have 50-plus members in the forum; it is quite scary to think through how we will manage so many people. We also have a waiting list of organisations that want to join. One of the key messages from the forum that we want to express to you is that there are a lot of players who are engaging in European activity and drawing down European funds, but there are many more who are not. You will be aware of that through the work of the Barroso task force.

There is a capacity issue. Across all the Departments, there is a 20% target to maximise European funding. There is also a technical assistance issue in helping bodies to write applications. We were able to help the PSNI, and that resulted in a multi-million pound contract to address the issue of home explosives.

I hope that the forum will bring people together, enable them and raise capacity. There is a challenge to the Assembly to look at capacity issues for the future.

Mr John McGrillen (Belfast City Council): As you might imagine, the other thing that really concerns us is the 2014-2020 programme. We are exercised about making sure that the moneys are drawn down, spent and spent as effectively as possible. Belfast City Council has given some consideration to that and has had significant conversations with Derry City Council about its approach and how that might be done.

If one looks at how the programmes have been developed in the past, although there has been a rural development programme that has been quite successful in its delivery and impact in Northern Ireland, you will see that there has never really been a suitable and similar urban development programme. We feel that that is an opportunity lost and we want to see that addressed, not least because evidence shows that cities are increasingly becoming the economic drivers for their regions across Europe, and there are urban programmes in other parts of the European region. Given the importance of Belfast and Derry/Londonderry for driving economic growth, we would like to think that serious consideration could be given to how funds are allocated to drive the development of the region through the economic drivers, which are the cities. That has been highlighted in recent times by the significant decay that urban areas are suffering from, and that is not just the case in Belfast and Derry/Londonderry. There are significant challenges in making urban areas competitive, and we want to address those.

Other parts of Europe and the UK have used vehicles such as JESSICA and JEREMIE, through which funds were used for rolling programmes for urban regeneration and development. Those have not been used here, and, when their use was considered by the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP), it was decided that it was route that it preferred not to go down. We also think that that was an opportunity lost and we want to see those sorts of programmes implemented in the future. Those vehicles do not offer grants, but allow investment from other vehicles, such as the private sector and the European Investment Bank, to add to regional development fund money. That money can be recycled to have a greater impact, rather than being disbursed as a grant per se. So, that is certainly something that we want to see considered moving forward.

On the structures being proposed, there are a number of options given to regions as to how the structures for the dispersion of European funds might be set up in the future. One of those is the creation of integrated territory investment vehicles. In Belfast City Council, we are keen to examine that model, and particularly keen to examine it with other neighbouring local authorities that cover the Belfast urban area, so that would include places like north Down, Lisburn City Council and the borough councils for Castlereagh and Newtownabbey. That would allow a structure to be put in place that would allow for the European principle of subsidiarity to be applied, so that the moneys would be devolved to the level where it could be delivered most effectively.

What we intend to do is try to develop an integrated development strategy for that area, in partnership with others, to have an integrated approach to the development of the urban area. Our sense is that our colleagues in Derry City Council would be minded to do something similar on the basis of conversations that we have had with them. We feel that that would eliminate some of the silo approach that is applied to the way in which European funds are delivered. It would allow us to better integrate the way in which central government funding, local government funding, the European regional development fund (ERDF) and the European social fund (ESF) could be applied to deliver against objectives that we would set for developing the economic competitiveness of the region. Those are in addition to the role that we hope the Northern Ireland forum will play and issues that we would like to see being considered in the design of the programme moving forward.

The Chairperson: OK. I thank the three of you very much. As you suggest, there are a lot of players: the Office of the Northern Ireland Executive in Brussels; our three elected MEPs; and Barroso. Increasingly, the more I hear of Barroso, the more I think of the Scarlet Pimpernel. Have you ever met the task force?

Ms Leonard: Yes.

The Chairperson: How many people sit on the task force?

Ms Leonard: There is one for every commission department, like the Civil Service department in Brussels and its counterparts here. We had several of them over last night at Queen's at the launch of our forum. Through Colette Fitzgerald and other colleagues in OFMDFM, we have direct access to them regularly.

The Chairperson: When you say regularly, how often is that?

Ms Leonard: Monthly, probably. In Belfast City Council, because we have a dedicated European resource, we do not need as much assistance as others, but I take your point. We have direct access to them, but I do not think that others know that they are there, and, therefore, others do not access them.

The Chairperson: So, you have to go and really cultivate and work it?

Ms Leonard: Yes.

The Chairperson: Do you see tangible benefit?

Ms Leonard: Yes.

The Chairperson: Could you say that there is something that the task force has done for Belfast?

Ms Leonard: Not yet, but you have the four desk officers who have only been in place for a couple of months. I think you need to give them a chance. They should be using the Barroso task force people like gold dust to get early information on funding calls coming out and to influence the programmes that are emerging. There are loads of other EU programmes out there that are being written at the moment. Who is disseminating that here?

The Chairperson: It seems to me that there are two ways of going about it. You can decide as a council that you want to do something, then go to see if you can get EU support for it and find out whether there is money or a scheme that would help. The other way of doing it — and I think, for example, some of the Polish regions have been doing this — is to flood Brussels, find out what is happening, what schemes are available and what pots of money there are, and then devise schemes that will attract that money.

Mr Stalford: I think that is the more constructive approach to take. In terms of the relationship with the Barroso task force and of taking the regional forum forward, the fact that Belfast has been at that for 20 years is a very positive thing for Northern Ireland as a whole, because, as you said, the relationships have been cultivated, the contacts have been established, and people know who to speak to on the phone. We have been able to use that experience that has been built up over the last 20 years in order to secure support for the regional forum idea.

Mr McGrillen: Part of our issue is that we are very proactive. Laura is out with the team on a regular basis and we see huge opportunities coming along, but we have limited capability to access those. First, we do not have the statutory authority to do many of the things that need to be done; therefore, we depend on other Departments to exploit such opportunities. Secondly, with a team of four, which is comparatively big in a Northern Ireland local authority context but small in comparison to other cities, we have to pick and choose what we do with those opportunities that do come along. Part of our frustration is that we see the opportunities that are out there and the potential to exploit them, but they are not being exploited to the extent that they could be.

The Chairperson: I think that is fair.

Mr Kinahan: To start with what you have just said: I hope that you can see ways of helping not just yourselves but us up here or the other councils. You mentioned the need for urban programmes, but later said exactly what we wanted to hear, which is that you realise that it comes down to towns and villages. I had forgotten that the finance we were getting was so rural that it just cut off all the towns, which struggled. If you can influence their decisions to change it, we need to see that happening. I would love to know what JESSICA and JEREMIE are. I do not know those.

You touched on something about which I also wondered about. I was at a presentation by the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (RICS) at which its members held up the Scottish, I think it is the financial or federation trust, as an example of an ideal way of looking at public-private funding. Simon Hamilton, who spoke at it, suggested that the way forward was probably with councils as they are better placed because we cannot do it as an Assembly. Have you been able to explore different routes for gearing onto more funding?

Mr Stalford: As a broad principle, I support the idea that devolving the delivery of projects downwards to local government merits further exploration. That is absolutely the case. From a practical point of view, we all need to be realistic. The 2014-2020 funding period may not be our absolute last chance, but after that, I foresee the funding pool from Europe to Northern Ireland being greatly diminished. Therefore, we should pursue any way in which we can save on technical assistance costs, which would mean resources are directed into front line delivery.

Some people will know that, for my sins, I previously worked for a Member of the European Parliament; he left me, I did not leave him. From memory, I think that the figure for technical assistance in the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) was something like 9%, which financed 65 staff. If local government can be used as a mechanism to reduce the overall technical assistance budget, more money will go into delivery on the ground. We need to explore the ways in which we can maximise what is likely to be our last bite of this cherry.

Mr Kinahan: May I come back to —

Mr Stalford: Is it JESSICA and JEREMIE?

Ms Leonard: A reality check about all of this is that we will get only about two thirds of what we currently receive in EU funding. There are 11 thematic areas where the funding must be spent, and — without getting into technical detail — you have to choose four of those. We need to be smarter. We are a small region and we can have a wish list. I know that the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) has been to the Committee with its paper pushing for more roles for local authorities.

JESSICA is about urban regeneration and JEREMIE is about financing small business, and it is about putting your ERDF in a pot, maybe with some private sector money, and creating a holding fund that works through the European Investment Bank. That holding fund becomes a loan fund; the money never goes back to Europe, so an organisation can borrow from it to do housing development or retail and then pay it back. An example of that are the combined authorities in Manchester, representatives of which we will have here on 11 June to tell us how they did it. That is public authority led, and the Merseyside one that we will also look at is private sector led. We will really push DFP to seriously consider that approach next time around, because there will be so much less money available.

Mr Kinahan: Finally, on the outcomes, the one thing that we seem to be missing in Northern Ireland but I know that they have in Ireland is the good report that tells us what is going on in Europe. Is that something you can do? We could all benefit from that, and they have quite a good, broad document that I think comes out monthly.

Mr Stalford: From a council perspective, I see no reason why the development department could not provide you, Mr Chairman, or the Committee with a regular update of the work that the council is engaged in Europe. I am happy to do what I can to ensure that that is provided.

The Chairperson: That would be useful, thank you.

Mr Molloy: I welcome the presentation, but I also have reservations about it on the basis that Belfast City Council is hijacking, if that is not too strong a word, the European funding that is should be for the Assembly to distribute. That is also a criticism of the Assembly that it is not doing that. I have concerns about subsidiarity and that Belfast City Council is taking on a role across the councils that, if you are looking at the new council model, you will see should be spread across. I notice from the make-up that every other European body that is represented has to go through the Committee of the Regions. I declare an interest that I sit on the Committee of the Regions. Other European bodies are sitting on this. The regional forum should have been the Assembly, not a particular council. The role of the Assembly has, to some extent, been usurped by the council. What we have gets it the opposite way round. Although it may be good practice because Belfast City Council has the resources, it does not have the statutory authority to do so, as you said yourself. Maybe that will prompt the Assembly to do more. Going ahead with setting up a regional forum without the contact of the Assembly or without the buy-in of Assembly Members who attend European meetings regularly is, to some extent, Belfast running ahead of the posse.

Mr Stalford: I would absolutely not support any project that was decoupled from the institutions here, and that is why I said in my opening remarks that we hope that that the regional forum would, effectively, link in to the institutions at Stormont through the Assembly's EU advisory panel and through the task force as well.

I know that some concerns have been raised by the Local Government Association, for example, that Belfast is providing a lead on this. In our defence, we are unique in local government in that we have been in this game for 20 years. No other council in Northern Ireland can legitimately claim that. We are also clear that, although this might be a Belfast led initiative, it will certainly not be a Belfast only initiative or a Belfast centric initiative. It is a case of trying to share with other councils and other parts of Northern Ireland the best practice that we have developed over 20 years. We can stand over that as a model of delivery, and we will try to share that with the other local government authorities that will be created under RPA to maximise mutual benefit. That is where we are trying to take the project.

Mr McGrillen: It is important to point out that the European regional forum is, essentially, a collaborative network. To date, 50 members, including government Departments, have signed up to it. It is there to ensure that all of the organisations across the board that have an interest in Europe, an interest in getting information about Europe and an interest in working in partnership across the patch and on a transnational basis get the opportunity to do so. In many instances, to effectively draw down European money requires you to have those sorts of partnerships built in the region, and you then

partner with other regions. It was an opportunity to ensure that we created a network to allow people to access information and exploit it. There was no attempt whatsoever on the council's part to usurp the role of the Assembly or any other legislative body. It is there to try to facilitate the opportunity to draw down funds.

The other point that is worth making about the approach of integrated territory investment is that we were not proposing to take a city council only approach. As I said, we would like to work in partnership with the other councils in the greater Belfast area and for Derry to work similarly. It is not dissimilar to the approach that already exists with the rural development programme. There are local area groups (LAGs) that have an allocated sum of money. It is politically driven, and the LAGs decide what the priorities are. People then bid for that money, but it is up to that local area group to decide how that money is dispersed and how it fits with the strategic approach that it wants to take for the rural development of the area that it is in. So it is not dissimilar to the programmes that already exist under the rural development programme. It is simply taking an urban approach or a similar approach to what already applies in rural areas across Northern Ireland.

Ms Ruane: Tá fáilte romhaibh. You are very welcome. I have two points. First, following on from what Francie said, it is good that groups are working together, but there are major gaps; for example, Down District Council and Newry and Mourne District Council. I am sure that you expected me to raise that, John. Certain Departments are also not there, such as the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, the Department of Agricultural and Rural Development, and the Department of Education, which are three very important Departments. I do not know why they are not there. I do not know what the process is for Departments. Perhaps you can let me know about that at some point.

I accept that you do not want to be Belfast dominated. So the other point is that it is important that we find a way to be more representative. I am thinking of further and higher education colleges. You have Belfast Met and the universities. However, the work of further and higher education colleges is so important. It would be good to see the Newry institutes and their equivalent right along the border.

The other thing that would be useful is a North/South approach. The South of Ireland knows the corridors of Europe inside out. Belfast might have been at this for 20 years, but the South has been at it since the EU was founded. I think that everybody will acknowledge its expertise in Europe. It knows Europe inside out. Obviously, Europe is a big focus in the South at the minute. I think that a North/South approach would be useful for programmes for the border region groups and so on.

I know that you cannot have something that is too unwieldy, but if you are going to have what is called an umbrella body — I take Francie's point about the statutory role — I think that there needs to be further discussion in relation to the role of Departments and the Assembly. I think that this needs to be representative and that it should not just involve Belfast and Derry.

Ms Leonard: This has evolved. When we decided to change from Belfast in Europe to the regional forum, we wrote to as many organisations that my team and I personally know that engage in Europe. We wrote to every Department, and the only Departments there are the ones that responded. However, I intend to proactively go after the other ones, because I agree with you.

Colleges Northern Ireland is coming on board to represent all the colleges, because it wants to start doing much more European dissemination. However, there is no reason why we cannot invite individual colleges on board. Border region groups have just joined; they are on my list.

In respect of other councils, I presented to the local economic development forum, which is a collective of the 26 councils, and it agreed that it would send two nominees. However, we could easily open it up to every council.

What I intend to do now that this has launched — I need to rethink how I am going to manage such a huge forum — is to start to write out to people again. Even today, I have another 10 business cards from people who want to join following the ESF conference. So it is growing.

Ms Ruane: I welcome the work that you are doing and look forward to doing work to make sure that this is representative and that it is Assembly led rather than Belfast led.

Ms Leonard: In answer to that, I approached OFMDFM a long time ago about this idea, because I personally feel it should be led by the Assembly. That was way before Barroso.

Mr Stalford: Was that in 2003?

Ms Leonard: Something like that. There was an appetite, but I understood that there were a lot more important issues on the table. We jumped in when there was an opportunity and a gap. I think that that shows leadership and creativity. If the Assembly decides that it wants to take it on board, I would be happy to work together if our parties agreed to the aim.

The Chairperson: 2003?

Mr Stalford: Yes.

Mr Molloy: I do not think that that is exactly fair. You know that the Committee has been pushing this and has held panel discussions here to try to co-ordinate different European bodies. I see this as an attempt to replace SEUPB as the funding body. I know that that is part of the agenda in local government at the moment — to become the alternative intermediary funding body. I think that this is undermining what the Assembly is trying to do. I think that the council is going off on a tangent, because, going back to my previous point, it does not have the statutory role to set up this type of body in the first place.

Ms Ruane: May I make a supplementary point. First, there is not enough co-operation in the North of Ireland with Europe, so I welcome work being done in that area. However, we now need a discussion between you and the relevant body here, because the Assembly was not here in 2003, the year that I was elected.

Ms Leonard: Of course.

Ms Ruane: However, there is now a functioning Assembly, a North/South Ministerial Council and a British-Irish Council. I know that a lot of hard work has been done, but that discussion needs to happen now.

Mr Humphrey: I declare an interest as a member of Belfast City Council and as a former chair of its development committee, although I am no longer a member of it. I welcome Christopher, John and Laura. We have to bear in mind, Chairman, that this is a presentation on behalf of Belfast City Council, which has a statutory role to govern the city of Belfast from a local government perspective. That is what we are talking about here.

Belfast City council used its initiative and had the foresight to set up a European unit when no one else did, so let us not criticise that. I think that the only other council to have one is Londonderry, and it took them until last year and Belfast to plant Laura there to do it. So let us not be overly critical of Belfast City Council for —

Mr Molloy: Chair, there is an important point to make. We are getting a presentation from the European regional forum, which was set up by Belfast City Council.

Mr Stalford: No, it is a Belfast City Council-led initiative. So —

Mr Molloy: It is a regional forum.

Mr Humphrey: Certainly, from the presentation, it was very clear that it was Belfast-centric. Among the things that have come out in this discussion and the presentation is the fact that there are huge difficulties here because we are over-governed. We have too many Departments. We have too many Members of the Assembly. We have too many councils. Of course, we then also have the Westminster tier and our MEPs. All of that makes it difficult for the Assembly, never mind a council, albeit of the country's capital city and the largest. As Mr Molloy said, joined-upness is absolutely important. No one has given more leadership on joined-upness than Belfast City Council and Laura, as its European manager.

Collette Fitzgerald's name was mentioned, and I went to a presentation that showed that the Republic has made the drawing down of money from Europe almost a national industry. It has managed to do that very successfully, and all credit to it. To use a colloquialism, we are not at the game. We have got to get the European Commission working with the Committee of the Regions, MEPs, the Executive here at Stormont, people such as Jane Morrice and Mike Smith, the Department that we scrutinise

and all the other Stormont Departments. The European regional forum is a welcome step forward in doing that, and I say that as a Belfast MLA, councillor and ratepayer.

Here is a positive thing that we are taking forward, and it is being knocked or criticised. I think that it is most welcome. I think that it was last year that Barroso, with the First Minister, the deputy First Minister and other Ministers, came to an event held by Belfast City Council in the City Hall. At lunchtime, I read these papers about European priorities, and Northern Ireland is fortunate to have the Barroso task force, because many other cities and countries across Europe — listening to me, you would nearly think that I was pro-Europe — simply do not have that.

We spoke earlier about interfaces, and, having worked in the chemical industry, I know that it takes a long time in research and development to get the germ of an idea to its fruition, outcomes and outputs. The truth is that I know the amount of work that is being done. Francie, you know the amount of positive work that is being done by Belfast City Council in Europe. There is a dichotomy here, because I heard people say that the forum is stretching out into Northern Ireland when that is not its role. Other people were saying that we should stretch on into the Republic of Ireland. On the COMET project, the council has given leadership that straddles the border. The council has been very active on that, and I pay tribute to Laura and her team for that.

Having been to a number of Eurocities conferences, I know the influence that Belfast and Belfast City Council has. In fact, the first event that was held in the Northern Ireland Executive offices was a Belfast City Council event. Let us use the goodwill that we have. We have talked about this before at the Committee. If we have not been doing as good a job in Europe as the council has been doing, let us learn from the council and work with it to ensure that we maximise that influence. Clearly, there is respect for Ministers from this Executive in Europe, and there is a soft spot for Northern Ireland. Let us exploit that.

I have two questions in conclusion. Laura, given the knowledge that you have, can you advise the Committee on whether there will be a Peace IV? What amounts of money have you been able to draw down from Europe for Belfast and the ratepayers of Belfast for the benefit of the city? If the economic driver and the regional hub of Northern Ireland benefits from that, Northern Ireland benefits from that as well.

Ms Leonard: I am being told that, yes, there will be a Peace IV. Within the regulations, the provision is there for Peace IV, but it has to be formally asked for by the Northern Ireland Government and the Southern Government. Therefore, it is over to Ministers. Over the summer and after the summer, SEUPB will be going out to consultation for a potential draft Peace IV and INTERREG V programme. It is key to stay in touch and be informed by SEUPB. You have to bear in mind that the moneys that me and my team draw down are non-Northern Ireland EU funding. For example, our economic team draws down from the ERDF for economic development and from the ESF for employability funding. We have a good-relations team that draws down the Peace funding. Ours is all the stuff that you apply directly to Brussels for. There are examples of what is coming up in the future. So far, we have drawn down £20 million for that. That has built the first skate park in Northern Ireland. We are putting in new low-carbon, state-of-the-art floodlighting around City Hall and have done a lot of people-type programmes.

Mr Humphrey: Those figures show exactly why —

The Chairperson: We have to acknowledge that there is a lot of support for what you are doing, but that there is some concern.

Mr Stalford: I am aware that the Local Government Association is lobbying very hard for the model that it has put forward. Obviously, it is entitled to do that. However, it is probably worth placing on record that there are occasions when the Local Government Association presents an opinion as the opinion of local government. However, on many occasions, local councils are told that what the Local Government Association says is the opinion of local government, having not been consulted.

Based on the 20-plus years that we have been involved in this field, the experience that we have and the networks that we have built up, we are confident that a Belfast City Council led initiative is more likely to succeed. That does not mean that it is solely about Belfast. Obviously, it is not. It is about taking the best practice that we have developed over those years and sharing it with others to bring the maximum benefit to everyone in Northern Ireland. That is where we want to take this project.

The Chairperson: I will finish with two points. William brought the question of Peace money. What feedback, particularly from community and voluntary groups, do you get on SEUPB?

Mr Stalford: To be honest, it is poor. There are several difficult issues with the Peace programme. The first thing that causes difficulty for groups is the three-year funding cycle. You spend the first year getting the projects set up; you spend the second year doing the project; and you spend the third year trying to secure additional funding to keep the project alive. A lot of voluntary and community groups find the three-year funding cycle very difficult.

On a more general level, as is often the case with Europe, whether it is funding, the single farm payment or anything like that, the sheer level of bureaucracy always causes groups a lot of frustration. There is the form-filling and the constant monitoring. Obviously, SEUPB has a job to do with regard to scrutinising the expenditure of European moneys, but, by the same token, my experience has been that community groups find it very difficult to complete the forms and to live with the three-year funding cycle, and they find that they are tortured, almost to the point of harassed, by the monitoring, when they secure the funding. Those are some reflections that I have heard.

Ms Leonard: You should also be aware that the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) is now engaging in consultation around Peace. It has a major concern that the community and voluntary sector has drawn down only 4% of all of the EU funds available here. There is clearly a problem and a blockage.

The Chairperson: I could introduce you to groups in Strangford that are not interested any more. I have a final point. We put an emphasis on Peace; I can understand that, and I do not wish this to denigrate that, but the big show in town for 2014-2020 is Horizon 2020. That is worth €80 billion. Is that something that you can leverage on behalf of your forum?

Ms Leonard: We are already in discussion with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) and the authors of the smart specialisation strategy around all of that. I think we need to be realistic about Horizon 2020. Yes, it is a massive fund, but FP7 is not accessible to everybody. It is about growth companies and high-end research institutions, and we do not have a lot of those. We have been lobbying in Brussels to make Horizon 2020 more friendly to small and medium-sized enterprises. I know that there is a big effort with DETI to do that, and it sees us as having a role in promoting that programme, which is what we will do.

Mr McGrillen: I would like to make one final point. The issue of a cross-border approach was raised. We, as members of COMET, are heavily involved and, I suppose, significantly frustrated in our efforts to try to access INTERREG money. I can express my experience around SEUPB. There are issues around the timeliness, bureaucracy and clarity of the guidance given for the programmes and the types of projects that they are looking for.

Our biggest frustration is that we do not have a natural partner to work with on a cross-border basis. You have to reach across the national boundaries. Clearly, our point of contact would be Dublin. We cannot reach to Glasgow, for instance, and Dublin would be our specific point of contact. We see huge potential in doing things collectively with Dublin, the likes of which can be seen in the cross-border work that is done in such places as Luxembourg and Belgium, western France and western Germany. We have not been able to utilise INTERREG funding because Dublin is ineligible. We think that an argument should be put forward by the Republic of Ireland Government and by the Assembly to have Dublin included, because both jurisdictions could benefit from that partnership. There is a clear industrial economic corridor from Dublin to Belfast, up to Derry/Londonderry, and we are not exploiting that opportunity. If I were making a plea on behalf of the city of Belfast to enable it to access more INTERREG funds and to draw down that money, I would say that it would be significantly beneficial to us if Dublin were in the mix as part of the INTERREG area.

The Chairperson: That is an interesting point. John, Laura and Christopher, thank you very much.