



Northern Ireland
Assembly

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

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Executive 2012-13 European Priorities:
OFMDFM Update

20 February 2013

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)
Ms Megan Fearon
Mrs Brenda Hale
Ms Bronwyn McGahan
Mr Stephen Moutray
Mr George Robinson

Witnesses:

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 now turn to the first of two departmental briefings on European issues. The first is on the mid-year review of the 2012-13 EU priorities. I welcome Dr Gerry Mulligan and Dr Paul Geddis.

Dr Gerry Mulligan (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): We are delighted to have the opportunity to appear in front of the Committee to introduce the paper. It has been a very busy two months. At the Brussels office, we have had visits from the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, the economy Minister and the Health Minister. The Minister for Social Development was over yesterday and we have had visits from the junior Ministers. Of course, we were delighted to welcome members of the Committee and yourself, Chair, to the office.

It has also been an important time for decisions in Brussels, culminating in the key decision on the 2014-2020 budget, which was agreed over 7 and 8 February by the heads of the member states. It has still to be ratified by the European Parliament, but it at least gives us a clear indication of the resources that will be applied across a range of key policy areas. Therefore, it is timely that we can talk about the documents that we have sent to the Committee for your consideration.

If I may, I want to thank you, Chair, for your kind words of appreciation following your visit to the office. They were very well received by members of staff. It is always nice to have appreciation expressed in the way in which you did.

The report is a statement of progress against the Executive's priorities for the year 2012-13, which was published in June 2012. In respect of timing, it represents progress until the end of September, so it is a mid-year report. We would expect to present the Executive with the end-of-year report

probably some time in May. The expectation is that, subject to the Ministers' agreement, we will be able to provide the Committee with that end-of-year report.

The format that we have used is the same as for Programme for Government monitoring in that we have adopted a red, amber and green convention. Hopefully, that makes it more straightforward to digest what is a lot of information. We were looking at something in the region of 124 commitments across the four general thematic areas: competitiveness and employment; innovation and technology; social cohesion; and climate change and energy. Those commitments represented how Departments intended to meet their targets against each of those four broad policy areas. The report, as you can see, is broadly positive in that 118 of those 124 commitments are well on track to being met. At present, 25% of them have already been met fully.

The Chairperson: Sorry to interrupt, Gerry. On a point of clarity, you mentioned red, amber and green. It seems to be red, amber, amber/green and green.

Dr Mulligan: Yes; there are degrees of —

The Chairperson: A cynic would suggest that that fourth category of amber/green was introduced by somebody who wanted to skew things more towards green.

Dr Mulligan: No. The formal description of amber/green is a level of progress that is broadly on track, with easily redeemable deviations from plans and justifiable confidence in getting close to targeted outcomes. So the expectation is that those would move to green. Amber is a level at which we would have some concerns. The mid-term report shows that a relatively small number of the commitments are in that particular category. However, an amber/green rating is a firm and confident expectation that it will move into green. I apologise for combining two of the categories.

As I said, 25% of the commitments have, at the halfway stage, already been met fully. There are examples — I will not go through them all — of very positive progress. One such example is the Department for Regional Development's input to future transport policy and the wording of regulations that will allow us to access funding for roads and infrastructure development, which had not always been the case. Now, we have regulations that provide the flexibility that we need to be able to do that. The emphasis on the Connecting Europe Facility was very much geared towards real infrastructure. That was an example of progress.

Another example that is worth mentioning is the Irish-Scottish Links on Energy Study — ISLES — project, which is mentioned in the report. That is being funded by INTERREG in co-operation with Scotland and Ireland. It is looking at the potential to integrate the provision of renewable wind and tidal energy into a single energy market. It is a very complex programme, but the Commission, recognising its importance, has given it special designation as a project of interest.

Another area with which you will, of course, be familiar is the promotion of Connected Health and the economy Minister and Health Minister's pursuit of special recognition for us as a reference region for Connected Health, which would greatly enhance our chances of securing competitive funding for Connected Health projects downstream.

Those are some examples of the type of progress that we feel has been made in the first half of the year. We will be glad to report further to the Committee in due course. We estimate that we will have the final report around May. Of course, that will be subject to it being included on the Executive's agenda, but we will certainly push to get that report to you as soon as possible.

I am happy to take questions on any aspect of the progress report.

The Chairperson: Members? No one has indicated that they wish to ask a question. Amber is at 4.8%, and red at 0%. It is almost too good to be true, Gerry.

Dr Mulligan: Again, that reflects a very positive engagement by Departments. I think that, with the Executive's commitment to have stepwise engagement in Europe, Departments have stepped up to the mark.

The Chairperson: Does it indicate that we can be more ambitious in future?

Dr Mulligan: We will always advise on setting the most challenging targets. It is expected that, as we make progress, Departments will review opportunities and set their targets in as ambitious a way as possible. Obviously, I cannot comment on whether individual targets are challenging. From what I see, and knowing what effort goes into them, I would say that they are quite challenging as they are, but there is always scope to set more challenging targets.

The Chairperson: OK. Thank you.