



Northern Ireland
Assembly

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

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

European Issues: Office of the Northern
Ireland Executive in Brussels

23 October 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)
Mr Alex Attwood
Mr Leslie Cree
Ms Megan Fearon
Mrs Brenda Hale
Mr Alex Maskey
Mr Stephen Moutray
Mr Jimmy Spratt

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: Good afternoon, Gerry and Paul. You are very welcome. Gerry, whenever you are content, will you give us your opening thoughts, please?

Dr Gerry Mulligan (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): Thank you, Chair. Thanks as ever for the invitation to brief the Committee.

The year to date in Brussels has been a particularly significant one for Northern Ireland, particularly with the heads of agreement on the future of the common agricultural policy and the cohesion policy. Also significant was the inclusion in the February Council conclusions of an additional £150 million for a fourth Peace programme. It was also a busy and significant year for the office with our involvement with and contribution to the Irish presidency. I believe that Minister Donohoe acknowledged the work of the office when he appeared before the Committee last week.

The next six to eight weeks will be very busy for the office with six ministerial visits. Minister Hamilton, Minister Farry and the Committee for Employment and Learning, Minister O'Neill, Minister Ford and, of course, our own junior Ministers Bell and McCann will all visit us before the end of the year. It will be Minister Hamilton's first visit to Brussels in his ministerial capacity, and we look forward to welcoming him.

It is worth saying that there are also some significant new faces in Brussels. Jon Cunliffe, who was the UK's Permanent Representation to the European Union, has departed to take up the role of number two in the Treasury, and he will be replaced by Ivan Rogers from 1 November. Within the

Irish Permanent Representation to the European Union, Declan Kelleher, the former ambassador to China, is to take over from Rory Montgomery, who is to be the ambassador to France. We hope that our Ministers will have the opportunity to meet them in the coming weeks.

The current week is important. The European Parliament is meeting in plenary session in Strasbourg all week, and top of its agenda is completing negotiations on the Budget for 2014-2020. There are still some outstanding issues around the cohesion policy, own resources and midterm reviews. So, there are still some loose ends that need to be negotiated, but the expectation is that this week will see final agreement on all aspects.

The heads of states are meeting in the Council on Thursday and Friday. Top of their agenda will be the digital agenda and, particularly, the regulation of the digital market.

The European Commissioners have also been meeting in Strasbourg. Significant for us was the agreement and publication just yesterday of the European Commission's work programme for 2014. I have obviously not had a chance to look at the work programme in detail, but what seems to have emerged is a concentration on those issues on which there is a realistic prospect of getting agreement before the elections to the European Parliament in May. They really only have between now and then to get agreement. So, no new legislation is likely to be introduced, and it will only be that legislation on which there has been agreement.

The three areas that I picked out are the completion of the banking union, particularly around what is called a single resolution mechanism; the telecommunications issues, which will look at areas of regulation of telecommunications in a single market context; and, of course, legislation to deliver the Budget, which is clearly important to get programmes up and running next year.

That brings me to the Executive's priorities. Now that we have the work programme for next year, we can begin, as we do every year, to liaise and consult on priorities for 2014-15. We will be engaging closely with the Committee as those priorities develop in light of the Commission's work programme. You will have received the Executive's priorities for 2013-14; apologies that they were not with you sooner. The Departments, however, have been working to those priorities throughout the year, and we had the benefit of your comments on an earlier draft. Hopefully, a mid-year review on the 2013-14 priorities will be cleared by the Executive in November. As soon as possible thereafter, we will share that mid-year review with the Committee.

The end-year report on the Executive's priorities for 2012-13 is also with you. Again, apologies that it was not with you sooner. I will make a brief comment on that. It included an ambitious set of targets —120 in total — across Departments, and you will see from the report that 95% of those were achieved. That is a solid achievement across all Departments. I will not pick up on the detail, but there are a few that I think that are worth highlighting. On the transport side, we persuaded the Commission that expenditure on upgrading the rail infrastructure was not necessary. By doing so, we reduced potential expenditure by about £13 billion, which would have been a cost to the block. We also achieved visits from three Commissioners: the Agriculture Commissioner; the Development Commissioner; and the Research Commissioner, Commissioner Geoghegan-Quinn. The establishment of the important European Centre for Delivering Social Change with the universities is another major achievement that is worth highlighting. To date, we have also drawn down £56 million in research and development funding from framework programme 7 (FP7). Those are just some of the areas that I think are worth highlighting as solid achievements.

I will end there and make myself available for questions.

The Chairperson: Gerry, thank you very much. I acknowledge your apology for the late delivery, but let us dig into that a little. We got sight of the draft priorities in January this year. Then, only yesterday do we get the final 2013-14 priorities, but they mention the Irish presidency and the Commission's 2013 work programme. Those things are past.

Dr Mulligan: Again, they were contemporary when drafted.

The Chairperson: Indeed, but they are not any more.

Dr Mulligan: They are not any more. Nonetheless, they will be reflected on — past tense — in future reports. We will make sure that the tense —

The Chairperson: I am not talking about future reports. I am talking about the one that you sent us yesterday.

Dr Mulligan: Again, without having to go back and redraft and resubmit for ministerial approval, and again with apologies for the anomaly in the tense, I hope that you see that, essentially, these are events that were important at the time and, on reflection, still are.

The Chairperson: OK, let us look at the positives. You talked about achievements. When we were in the Office of the Northern Ireland Executive in Brussels, I asked you what more you would aspire to. I think that face time with commissioners was your answer. In that context, to have three commissioners visit Northern Ireland is an achievement. How did the three visits come about?

Dr Mulligan: The three visits would have come around as a result of lobbying. There was —

The Chairperson: By you or by MEPs?

Dr Mulligan: Both. MEPs contribute and we contribute in our discussions with chefs de cabinet. We also benefit from the chair of the Barroso task force having access to senior Commission officials and making the case for commissioners to visit. If you like, pressure applied at political level within the Commission and our discussions — formal and informal — had the impact of getting commissioners to Northern Ireland. Some commissioners were here for the first time. Commissioner Geoghegan-Quinn is, of course, no stranger to us and would not require significant persuasion. The other two commissioners had not been here before.

The Chairperson: When they come, are they greeted by the three MEPs? Was their time divided equally between the MEPs? Who draws up a programme?

Dr Mulligan: The programme would be drawn up and coordinated by the Commission office in Belfast in consultation with MEPs and officials, so it would be very much a joint effort. The formal receptions are organised by the Commission office in Belfast. Of course, MEPs will be closely involved in those programmes, and they would normally include either a working lunch or a dinner to which MEPs would be invited as a matter of course.

The Chairperson: The competitive drawdown in 2012-13 was over £18 million. As you mentioned, a large proportion of that was by one Department — the Department for Regional Development (DRD). We also have to factor in the £13 billion that the Commission saved us having to spend. Can you give us a breakdown of the total by Department?

Dr Mulligan: I will ask Paul to come in on the detail of this one, if you do not mind, as he is sighted on that sort of detail.

Dr Paul Geddis (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister): Yes, a breakdown by Department is available. It is a particularly complex table. I do not have the table with me for this evidence session, but it can be provided. I also believe that, in the past, we provided a departmental breakdown to the Committee. The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) draws down most in FP7 research and development moneys. However, there are substantial contributions from some other Departments, such as the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD).

The Chairperson: You referred to the Barroso task force having a stocktake seminar in December 2012. What sort of outcomes were there from that?

Dr Mulligan: Indeed. That was a seminar that welcomed the incoming director-general, Walter Deffaa. Our junior Ministers were there, so it was an opportunity for them to meet him. It was also an opportunity to bring the task force members together in our offices in Brussels to review areas of progress, talk about areas where they could be of assistance and get a feel from them of what their current issues were. Importantly, as well as reinforcing the work of the task force and reinforcing bilateral links with members of staff in the office, it was also agreed that, rather than a large collective inward visit by the task force to Northern Ireland, a series of focused and targeted visits in the form of seminars and related programmes would be preferable. Those seminars are now being organised and delivered, the first of which will be looking at service innovation in the health service. I think that

was an important outcome, because we felt that inward visits, important as they were, did not achieve as much as focused visits by the relevant task force members or the Commission.

The Chairperson: Gerry, is there a formal relationship between the task force and the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB)?

Dr Mulligan: No.

The Chairperson: OK. Let me explain why I am asking, if members will indulge me for a second. I do not want to be parochial, but it is to do with one of the partnerships — north Down, Ards, and Down — that requested a meeting with political support, and at least four of the five parties in the Executive had representatives at that meeting with Pat Colgan and SEUPB. The issue was a fear that there was going to be a significant underspend of upwards of half a million pounds because of unforeseen circumstances that had prevented certain community groups in a defined section of the population engaging with the Peace III partnership and therefore drawing funds down from the SEUPB. The message that was being taken to Pat Colgan was that, if we could get a six-month extension, it would be possible to overcome those unforeseen issues, get the groups engaged and get the money drawn down. Pat, reasonably, made the point that he is a manager of the programme and, at this point in the Peace III process, his job is effectively to close it down, because it is coming to an end. I accept that, managerially, that is a huge task for Pat to undertake. The question he was being asked was not about the management of it; it was more about an overarching policy decision. Do you want history to look back at Peace III and say that, for certain sections of the population, it failed, not because of an intrinsic fault with Peace III, but for the lack of being able to secure a six-month extension to deal with unforeseen circumstances? I just wonder whether that is something that the Barroso task force could bring influence to bear on, because I accept that Pat is there as a manager and that is beyond his brief.

Dr Mulligan: I will qualify what I said earlier about there being no direct relationship between the SEUPB and the task force. There is an indirect relationship through the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP). The SEUPB has a formal relationship with that Department, and that Department is part of the Barroso task force process. If there was a point that the Department wanted to press the Commission on, with the help of the task force, and if that originated in DFP, I am sure that the chair of the task force, who is always willing to lobby on our behalf, would be prepared to take the point up. However, it would really be down to the Department of Finance and Personnel if it felt that a policy was worth pursuing.

The Chairperson: From where you sit, do you think that there is still scope and possibility for those requests to be granted?

Dr Mulligan: Without knowing where we are in the process, I do not think it would be advisable for me to give a view, but it is certainly something that I could speak to the Department of Finance and Personnel about if that was helpful.

The Chairperson: OK.

Mr Maskey: I think you are expecting us to sit through what might be very important circumstances, but we do not know what they are. I think that the official, Gerry, gave an appropriate answer. It would not be right to get an answer to the question that you have put. I think it is unfair that that question has been put at this meeting.

The Chairperson: I am asking about the relationship between —

Mr Maskey: But you are citing as an example a set of circumstances that we know nothing about, and I do not think it is appropriate for us to discuss it at this meeting.

The Chairperson: I am happy to move away from the illustration, but the point I am trying to get to is the relationship between the SEUPB and the Barroso task force. I believe that is a legitimate question.

Mr Maskey: That is fair enough then.

The Chairperson: We will move on to social cohesion. Priority SC14.1 states that you want to:

"Identify the organisations working in the area of social cohesion within the region who could most benefit from European assistance ... identifying the most appropriate source of funding available and providing assistance; facilitating at least 1 bid for funding during 2012-13."

Will you talk us through that process and how it has ended up, please?

Dr Mulligan: That relates to the ongoing work on identifying potential programmes for the many bodies that are working on delivering social cohesion in the region. There will be a number of opportunities to engage with organisations that have social cohesion as their focus, including through organisations such as the Northern Ireland European Regional Forum. Organisations will also be invited to participate in a seminar series, which I referred to. Those are the sorts of opportunities that we want to develop as much as possible so that the information on opportunities that goes to Departments is disseminated as widely as possible and those organisations are developed in their capacity to apply and, hopefully, to draw down funding.

The Chairperson: There are quite a few references to funding being made available and information being circulated to encourage organisations to apply for funding. I do not think there is quite as much information on the outcomes and whether they have successfully followed through. Can you update us?

Dr Mulligan: Again, I do not have the specific information to hand, but I could certainly come back to you with the detail. I am sorry that I do not have that specific information, but I will follow that up and pass it on to the Committee.

The Chairperson: OK.

Mr Spratt: It is good to see you, Gerry and Paul. Thank you for briefing the Committee. It will come as no surprise that I am interested in Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) issues. I know that DRD secured funding of €1.6 million for the Coleraine to Londonderry line, €0.25 million for the York Street interchange option study and €1.9 million for the Electricity Supply Board. Given that the Committee, your office and the Department have been successfully working in collaboration to get amendments to the strategy and in bringing roads in, what ongoing work are you aware of?

I think there is another tranche of money starting to open up from December. There are obviously issues with rail infrastructure here: the North/South line; the Dublin line; and stuff like that. Given that most of our freight is still going out through, thankfully, the Port of Belfast, the Port of Larne and the A75, are you aware of any collaboration with the Edinburgh Parliament on securing some funding for the A75? That is the direct route for onward transportation, and I am sure that you are well aware of the problems with that particular section of road. I know that we have had a lot of support from the Chair of the Committee. The MEP, Brian Simpson, has been over with the Department and good views were shared. However, we need to work hard now to try to get some of that in maybe for enhanced rail links and stuff like that. Because, you will know that, on the initial map, the European Parliament considered that the island was linked to the rest of Europe. It saw the Channel tunnel but did not think that there was a bit of water in between. Now that we have roads in as well as rail, are you satisfied with the work that is going on and can you give me an insight into what exactly is happening?

Dr Mulligan: Again, without knowing the detail of Regional Development's plans, I cannot be precise. However, I know that officials have been attending meetings and conferences — one was in Tallinn recently and another is coming up next month — on the Connecting Europe Facility and its future shape. You are right in that the legislation that has been drafted and which will, hopefully, be finalised, allows us funding for roads infrastructure that otherwise would not have been possible. I understand that the Department intends to make use of that facility. I am also aware that there will be other areas of potential funding on the transport side, although structural funds may not be open to the Department for major infrastructure.

Mr Spratt: There will be a substantial pot of money available under TEN-T. I am not sure whether the final budget has been agreed.

Dr Mulligan: I have the budget figures here. I cannot be precise about the Department's plans, but I can follow up with it on specific targeted areas under TEN-T if that is useful. All that I can talk about is the generality, which is that the Department is actively looking at opportunities under future TEN-T funding.

Mr Spratt: I know that there was a meeting last week in Estonia.

Dr Mulligan: That is right, in Tallin. That was the meeting that I referred to. I have not had a chance to speak to colleagues in DRD since that, so I am not best placed to give you the details.

Mr Spratt: That is fair enough, but it would be helpful to get feedback on that.

Dr Mulligan: I will pass what information I can from DRD colleagues to the Committee.

Mr Lyttle: Thanks for your presentation. Among the key policy achievements, you mention the development in consultation with the European Commission of a regional strategy for older people's issues. What exactly does that refer to?

Dr Mulligan: Do you have the particular reference to that? It would be helpful if we could —

Mr Lyttle: It might refer to the Department's older people's strategy.

Dr Mulligan: Again, that is an example of where the Department will look to impress upon the Commission some of the aspects of our older people's strategy that could be relevant across member states. It will equally look to explore how European policy, including funding policy, could be relevant to our developing strategy. As I am not the policy lead on this area, I cannot be specific. However, from discussions with them, I know that senior Commission officials in the unit that looks after older people's issues were particularly impressed by many of the initiatives here, including those around warm homes and the appointment of a Commissioner for Older People, to mention a few. I imagine that that is a two-way process that involves letting the Commission know what we are doing on that policy front and seeing what the Commission can do to enhance our work.

Mr Lyttle: OK. Negotiations and final votes on the multiannual financial framework (MFF) are ongoing, but will you update us on what work the Department is doing to support the private sector and the community and voluntary sector becoming partners for any bids that may be made, once the MFF has been agreed?

Dr Mulligan: Indeed. The main focal point for that effort is in the Northern Ireland regional forum, which the Department co-chairs with Belfast City Council. The forum brings together the private sector, the voluntary sector, academia and all the stakeholders that have a potential interest. It is an area ripe for development. I understand that the forum's membership is not oversubscribed but significantly subscribed. I would look to that group as the vehicle for improving engagement among all those groups in the future.

Mr Lyttle: You may have answered this question already, and forgive me if you have, but is there a timescale for making draft operational programmes for Peace IV and INTERREG ready for Executive approval?

Dr Mulligan: The Department of Finance and Personnel takes the lead on those programmes. I know that, in general, the first stage in that process is to approve the partnership agreements at member state level. I understand that the timescale for that will be the end of the year. The partnership agreements have to be signed off by the Commission. Thereafter, the individual programmes, including our own, will be negotiated with the Commission. I would imagine that that will happen in the first six months of 2014.

Mr Lyttle: Can you shed any light on European reaction to the Maze situation?

Dr Mulligan: The best thing I can do is to quote from Commissioner for Regional Policy Hahn:

"This is a project which we supported as a contribution to the reconciliation of the communities in Northern Ireland. Sadly, due to the political conditions on the ground it cannot go ahead in this

period. To be meaningful all communities have to be involved — that unfortunately is not the case. I very much hope we can try again with this project and that for the time being the money from it can be used to fund other projects."

That is the most appropriate comment from Europe.

Mr Lyttle: That is fair enough.

Mr Maskey: Thank you for your presentation, Gerry and Paul. Section 2 of the implementation report outlines the targets that have been achieved; target SC14.2 was to hold a stakeholder workshop by March 2013, attend relevant conferences and actively target key stakeholders to raise awareness of the Barroso task force. It states that

"Over 800 organisations were contacted who had previously bid for or received European funding".

Do you have any sense of the substantive success of that when the target was achieved? Could you elaborate on that?

Dr Mulligan: I apologise; I do not have the detail of that. I will talk to the relevant official and get back to you.

Mr Maskey: OK, thanks.

Mr Attwood: Given your last answer, I hope that you may be able to answer my question. By the end of 2014 and the funding window for FP7, on the basis of your best understanding of projects at the moment, what do you think the total drawdown will be by the Northern Ireland Government?

Dr Mulligan: I can certainly state the target or the ambition for the Northern Ireland Government, which is nearly to double the drawdown for the next programming period to a figure of about £100 million. I am aware that, in preparation for that, a number of important things have happened, one of which is the recruitment and appointment of seven contact officers; one in the Agri-food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI); two in the University of Ulster; and the remaining four in Queen's University. That should make a significant difference, as those posts will be there to co-ordinate the efforts of different partners who are involved in drawing down FP7 in a largely academic research environment. That is a significant development, which should contribute significantly to the target. Of course, as an office, we will —

Mr Attwood: What is the drawdown at the moment, as far as you are aware?

Dr Mulligan: To date, it is £56 million. That will bring us to the end of the current FP7 period, after which Horizon 2020 will start from 1 January 2014.

Mr Attwood: Is the target for Horizon 2020 £100 million?

Dr Mulligan: One hundred million pounds; that is right.

Mr Attwood: I agree with you that the appointment of these individuals in various places is a good thing. It is, of course, borrowing from the Republic of Ireland model where Enterprise Ireland and all subsidiary organisations, agencies and Departments have a point person to do the job that the individuals you named. However, at the end of the day, the drawdown of FP7 in the North will be £60 million, whereas the drawdown of FP7 in the Republic will be close to €900 million. Pro rata, the notional drawdown from Horizon 2020 from the Southern Government could be £1.5 billion, yet our ambition is £100 million. Do you not think that we should be more ambitious than that?

Dr Mulligan: Without wanting to sound evasive, I am not sure that commenting on the target would be appropriate for me, as the target has been set in another Department. I will say that pro rata is one way of expressing performance on drawdown; another is looking at it in relation to GDP and the size of the economy. In relation to the size of our economy, our drawdown of £56 million stands up well against areas of Scotland, Wales and England. I acknowledge that Ireland has been particularly successful, and we have much to learn from it.

Mr Attwood: That is the point. Surely, the more we can piggyback on the Southern experience and embed its structures in the life of our Government, work closely with them in Europe, it seems to me that an ambition of £100 million is the least of our ambitions in the six years of FP8 or Horizon 2020. In your view, as the senior official representing the Northern Ireland Government in Europe, is there any low-hanging fruit that, with some further application, you could draw down across the range of funding programmes?

Dr Mulligan: It is always risky identifying things that are seen to be relatively easy.

Mr Attwood: You are a senior official, and you have to give best advice. Is there low-hanging fruit that you would advise us to look for?

Dr Mulligan: There are some areas where we have a particular advantage and a track record. Therefore, those are areas in which I feel that we would be best placed to be successful: aviation and aeronautics is one; composites is another. The Commission is eager to point to us as an exemplar. Another area worth mentioning is connected health, as we have been successful in achieving reference region status in it. The precise designation is three-star reference region status, which is the highest status achievable. That means that other regions and member states will want to partner us in applications for research and development, so we have done well in priming our applications. We have learnt a great deal from others' experience, including Ireland's, and you will see that that will be put into practice across a range of areas, but, where we have a smart specialisation, those will be the areas in which we will be most likely to be successful in future.

Mr Attwood: I have one final question. When the decision was made on the Maze, it seemed to be in contrast with the patience of Europe and the SEUPB in respect of Narrow Water. Even though, unfortunately, question marks seem to endure over Narrow Water, SEUPB has not pulled the funding package. Yet when issues arose about the Maze, a decision was taken very quickly to pull the funding on it. Did the speed of one and the patience in the other surprise you?

Dr Mulligan: I would not have compared the two to draw conclusions about the processes. I know that their decisions are, and were, bound by procedures and contractual obligations. Contractual obligations always drive the timescales on those matters.

Mr Attwood: Surely the same timescales for the completion of a newbuild bridge or a newbuild facility at the Maze are the same under European funding requirements?

Dr Mulligan: The requirements would have been outlined in the letter of offer, and the timing of the withdrawal would have been determined strictly by that letter of offer. Therefore, whatever conditions applied, there would have been the conditions that would have been the basis of a decision to withdraw.

The Chairperson: Three more members wish to speak so, if you will permit me, we will move to Megan.

Ms Fearon: I will be brief, Chair. Thank you for your presentation, Gerry and Paul. I noticed, under the social cohesion targets, that we were to join the European network on youth unemployment by December 2012, and I note that that has not been achieved and, presumably, will not be achieved since the programme is winding down. What did we miss out on by not getting into that programme sooner? Did we miss out on any potential benefits?

Dr Mulligan: It is looking at the hypothetical. Had we been involved in the programme earlier, would we have been better placed? Given the amount of constructive policy on youth employment that we can refer to here, including our youth guarantee schemes, I suspect that we would have had quite a lot to offer that organisation had we been members earlier. I am not being flippant, but I suspect that, had we been involved earlier, they might have learned something from us as regards our policy. However, I cannot talk hypothetically about what we missed.

Ms Fearon: Why did we not join the network sooner? Was it an oversight?

Dr Mulligan: Sometimes, knowledge of those networks emerges only by chance, and then, as soon as they are assessed, Departments would act very quickly if they thought that it was in their interests to join networks. There are very many networks in Brussels and in Europe. The trick is to make an

assessment of their real potential value before deciding to commit. Some of those networks are by subscription, in which case money is involved, and you have to assess the value for money of those networks. Again, you have to look at the participants, as that also gives you a steer as to whether it would be worth our while putting the resource, time and effort into them. I cannot be specific about this network, because I do not know enough about it, but we tend to make a detailed assessment before advising whether a network is worth joining.

Mr Moutray: I will be very brief. Gerry, I do not know whether you can help me out or not, but there is considerable concern in the Quarry Products Association about the formal investigation that was opened up by the European Commission, and that there may have been the potential for a clawback of money. Can you give us any indication of how long you think that would take, given your experience in Europe?

Dr Mulligan: If the investigation was based on procurement procedures, it could take quite some time. I know that the Commission, in a number of areas of investigation, such as state aid, is suffering bottlenecks because of resources. I can only speculate that it is the type of issue that could take six months to a year to resolve.

Mr Moutray: It was opened in August.

Dr Mulligan: From experience, quick decisions on such issues are not common. Is this a Department for Regional Development issue around quarrying?

Mr Moutray: No; it is UK levy scheme. It could be that the European Commission will enforce the UK Government to take funding in again.

Dr Mulligan: I can certainly check with colleagues in the UK representation to see whether they are familiar with the case and what their expectation would be about its being resolved.

Mr Moutray: I appreciate that. There is concern around that.

Dr Mulligan: Certainly, I will follow-up on that and get back to you.

The Chairperson: I think that it is the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI), is it not, Stephen?

Mr Moutray: Yes, it probably would be.

Mr Cree: To go back to framework 7, I am surprised that you consider the comparison on GDP to be adequate and that you seem content with it. Surely the purpose of the exercise is to get GDP or, more accurately, GVA, up to that which pertains in other parts of the Kingdom.

Dr Mulligan: Inasmuch as the amount of activity in research and development is correlated with the size of your economy, in other words, the innovation and entrepreneurship — the things that relate to the demand on the research and development side — then that would have a direct link to the size of your economy. Therefore, the smaller economy is less likely to produce as much demand and as much research and development activity. The other point is that the number of universities is critical. Although Ireland has, I think, seven universities, we have two, and that will have a bearing on the extent of the interest in and demand for research and development.

Mr Cree: Does that not mean that we need and, indeed, expect, more from what we have for greater effort?

Dr Mulligan: There is an acknowledgement that we can make a greater effort, and I hope that what I have outlined reflects the effort, particularly from DETI, Invest NI and others to be more successful in the next period.

Mr Cree: We have links with other universities.

Dr Mulligan: Indeed, and I know that some of the other universities are directly involved in funding programmes. We have partnered those universities, some in Ireland and in other member states.

However, the capacity to draw down research and development and to be involved in research and development is, in many ways, related to the size of the economy, which will grow in relation to innovation and entrepreneurship. It is not the only indicator, but it is one that is legitimately considered.

Mr Cree: It is probably the weakest one, yes. I will leave it there.

The Chairperson: There we will leave it, except for one point, Gerry, which is desk officers. I am not sure whether you are aware that there is some disappointment and, in relation to at least one Committee, probably annoyance that it no longer has direct access to briefings from the desk officers in Brussels but, instead, has to rely primarily on the quarterly updates. We considered the last quarterly update on 9 October, but that covered the period from April to June. Therefore, we are reviewing events of four to seven months ago. Surely there is a better way.

Dr Mulligan: I have two points. The next report will be cleared for onward transmission to you tomorrow at the interdepartmental meeting chaired by our junior Ministers. Therefore, hopefully, you will see that for the period June to September very soon. On the process itself, it was prompted by a request from one of the Committees — I cannot remember which — to be copied into the advice that was issued by desk officers. At that stage, we felt that, to respect the protocol between Departments and their Committees, it would be better to clear the information in advance. Of course, the Committees can require anyone to appear and give evidence directly, so there is nothing to prevent desk officers from briefing and appearing before Committees. I think that it would be advisable to have a policy lead there as well, given the role of the desk officers. Nevertheless, that is still possible.

The Chairperson: OK. That is a different view on matters.

Dr Mulligan: The document was cleared through that process, which, admittedly, is not ideal. We will try to speed things up. Again, the Committee can require whom it likes to appear before it.

The Chairperson: That is a very fair and positive point. Paul and Gerry, thank you both very much indeed.