

Mrs Cathie White
Clerk to the Committee
Committee for Employment and Learning
Parliament Buildings
Ballymiscaw
Stormont
Belfast
BT4 3XX

Our Ref: COR/085/14

March 2014

Dear Cathie,

At their meeting on 26 February 2014, the Committee considered correspondence from the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister setting out the Terms of Reference for the Inquiry into the Barroso Taskforce and requesting views on the work of the Taskforce and on future engagement on European issues. The Committee agreed to forward the correspondence to the Department for comment. It should be noted that the Barroso Taskforce Working Group is currently considering how its work can be reshaped to make it more effective.

Work of the Barroso Taskforce - DEL Experience

The work of the Taskforce has been worthwhile in terms of raising Northern Ireland's profile in Europe and in creating a more focussed and more cohesive approach in Northern Ireland to engagement with Europe and, in particular, drawdown of competitive European funding. Chairmanship of the Barroso Taskforce Working Group by the Junior Ministers has helped to keep the profile of the work elevated.

The development of the European priorities, annual implementation plan and the associated objectives has ensured that efforts are focused on achieving Departments' individual targets which help to ensure that the overarching priorities are met.

Some challenges experienced include a lack of clarity at times. This may be because of the unknown nature of the work at the outset and other factors such as changes in personnel which would naturally have an adverse effect on continuity. Particular examples include some confusion in the methods used to calculate drawdown of funding, lack of clarity as to the roles and responsibilities of the Desk Officers and, more recently, lack of clear guidance around the benchmarking exercise.

Future Engagement on European Issues

As indicated above, the Barroso Taskforce Working Group has given focus to European issues making Departments accountable for achieving their related objectives. The same cohesive approach across the Departments going forward would be of benefit; however, lessons can be learned from the challenges experienced.

There is an opportunity to refresh focus and better clarify Northern Ireland's aspirations for future European interaction. It is important that the same focus is given to all three objectives of the Barroso Taskforce Working Group. It is vital that each Department is clear on its role in achieving Northern Ireland's aims.

In addition, it is important that the methods in terms of measuring drawdown and benchmarking are well thought through and agreed at the outset. The role of supporting mechanisms should also be clear. For example, the roles and responsibilities of the Brussels-based Liaison Officers should be made clear to all concerned in order to avoid duplication and unnecessary delay in getting the information and inputs required to achieve objectives.

Yours sincerely

FIONA STANLEY

Departmental Assembly Liaison Officer