



**Committee for Enterprise, Trade & Investment,
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To: Shauna Mageean
Clerk to the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy
First Minister

From: Jim McManus
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Date: 24th March 2014

Subject: **Inquiry into Barroso Taskforce**

The Committee for Enterprise, Trade & Investment considered correspondence from the Committee for OFMDFM at its meeting on 27th February. The Committee welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Inquiry.

During a Committee visit to Brussels in April 2013, the Committee for Enterprise, Trade & Investment engaged with the Barroso Desk Officers on matters relating to the work of the Department of Enterprise, Trade & Investment. Desk Officers informed members that they not only have a role in Brussels but also have a role in Northern Ireland to ensure information is disseminated appropriately across the region. This includes work being done by DETI and Invest NI. It was stated that Desk Officers also have a role in relation to the work of local councils and the Invest NI client base. Members were informed that departments also have a role in keeping Desk Officers up to date on what is going on in Northern Ireland. According to the Desk Officers, some departments are better at this than others.

The Committee welcomed the approach of having the Desk Officers in place in order to share information and keep stakeholders in Northern Ireland better informed about what is going on in Brussels and helping Northern Ireland stakeholders engage with the EU.

At its meeting on 7th November 2013 the Committee considered the first report from the Desk Officers covering April to June 2013. The report was made up largely of a list of activities undertaken by the Desk Officers with little indication of any benefits having been accrued by their activities. The Committee therefore sought clarification on a number of issues in the report which were of interest to members. Correspondence to that effect issued to OFMDFM on 21st November 2013.

At its meeting on 12th December 2013 the Committee considered a response from OFMDFM indicating that it would be preferable for the information sought to be requested through the relevant committee and thereafter departmental official. It was stated that this route would ensure departments are fully aware of both the request and the information provided. In doing so, OFMDFM conceded that this did, in fact,

make the process somewhat complex. The Committee agreed to respond to OFMDFM clarifying that the Committee had requested the information from the Barroso Desk Officers based on progress reports they provided and that it would therefore be more appropriate for the Desk Officers to comment in detail on the progress they have made, rather than individual departments. Having not received a response by the Committee meeting of 6th February 2014, the Committee agreed to contact OFMDFM to determine when a response may be expected.

At the meeting on 13th February 2014 the Chair informed members that the Clerk had contacted the OFMDFM DALO and had been informed that OFMDFM is awaiting information from DETI before the response to the Committee's queries can be completed. DETI, in turn, informed the Committee that the required information had recently been forwarded to OFMDFM. The substantive response was received on 5th March 2014 and considered at the Committee meeting on 13th March 2014. The response from OFMDFM raised a number of additional queries from the Committee regarding a lack of detail on some of the issues covered. The Committee has therefore sought additional information from OFMDFM on the matter.

Considering the protracted delays in providing the initial information, the Committee was very disappointed at the timeliness and quality of the response to its request. During the time the Committee awaited the response two additional Desk Officer Reports were received. The Committee received the Report covering July to September 2013 on 16th January 2014 and considered it at its meeting on 23rd January 2014. The Report covering October to December 2013 was received on 12th February 2014 and considered at the Committee meeting on 20th February 2014.

In summary, the Committee is concerned that the promise raised by the establishment of the Barroso Desk Officers in Brussels is not being delivered. If a statutory Committee cannot receive a detailed response until up to a year after the activities to which that response relates, the facility cannot hope to provide adequate, appropriate, timely, accurate and relevant information to businesses in the Invest NI client base which are seeking to take advantage of opportunities presented by the EU.

The Committee suggests that the Inquiry considers whether the problems encountered relate directly to ineffectiveness of the mechanism that is in place, including the systems and processes that have been established, or if the problems result from a lack of information coming to the Desk Officers from departments. As stated earlier, the latter problem was identified by the Committee at meetings with Desk Officers during the Committee visit to Brussels. In either case, on the experience of the Committee for Enterprise, Trade & Investment, urgent action needs to be taken to improve the current mechanisms to identify, collate and share relevant information between Northern Ireland stakeholders and Brussels or to provide an alternative which better meets the needs of stakeholders.