



Member of the European Parliament

Mike Nesbitt MLA

OFMDFM Committee Chairperson

1st April 2014

Dear Mike, a chara.

Thank you and your Committee for this opportunity to input into your deliberations around the functioning of the Barroso Taskforce.

As Junior Minister from 2011-12 I was the co-chair of the Taskforce, and in my current role as one of the north's three MEPs, I have continued – in liaison with my party colleague Jennifer McCann MLA – to keep an interest in how the Taskforce is performing in its stated role of increasing the drawdown from our Executive Departments from the wide range of European funding streams available.

In my own work, I have seen the potential of the competitive funding streams emanating from the Commission in Brussels. I have been highlighting to as many groups and agencies as possible the need for them to learn about these funding programmes and to engage with those who can open the doors for them to learn more, prepare to submit bids and to identify the partners needed in such applications.

I have recently launched my own document, "A Gateway to EU funding" to try to assist this work, and would commend organisations like the NI European Forum and the officials from Invest NI who provide the Enterprise Europe facility to our small and medium businesses who are in such need of assistance in these times of economic downturn and austerity.

So I am glad of this opportunity to share some observations on the Taskforce, how it has progressed and lessons for the future.

I was one of those, both before and during my tenure as Junior Minister with those responsibilities, who was extremely critical of the slowness of many of our Departments to grasp the opportunities which President Barroso had offered us. I felt that not all Departments saw the need for new thinking and were continuing to do what they had done in the past in terms of engaging with Europe – with predictable results.

However, the setting of an Executive target for an increased drawn down of 20% for the 2011-2015 can clearly have been seen to focus minds, and I am glad to see from the mid-term report of the Taskforce's activity released in January 2014, that 64% (£41.3m) of the target figure has been drawn down to date, and that of the 113 targets set for this activity in the 'European Priorities

Implementation Plan 2013/14' that 27% of targets are achieved and 98% are on track to be achieved or achieved with minor delays.

I would also welcome some of the specific initiatives which have contributed to the progress so far. These include the inception of the NI European Regional Forum initiated by Belfast City Council, and now co-chaired by OFMDFM and the launch of the European Centre for Delivering Social change.....

While all of this is encouraging, complacency must not be allowed to set in, and the oversight provided at the BTWG meetings chaired by Ministers McCann and Bell must be maintained.

In terms of the scrutiny of Departments needed, I'm also encouraged by some of the recommendations of the report of the Assembly's European Project manager last year, who called for greater engagement by Assembly committees, with, amongst others, the Barroso officers in Brussels and with the individual departmental representatives on the Barroso Taskforce Working Group, to increase the Committees' awareness of this work.

I believe the role of the officers based in the NI Executive office in Brussels, with whom I have regularly engagements, along with Heidi-Beth, is a key link in the chain. I am aware that there are some changes in personnel in this group ongoing at the moment, and a reduction from four to three thematic objectives coming out of that process. However I believe that the installation of the new team can provide another opportunity for an upwards step change in our engagement. In their first manifestation, these positions were described as 'desk officers' which I always felt was a misnomer as the key to their role in Brussels was being active – being out and about, networking – not being perceived as being tied to their desks. So I welcome the new designation as 'liaison officers' which more accurately reflects what we need –liaising with officials from other similar offices to build networks, and particularly with the relevant commission officials in the relevant DGs. The NI Exec office is potentially a tremendous resource, and awareness of what it can offer to groups who might be thinking of travelling to Brussels is a key ask for them, and us.

As your letter stated, we also have to be conscious of a post-Barroso future. We have been fortunate in the President's original announcement in 2007 and it's continuation to this day, but it will not last forever. So much of what is being done now in the guise of the BTWG in the Assembly and the Brussels officers must be maintained into the future. The structure is there, under the management of the Junior ministers, and the setting of continuing ambitious targets for Executive drawdown must continue, so that stretching ourselves to increase our uptake of EU monies becomes part of the culture of all our Departments.

Best Regards

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Martina Anderson". The ink is dark and the signature is fluid and connected.

Martina Anderson MEP