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Our Ref: COR/127/14

8 April 2014

## INQUIRY INTO THE BARROSO TASKFORCE

Your letter of 20 February invites written evidence to the Committee on its Inquiry into the Barroso Taskforce.

We have enclosed a submission in line with the Terms of Reference of your Inquiry and look forward to seeing your conclusions in due course.

Yours sincerely

**JONATHAN BELL MLA**  
Junior Minister

**JENNIFER McCANN MLA**  
Junior Minister

## **SUBMISSION TO THE OFMDFM COMMITTEE INQUIRY INTO THE BARROSO TASKFORCE**

This paper is in response to the request from the Chairman of the Northern Ireland Assembly Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister of 20 February 2014, seeking views from key stakeholders on the work of the Barroso Taskforce.

The Committee agreed as its Terms of Reference:

- consider the work and structures of the Taskforce including the Barroso Taskforce Working Group since its inception in 2007;
- identify the outcomes from the Taskforce and assess against the objectives;
- identify and consider lessons learned from the functioning of the Taskforce in order to inform recommendations for future engagement in EU affairs post Barroso.

Consequently, this submission is structured in such a way as to address each in turn.

### **Consider the work and structures of the Taskforce including the Barroso Taskforce Working Group since its inception in 2007**

While the Inquiry takes as its starting point the establishment of the **Barroso Taskforce for Northern Ireland** in 2007, it should be recognised that a framework for strategic engagement of the region in Europe had been published previously, outlining priorities for the Administration in its dealings with the European Institutions. A chronology of significant developments since the publication of '**Taking Our Place In Europe**' in 2006 is included as **Annex1**.

Notwithstanding the prior publication of a European strategy, the visit by President Barroso in May of 2007 immediately prior to the restoration of Devolution and his announcement of the establishment of a Commission Taskforce for Northern Ireland, was particularly significant for a number of reasons. In doing so, the President was the first European Leader to affirm Europe's support for the restoration of devolved institutions. The tangible contribution of the Taskforce lies in its original remit and key focus at the time to support the peace process, with a particular emphasis on improving

competitiveness and generating jobs and growth. This was and continues to be a unique initiative, bringing together a group of senior Commission officials with the common objective of providing help and assistance to the NI administration.

It was not time limited, recognising as stated by President Barroso, that the NI journey was *'a marathon and not a sprint'*.

**Response to this initiative:** Firstly, Junior Ministers from OFMDFM led a delegation to Brussels to discuss the work of the Taskforce; secondly, and following the publication of the report of the Commission Taskforce in April of 2008, the Executive published its first Strategic Plan for European Engagement in March 2009, taking account of the Commission's recommendations; thirdly, an interdepartmental group was established initially under the Chair of DFP, but later with OFMDFM Ministers, to provide continuous co-ordination of work prompted by the Barroso Taskforce and its report.

This group, referred to as the **Barroso Taskforce Working Group (BTWG)** is chaired at Ministerial level with senior departmental representatives from all government departments. The objectives for the BTWG as set out in the March 2009 Priorities for European Engagement document and accompanying Action Plan were based on five themes:

- promoting Northern Ireland's interests within the European Union;
- raising Northern Ireland's positive profile throughout Europe;
- raising awareness and encouraging participation in Europe;
- access EU funding; and
- sharing experience of building peace and conflict resolution in a divided society with Europe and beyond.

In parallel with the work of BTWG in NI, a senior official within the European Commission chairs a cross-DG group (The Commission Taskforce for Northern Ireland) which is asked to:

- provide analysis and advice;
- prioritise NI issues;
- participate in NI events;

- increase accessibility to senior officials and commissioners;
- to factor NI interests into key Commission decisions as far as it is possible to do so;
- to provide endorsement of Northern Ireland policy and practice.

Currently there are 13 DGs represented at senior level on the Taskforce (Commission) inter-services group, itself a unique model of co-operation within the European Commission.

Following a further meeting with the First Minister and deputy First Minister in December 2010, President Barroso, in opening the new office of the Executive in Brussels, renewed the Commission's commitment to the Taskforce and reaffirmed its role in assisting the remit to improve the focus of Northern Ireland's engagement with the European Institutions in an effort to maximise EU funding opportunities and seek to influence future EU policy.

This in turn led to the BTWG developing and adopting a thematic approach to encourage greater cross-departmental working in the delivery of the Executive's European Priorities under four thematic groups, aligned to the direction of key EU policy areas under development. The four groups were:

- Competitiveness and Employment (DEL Lead)
- Innovation and Technology (DETI Lead)
- Climate Change and Energy (DOE Lead)
- Social Cohesion (OFMDFM Lead)

Each of these groups was supported by one of the four Brussels based Desk Officers who were recruited as part of this thematic approach.

Following a review of the Desk Officer initiative by OFMDFM economists, and recognising the relevance of Innovation and Technology to all themes, BTWG decided to co-ordinate departmental priorities through three interdepartmental groups covering respectively economic, societal and environmental challenges and supported correspondingly in Brussels by three liaison officers in Brussels.

More recently and in recognition of the wider interest and role of non-departmental stakeholders, including local government, businesses and the third sector, OFMDFM along with Belfast City Council have established and jointly chair a '**Northern Ireland European Regional Forum**' (NIERF).

The membership of the forum has grown consistently since it was officially launched in May 2012 with stakeholder groups now numbering more than 80.

The Commission Taskforce, the BTWG, its three thematic groups and Brussels based Liaison Officers, along with the NIERF form the main 'architecture' of the Taskforce initiative. The Commission inter-services group has been significant in providing advice on the Executive's European Priorities and funding opportunities. The BTWG and its thematic groups have helped to develop the European Priorities and key objectives; have worked with their NICS colleagues, the Brussels based Desk Officers and a wide range of external stakeholders both local, at UK, RoI and EU level to take forward the associated actions and monitor progress against the targets set, including financial targets associated with the drawdown of competitive funding. The NIERF has helped to disseminate information about funding opportunities, promote networking and develop the capacity of members to participate successfully in various EU competitive programmes.

### **Identify the outcomes from the Taskforce and assess against the objectives**

It is difficult to isolate the unique contribution of the Taskforce against the range of other factors affecting the economy including the recession. In its absence however we would not have had a detailed report adopted by and carrying the weight of all EU Commissioners, providing a roadmap for enhanced NI engagement with Europe. We would not have had the benefit of a senior Commission Official seconded to the Northern Ireland Civil Service providing local advice and intelligence on navigating often complex Commission networks and processes.

In general, the emphasis of the Taskforce Report was on helping the region to generate more growth and jobs, and in that way to create more economic opportunities and thereby underpin the peace process. The Report of the Taskforce pointed to the fact that the region bore the imprint of a period of conflict, a high dependence on public sector and an

inclination against risk-taking. The report cited a low level of entrepreneurship with low investment in research and innovation, persistent negative image of the region to international investors and a high proportion of the population seemingly detached from the world of work. The report also drew attention to a long list of 'leads to follow up'. Under, for example, the 7<sup>th</sup> Research Framework Programme (FP7), the education programmes such as Erasmus for student exchanges, enterprise programmes to encourage the growth of the risk capital sector and many transport and energy initiatives as well as the Life+ in the environmental field. The report stressed that in the 'information age' networking with the Irish Republic, with other UK regions and with the rest of Europe, would be an essential ingredient for success.

While this roadmap was not exclusively concerned with funding support for the region, the drawdown from a range of key European Programmes such as FP7 and TENS-T are good markers for a stronger orientation towards European funding programmes in the intervening period. The Committee will be aware from data previously provided how, against a benchmark of 2010 levels of funding, following the Executive's Programme for Government commitment to increase drawdown of funding by 20%, this target has been exceeded in the intervening period. This translates to a financial 'gain' of some 14.5 million pounds at the halfway stage in the budget period. To this we should add 150 million euros which is the value of a fourth Peace Programme which we lobbied for in the context of the Taskforce.

The 'architecture' of European engagement, absent before 2007, undoubtedly contributed to this success. This architecture includes, within the European Commission, an inter-services co-ordination group chaired at a senior level, with a particular focus on NI issues, a NICS cross-departmental co-ordination group chaired by Junior Ministers with its thematic sub-groups, additional resource allocated to the Office of the Northern Ireland Executive in Brussels to help the Office exploit Taskforce benefits and to some extent a forum of stakeholders, jointly chaired by OFMDFM and Belfast City Council.

The thematic groups established in response to the Taskforce cover a very wide spectrum and allow us to take a more holistic and co-ordinated approach. Hopefully the thematic approach, aligned to EU priorities, will help us make the region an exemplar for the rest of Europe.

It is evident that the Taskforce is valued by NI Departments who were consulted in the course of the preparation of this submission. Their comments, a selection of which are quoted below, indicates a recognition that the Taskforce provided a catalyst for enhanced and more holistic European engagement.

### **DSD**

*“ a catalyst for raising the profile of EU engagement in DSD”*

DSD cited also that their work with the Youth Council opened up over 60 organisations to the potential for funding under the Youth in Action (now ERASMUS +) programme

### **OFMDFM**

*“a catalyst for the development of a more holistic approach to European engagement by the Executive. While it can be argued that it is still work in progress and that there are areas of improvement, the level of engagement from NI Departments and indeed NI as a whole is unprecedented”*

### **DETI**

*“the taskforce has given us profile beyond what we might have expected as a small region and above what others get”*

### **DOE**

*“The Taskforce has generated greater awareness and improved engagement and alignment with EU policy. The Barroso Taskforce work is allowing us to communicate better on what Northern Ireland as a Region is doing and the benefits and problems we face in transposing and implementing EU policy”.*

Without the Taskforce we would not have had the increased level of awareness and interest in EU policy and funding opportunities across the NICS and beyond. We would not have had the same level of Ministerial and official engagement with the

EU Commission, nor encouraged and promoted Northern Ireland businesses and research establishments in so many diverse Brussels based events. We would not have developed such an extensive network of contacts. It had provided an agenda for active and constructive engagement by Departmental Committees reflected in the present inquiry by the OFMDFM Committee in particular, which has also established a Cross Committee European Forum.

The Taskforce provided and continues to provide a changed context in which we do business with Europe. It is a context in which: In general advice is more readily sought and given; Senior Officials and Commissioners are more readily accessible; and Commission officials willingly give their time to travel to Northern Ireland to participate in meetings, seminars and conferences. Significantly, Northern Ireland has visibility at the most senior levels in the EU. This is evident in the personal contacts of the First Minister and deputy First Minister with President Barroso, President Van Rompuy, President Schultz and the support and visits to the region by Commissioners Hahn and Geoghegan-Quinn. The region is recognised by the EU's Foreign Policy chief, Baroness Ashton, as a model of success in conflict resolution.

This is not a relationship enjoyed by other regional representations, too numerous (260) for the Commission to support in the same way. Consequently, Northern Ireland as a region, and possibly uniquely, remains on the Commission's 'radar' at the most senior levels allowing access for discussions around the regional economy and high level policy in areas such as State Aid, Transport, Cohesion Policy and Research and Innovation. The facility to put our case to the Commission in the context of the Taskforce continues to ensure therefore that issues which are of importance to the region and its economy are taken into account and given a priority at the most senior levels.

**Identify and consider lessons learned from the functioning of the Taskforce in order to inform recommendations for future engagement in EU affairs post Barroso**

As President Barroso approaches the end of his mandate, it is an appropriate time for the Administration to consider our experience of the Taskforce and how we may wish to shape our relationship with the European Commission in the period 2014-2020. We saw how the reaffirmation of the President's support for the work of the Taskforce, the subsequent Programme for Government target on the increased drawdown of funding and



the revised structures which were put in place, have helped generate fresh momentum which has been maintained ever since. This serves to highlight however the need to affirm high-level political support at critical points in time. We need also to continuously review these structures to ensure that they deliver the desired outcomes from our European engagement.

Secondly, the growth in the numbers of Directorates General as members of the Taskforce, the continued interest in inward secondments to the NICS by Commission staff suggests no reduction in emphasis at the Brussels end. At the same time we have also supported outward secondments of NICS staff to the Commission and Presidency, including the short-term placements as National Experts. It is however important that we signal, at senior level, the importance of the Taskforce work to our region and the hope and expectation that some form of structured relationship will continue.

It would be important to acknowledge the two-way nature of such a relationship with the region offering much to potential partners across Europe (we are for example a Reference Site Region in the area of Connected Health) with other significant regional specialisms in health, justice, employment and equality areas, and a successful peace process which is of significant interest to Europe and the wider international community.

It is important therefore that we continue to use the Taskforce structures currently in place to our advantage, acknowledge their importance and maximise their benefits in the months and years ahead.

**TIMELINE**

**Progress to Date**

16 October 2006 – European Strategy Published

- Northern Ireland's European Strategy, 'Taking Our Place in Europe' launched
- 'Taking Our Place in Europe' maps out a framework for Northern Ireland's engagement with Europe, guiding the work of regional and local government in partnership with civil society

1 May 2007 – Barroso Visits Northern Ireland

- European Commission President Manuel José Barroso visited Northern Ireland and met with First and deputy First Ministers designate, Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness
- President Barroso announced a European Commission Task Force for Northern Ireland

22 November 2007 – Junior Ministers travel to Brussels

- Junior Ministers, Ian Paisley Jnr and Gerry Kelly, led delegation to Brussels to discuss work of Taskforce

11 December 2007 – Taskforce visits Belfast

- European Commission Taskforce visited Northern Ireland on a fact-finding mission and met with government departments, social partners and stakeholders

9 January 2008 – Ministers travel to Brussels

- First and deputy First Ministers (Paisley and McGuinness) travelled to Brussels, met with President Barroso and Commissioner Hubner and secured commitment to extend the life of the Taskforce

6 March 2008 - Barroso Taskforce Working Group Meeting

7 April 2008 – Task Force Report Published

- European Commission publishes Northern Ireland Task Force Report

14 April 2008 - Taskforce Report Launched in Belfast

- Commissioner for Regional Policy, Danuta Huebner, launches Report in Belfast

6 August 2008 – Barroso Taskforce Working Group Meeting

29 August 2008 – draft Action Plan submitted to OFMDFM Ministers

- Copy of draft Action Plan sent to Ronnie Hall

October 2008 – Inter-departmental Consultation

- Consultation to consider Commission comments on sectoral policy areas
- Ministers approve content relating to their Departments

#### November 2008 – Inter-departmental North/South consultation

- Consultation to consider enhancements of North/South references

#### 22 January 2009 – draft Action Plan approved by OFMDFM Ministers

- Ministers released draft Action Plan to Assembly Committee for OFMDFM
- Ministers released draft Action Plan to Oliver Grogan (DFA) and SEUPB
- Draft Action Plan also sent to Ronnie Hall (Taskforce Chairman), UKRep (Kim Darroch and Tim Hemmings).
- Comments invited from copy recipients.

#### February 2009

- draft Action Plan agreed by OFMDFM Assembly Committee
- draft Action Plan released to MEPs and other European representatives

#### March 2009

- draft Action Plan agreed by the Executive Committee
- First and deputy First Ministers travel to Brussels
- Ministers present Executive Action Plan to President Barroso

#### April 2009

- New Annual Action Plan commences
- Monitoring Round (ending 31 March 2009) closes
- 2008-2009 Executive Action Plan is closed off and published
- Barroso Taskforce Working Group meeting

#### Summer 2009

- Officials travel to Brussels to engage with Commission counterparts regarding the 2009-2010 Action Plan
- First and deputy First Ministers travel to Brussels

#### Autumn 2009

- Commission officials to visit Northern Ireland
- Briefed on new College of Commissioners' strategic priorities

#### July, October, January, and April 2009

- Departments provide Quarterly updates against actions and key milestones in Annual Action Plan

#### January 2010

- Departments asked to contribute actions to the 2010-2011 Annual Executive Action Plan

#### April 2010

- Annual Action Plan (2009-2010) closed and subsequently sent to Ministers, OFMDFM Committee, and the Executive Committee

#### 9 December 2010 - Official Opening of ONIEB by President Barroso

- FM and dFM (Robinson & McGuinness) visit to Brussels for Official Opening and renewal of Taskforce work Dec 2010

March 2011 – European Commission Taskforce Visit to Northern Ireland

March 2012 - Reciprocal Visit of NI Barroso Taskforce Working Group to Brussels

June 2012 – Plenary meeting of the European Commission Taskforce in ONIEB

During 2013 - Various bilateral visits by European Commission Taskforce Members to Northern Ireland

February 2014 - Visit by Taskforce Chair to participate in BTWG in Belfast