

EESC Member Jane Morrice response to OFMDFM request on EC 2016 Work Programme

At the start of every year, the European Commission sets out a new work programme to guide the direction of EU legislation for the twelve months ahead. Although the situation in the EU is changing dramatically as a result of the refugee crisis, the terrorist threat, the economic downturn and changing political attitudes, the EC work programme is set in the context of the 10 priorities set by the new Juncker Commission when it first started at the end of 2014. As has been well documented by the Assembly Research and Information Services, these cover **10 headlines**:

- Jobs, growth and investment
- Connected digital single market
- Strong energy Union
- Fairer internal market
- Deeper monetary union
- Balanced trade agreement with the US
- Area of justice and fundamental rights
- New policy on migration
- Stronger global actor
- Democratic change

The action points include **23 key initiatives**. These to be delivered in 2016:

- Better migration and border management
- European Defence Action Plan and Space Strategy
- Legislation to implement Energy Union
- New skills agenda, new start for working parents and Social Rights pillar of EMU
- Corporate tax package and Action Plan on VAT
- European Security Agenda
- Global strategy on foreign and security policy
- Follow up on trade and investment strategy

In addition there will be 40 so-called '**REFIT** Actions' - which is the commitment to better regulation by ensuring EU legislation is fit for purpose and delivers the results intended. The actions include:

- simplifying the rules for EU funding
- Reducing the burdens of public procurement for SMEs
- Ensuring health and safety legislation is workable

A number of other legislative proposals will be withdrawn or modified.

Finally, there are 17 so-called 'Priority pending proposals' which will doubtless be reviewed over the coming year. Some of these date as far back as 2008 and include proposals for action in the form of a Council Recommendation, Regulation or Directive in different legislative areas.

The areas under these proposals which may be of particular interest to Northern Ireland, which fall into my area of expertise and which the OFMDFM Committee is advised to review are the following

Women on Boards - Proposal for a Directive on improving the gender-balance among non-executive Directors of companies

Long-term unemployed - proposal for a Recommendation on integration into the labour market

Port Services - proposal for a regulation on market access to ports and financial transparency

Anti Discrimination - proposal for a Directive on implementing the principle of equal treatment

GMO - proposal for a Regulation amending a previous regulation on restricting the use of GMOs

While every NI Government Department and therefore every Assembly Committee is affected in some way or another by EC legislative proposals and, as outlined by the Research Department, Committee Members should be up to speed on all aspects of this work to allow for consultation and input. However, there are particular areas which the experience and expertise of Northern Ireland would be highly valued in the legislative process. These include the following:

The Review of the Multiannual Financial Framework - simplifying rules and targeting funding

- as one of the original 'Objective One' regions and a special beneficiary of EU PEACE funding, NI is very well placed to give expert advice on this. The Public Accounts Committee could give valuable feed-back on its scrutiny of EU funding - eg Irish Sport Horse

Corporate Tax Package - towards a fair and effective the corporate tax system

- those dealing with the move towards a reduction in Corporate Tax in NI would be well advised to keep a close watch on this

European Banking - steps towards a EU Deposit Insurance Scheme

- interesting in the context of the Internationalisation of the U.K. Banking scene particularly the potential change as a result of a change in the status of the UK in the EU

Trans European Network completion

- to ensure NI is making the best use of potential funding for roads and telecoms in particular

Youth employment initiative

- a possible opportunity to gain increased support for NI work in this area

European Agenda on Security and global strategy on Foreign and Security policy

- the NI experience in peace-building and conflict resolution should be used to help guide this policy at European and global level. The proposal to create a European Centre for peace building in Belfast should be resurrected, following agreement on the location of the site.

Other areas still ripe for greater input from NI include

- the uptake of **ERASMUS** and better public awareness of the ERASMUS PLUS programme - (exchange programmes between students, teachers and young entrepreneurs EU-wide),
- increased use of **secondments** to Brussels Institutions and the trainee programme for graduates in the European Commission. The new direct flight from Belfast to Brussels will make these possibilities much more feasible.

UK REFERENDUM

The above mentioned issues will progress throughout the course of 2016, but there is no doubt whatsoever that everything will hinge on the vital question of the U.K. Referendum on EU membership. This issue will dominate thinking on both sides of English Channel over the months to come and the repercussions of the result will be played out for the remainder of the year and more.

Committee Members would be well advised to have the correct facts and figures available with regard to the cost of withdrawal from the EU and the advantages versus the disadvantages of being an EU member. The implications of a 'no' vote on on the UK in general and on each region, Northern Ireland in particular, would also be worth researching in detail, including the effects on the only part of the U.K. which would continue to have a land border with the EU.

In conclusion, there is very obviously a great deal more to debate on all the issues above and I would be pleased to give an oral presentation alongside my colleague Michael Smyth to the OFMDFM Committee if and when required.

Jane Morrice
EESC Member