



## Research and Information Service Briefing Note

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# Barroso

## Northern Ireland Task Force

### 1 Establishment and Report

The Barroso or Northern Ireland Task Force (the Task Force) was established following the visit of José Manuel Barroso, President of the European Commission, to Belfast in May 2007. The Task Force, which was led by Commissioner Danuta Hübner, represented the first time a specific taskforce had been established for a single region in the EU. The specific remit of the Task Force was to:

Support efforts in Northern Ireland to improve competitiveness and create sustainable employment, mobilising the services of the Commission most concerned with the competitiveness and sustainable employment agenda.<sup>1</sup> Particular importance is attached to reducing dependence on the public sector and to creating a more dynamic private sector.<sup>2</sup>

In operational terms, the Task Force undertook:

...against a background of an analysis of the socio-economic profile of the region, a detailed stocktaking of the achievements of Northern Ireland in different EU policies, especially over the previous planning period, 2000-2006, set where appropriate in a comparative context with other parts of the EU; formulated, on the basis of this stocktaking, suggestions and recommendations on how the administration, the private sector, universities and research institutes and other economic actors can contribute to, and benefit more from, Europe.<sup>3</sup>

In April 2008, the European Commission adopted the report from the Task Force<sup>4</sup> and in a 'Communication' to the Council and the European Parliament stated that:

The Commission proposes to maintain the Task Force in order to accompany the region in this work, and to monitor progress. As part of the effort to ensure its success, the exchange of officials, including for short periods, is envisaged. The Northern Ireland Office in Brussels will also have an important role to play in this regard.

The Task Force will also continue to seek to raise the awareness in Northern Ireland regarding new European programmes, events and fora that could be of interest to the region.

The Task Force will also support the region in its declared objective of becoming more involved in the shaping of the EU policies. This implies a change of perspective and role, from the status of a region receiving EU financial assistance to that of player in the development of the EU policy agenda. Success in this regard will depend on the national context through which consultation on EU policy is organised, although the Task Force can help by ensuring that the authorities and other actors are fully informed, for example, using the Commission's office in Belfast.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, as indicated above, the Northern Ireland authorities have expressed an interest in promoting the development of a facility to provide research and advice on the theme of conflict resolution.

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<sup>1</sup> DGs AGRI, EAC, EMPL, ENTR, ENV, FISH, RTD, TREN, SG together with the European Investment Bank

<sup>2</sup> European Commission COM(2008) 186 final - Communication from the Commission to the Council and to the European Parliament on the Report of the Northern Ireland Task Force (p3)

<http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2008:0186:FIN:EN:PDF>

<sup>3</sup> As above

<sup>4</sup> Northern Ireland Task Force Communication from the Commission Final April 2008

[http://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/activity/ireland/report2008.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/activity/ireland/report2008.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> As above (p7)

In March 2009, the Executive agreed its response to the Task Force Report and presented this to President Barroso in the form of its '*Priorities for European Engagement*' document and accompanying Action Plan.<sup>6</sup> Actions were based around the following five themes:

1. Promoting Northern Ireland's interests within the European Union;
2. Raising Northern Ireland's positive profile throughout Europe;
3. Raising awareness and encouraging participation in European;
4. Access EU funding; and
5. Sharing experience of building peace and conflict resolution in a divided society with Europe and beyond.

On 21 April 2009, the deputy First Minister, making a Ministerial Statement to the Assembly on the Executive's Action Plan response to the Task Force report, stated that:

Initially, the task force assisted with the rapid implementation of the 2007-2013 socio-economic development programmes. However, its underlying objective is to bring the region more firmly into the European networks that make up the knowledge economies, especially Commission networks that can assist the Executive to become more involved in the shaping of EU policies.<sup>7</sup>

In the statement the deputy First Minister also announced that the Executive had mandated Junior Ministers to chair an interdepartmental working group to oversee implementation and provide strategic leadership to the work of the group. An End of Year Report on progress against key targets and activities was released by Ministers on 21st September 2009.<sup>8</sup>

## 2 Further Action

In December 2010, the First Minister and deputy First Minister travelled to Brussels to meet with President Barroso and, during this meeting, President Barroso announced that the Task Force would return to Northern Ireland in early 2011. In line with this announcement, in March 2011, members of the Task Force visited Belfast on a two day mission to discuss priorities for the future with government departments.

Reporting on the activity which had taken place between April 2011 and March 2012, the European Division in OFMDFM, in a written briefing provided to the OFMDFM Committee,<sup>9</sup> stated that:

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<sup>6</sup> Northern Ireland Executive (2008) Priorities for European Engagement: Action Plan 2008/09  
[http://www.ofmdfmni.gov.uk/priorities\\_for\\_european\\_engagement-\\_action\\_plan\\_2008-2009\\_3mb\\_-2.pdf](http://www.ofmdfmni.gov.uk/priorities_for_european_engagement-_action_plan_2008-2009_3mb_-2.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Ministerial Statement - Executive's Action Plan in response to the Barroso Task Force Report.  
<http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/record/reports2008/090421.htm#2>

<sup>8</sup> Northern Ireland Executive (2009) Priorities for European Engagement: End of Year Report 2008/09  
[http://www.ofmdfmni.gov.uk/barroso\\_task\\_force\\_-\\_end\\_of\\_year\\_report\\_2008\\_09\\_-\\_final\\_publication-3.pdf](http://www.ofmdfmni.gov.uk/barroso_task_force_-_end_of_year_report_2008_09_-_final_publication-3.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Included in Committee papers for Meeting held on 4/7/2012

After the Executive took up their new mandate in May 2011, Junior Ministers Bell and Anderson assumed the Chair of the Barroso Task Force Working Group (BTWG), the cross-departmental group, the stated objectives of which are:

- Participation in EU policy development to benefit the region;
- Engagement in European networks, allowing us to benchmark our performance and learn from best practice across Europe in the delivery of services to citizens and businesses; and
- Drawdown of resource from competitive EU funding programmes, strengthening our economy and delivering competitive advantage for our businesses

Regarding structures, the paper went on to explain that the BTWG had:

...firmed up its organisational structures throughout the year, establishing four policy sub groups with a focus respectively on Innovation & Technology; Competitiveness & Employment; Climate & Energy, and Social Cohesion; a Finance Sub-Group, to oversee progress towards the achievement of the Executives target for increased drawdown of elective EU funds; and a Human Resources Sub-Group to oversee and support the various secondments and placements of NICS staff in Brussels institutions, support development of enhanced EU training to NICS staff delivered by the Centre for Applied Learning and to ensure we fully utilise staff with EU experience on their return to NICS'.

Addressing the issue of finance, the briefing further explained that:

Departments contributed to a central budget of around £615K managed by DFP .The BTWG HR Sub Group provides strategic advice to DFP on the allocation of the budget Currently the central budget supports:

- Four Desk Officers reporting respectively to and supporting the work of each of the policy sub-groups of BTWG;
- One Seconded National Expert (SNE) in DG Regional Policy (DG REGIO) Urban Unit;
- One Staff Officer seconded to the UK Permanent Representation to the EU
- One Staff Officer seconded to the Irish Permanent Representation to the EU
- Two 'National Experts in Professional Training' (NEPTs) who were successful in securing five-month placements in the European Commission.

The paper added that '*Separately, this year DARD have added to their Brussels staff by creating and funding a two year staff officer developmental post. The post-holder commenced in February and directly supports DARD Brussels engagement in agri-food, fisheries veterinary and rural development policy*'.

In March 2012, the Task Force met with the BTWG and officials from all 12 departments to discuss priorities for 2012-13 in a series of meetings centred on the Executive's four thematic work streams. These meetings were followed in May 2012 by publication of the Executive's 2012-13 European Priorities document. These priorities were supplemented by a European Priorities 2012–13 Implementation Plan, which contained three overall objectives.

## Overall objectives

### 1 Maximise our engagement in European funding programmes.

1.1 Drawdown £13.2 million of competitive EU funds between 1 April 2012 and 31 March 2013. [OFMDFM; all departments]

### 2 Increase our engagement in European policy.

2.1 Offer assistance to the Irish in the preparation for and work of the Irish Presidency of the European Union (January – June 2013) to enhance the region's positive profile and fully participate in key European policy debates. [OFMDFM; all departments]

2.2 Participate in at least 3 EU themed weeks in Brussels by end of March 2013. [OFMDFM; all departments]

2.3 Encourage inward visits to the region from at least two European Commissioners by December 2012, profiling our regional views regarding key EU policies and programmes. [OFMDFM; all departments]

### 3 Maximise our engagement in key European networks and with the European Institutions to raise our positive profile, promote our interests, raise awareness of and encourage participation in European matters.

3.1 Identify and engage in EU networks and consortia of benefit to the region, in line with our four thematic priorities, hosting at least one event in the region by June 2012. [OFMDFM; all departments]

3.2 Facilitate co-ordination and co-operation between the region's cross-departmental Barroso Task Force Working Group and the European Commission's Task Force for Northern Ireland in line with the Executive's European Priorities, with at least one formal meeting by end March 2013. [OFMDFM; all departments]

The drawdown target of £13.2 million was derived from the Executive's target for a 20% increase in drawdown of competitive EU funds. Setting out the background to this target, information provided from by Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to the Committee outlined that:

A baseline of £11m was established following an interdepartmental consultation exercise. 'Drawdown' was defined as the point in time at which competitive EU monies were received in a project sponsor's bank account. For some programmes, such as Framework Programme 7, it was accepted that it would be more appropriate to report drawdown as 'funds awarded'.

Although this was an Executive target placed on Departments, drawdown by Arms Length Bodies (ALB) and Third Parties could count towards the achievement of the target if departments could:

- a. Demonstrate that measurable and significant departmental effort had been expended to assist in leveraging the drawdown; and
- b. The ALB or Third Party confirmed that they were content for their drawdown to be counted towards the Executive's target.

The baseline comprises the sum of monies drawn down in the financial year 2010/11 from Framework Programme 7 (£6.4m), Trans-European Networks –Transport (£1.8m), the Competitiveness and Innovation Framework Programme (£0.2m) and the Interreg IVB and IVC Programmes (£2.6m).

Answers to recent Assembly Questions (AQs) have provided updates on the work of the BTWG and progress against commitments contained in the Programme for Government and the Executive's 2012-13 European Priorities. On 10 January 2013, in response to an AQ asking the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the Programme for Government commitment to facilitate delivery of the Executive's 20 percent target for increased drawdown of competitive EU funds, it was stated that:

A baseline of £11 million was set against which to measure the Executive's target of a 20% increase in drawdown of competitive EU funds. Meeting our 20% target would result in £53 million of competitive European funding for the Executive. In 2011/12, which was the first year in which we measured progress against the target, almost £16 million was secured to benefit our businesses, groups and citizens.

We continue to drive this work through the Barroso Taskforce Working Group (BTWG). In November, Junior Ministers led a BTWG meeting to consider progress made by Executive departments – not just on funding – but against all of the objectives in our 2012-13 European Priorities. At the halfway point in the year, we can confirm that departments are on track to deliver 95% of targets set.

We will build on this work when we visit Brussels later this month to participate in an EU Peace conference at the invitation of Commissioner Hahn.<sup>10</sup>

On 14 January 2013, in response to an AQ asking the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the work of the Barroso Task Force, junior Minister Bell informed the Assembly that:

The Executive published their 2012-13 European priorities in May, maintaining the thematic approach that was established in previous years. Departments have set themselves 124 targets to drive forward our European

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<sup>10</sup> AQO 2965/11-15 Mr Robin Swann [Ulster Unionist Party, North Antrim] Tabled Date: 15/11/2012 Answered On: 10/01/2013

priorities. I am pleased to say that at the halfway point this year, thematic groups have reported back to us that 95% of our targets are on track to be met and achieved and that 30 targets, almost one quarter of the total, have been fully achieved. We continue to drive that work forward through the Barroso task force working group. We are looking to enhance Northern Ireland's competitiveness and to promote new skills and jobs. We also want to encourage innovation and technological advances to address the climate change issues, reduce harmful emissions and promote energy efficiency.<sup>11</sup> Finally, we want to promote social cohesion, including conflict resolution.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> AQO 3107/11-15 Mr Gerry Kelly (SF - North Belfast) Tabled Date: 15/11/2012 Answered On: 14/01/2013

**Appendix 1****Membership of European Thematic Priority Groups by Department**

<b>Thematic Group</b>	<b>Competitiveness and Employment</b>	<b>Innovation and Technology</b>	<b>Climate Change and Energy</b>	<b>Social Cohesion</b>
<i>Department</i>	DEL lead	DETI lead	DOE lead	OFMDFM lead
DARD		X	X	
DCAL		X		X
DE	X	X		X
DEL	X	X		X
DETI	X	X	X	
DFP				X
DHSSPS		X		X
DOE			X	
DOJ				X
DRD	X		X	
DSD	x		X	X
OFMDFM				X