



Northern Ireland
Assembly

**COMMITTEE
FOR THE OFFICE OF THE
FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY
FIRST MINISTER**

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

European Issues

16 February 2011

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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FOR THE OFFICE OF THE FIRST MINISTER AND
DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER**

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Tom Elliott (Chairperson)
Dr Stephen Farry (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Martina Anderson
Mr William Humphrey
Mrs Dolores Kelly
Mr Barry McElduff
Mr Jimmy Spratt

Witnesses:

Dr Paul Geddis) Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister
Dr Gerry Mulligan)

The Chairperson (Mr Elliott):

I welcome Dr Gerry Mulligan and Dr Paul Geddis from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. Thank you for your attendance. The session will be recorded by Hansard. I ask you to make a presentation of around 10 minutes and leave yourselves available for questions.

Dr Gerry Mulligan (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister):

I am happy to do that, Chairman. Thank you for the opportunity to brief the Committee on

current developments on the European front. Of course, you know Dr Geddis, who heads up the European policy and co-ordination unit in the Department.

A lot has happened since the last time I appeared in front of the Committee. As you will, undoubtedly, be aware, we had a successful inward visit. In December 2010, the First Minister, the deputy First Minister and junior Minister Newton visited Brussels. Along with President Barroso, they officially opened the Office of the Northern Ireland Executive in Brussels. At that time, they were able to meet President Barroso, President Buzek, Commissioner Hahn, Commissioner Máire Geoghegan-Quinn and Commissioner Danuta Hübner, who is the chairperson of the European Parliament Committee on Regional Development. Therefore, it was a very successful programme of meetings and visits.

In the course of those visits, President Barroso committed to renew the work of the task force, which he had established in 2007. I will not go into the detail of that because the deputy First Minister made a statement to the Assembly on 15 December 2010. Obviously, I am happy to take questions on any of the detail if needs be. However, with your permission, Chairman, I would like to update you on work that we have been doing in preparation for the renewal of the task force and, in particular, its planned inward visit to Northern Ireland. I would also like to bring you up to date with the review of European division, which was one of the Committee's recommendations. Finally, in the time remaining, I would like to mention one or two events that are coming up in Brussels, just to keep the Committee informed of what is happening at the Brussels end.

With your agreement, Chairman, I will bring you up to speed on the reactivation and renewal of the work of the task force. When the task force last visited Northern Ireland, it was a very different place as regards the context of the work. At that time, Northern Ireland was a fast-growing regional economy. This time, it is not. Therefore, although the task force's work was critical then in helping to promote growth, it is even more critical now. There are now more member states, which compete for limited available resources.

Importantly, the Commission has made a clear statement of where it wants to be by 2020. It has published its strategy. It might be worthwhile, for the record, for me to remind Committee members of the main elements of that strategy. They are reflected in five key targets. The first is that 75% of the population aged between 20 and 64 should be employed. The second is that 3%

of the European Union's GDP should be invested in research and development. The third relates to climate change: targets for greenhouse gas emissions, use of renewables, and energy efficiency were set. The fourth is that the share of early school leavers should be under 10% and that at least 40% of the younger generation should have a tertiary degree. Finally, an important target was set for poverty: 20 million fewer people across the EU should be at risk of poverty.

To achieve those targets, the European Union is consulting on a seven flagship initiatives. I mention that because, if we are to engage meaningfully with the European Union and to benefit from that engagement, our actions must contribute to those themes and targets. I will mention more on that shortly. The important point is that we have a clear policy framework within which we are working.

I move now to timing. Last week, my colleague Noel Lavery mentioned to you that Ministers have already chaired an interdepartmental working group to prepare for the inward visit of the Commission staff. At that meeting, there was agreement on the overall approach to the inward visit and on what we wanted to get out of it. Ministers stressed the particular need for a step change in our engagement with the Commission. They agreed in principle a draft programme for the visit, and I will outline the elements of that in a second. They also agreed a policy framework which reflects the Commission's 2020 strategy, which I have outlined, and the current work programme. It is important that they have done that. There are four elements to that policy document, and I think that that has been sent to you. The four elements are about competition and employment; technology and information; environment and energy; and social cohesion.

We now have four Departments that will lead on each of those themes. Between now and 15 March, when the group is due to meet again, those lead officials will engage with their counterparts in the European Commission to take their view on the discussion paper, which you have seen, and the programme that is being proposed. That will ensure that the Commission is broadly content with what we are planning to do. Those meetings will occur between now and 15 March.

At the meeting on 15 March, which will be chaired by Ministers, the programme will be finalised and the next draft of the working paper will be agreed. That will lead us to the inward visit of the Commission officials. We anticipate the attendance of around 12 to 15 senior Commission officials from most of, if not all, the directorates general. The elements of the

programme will involve a reception and a getting-to-know-you opportunity. That will provide some familiarisation and give us an opportunity to describe the socio-economic context in which we are working.

On the following day, there will be a series of bilateral meetings and intensive discussions around the themes that I have outlined. There will be an open forum in which discussion will be open to a wider audience of stakeholders. There will also be a plenary session, which will draw together the main conclusions and outline the specific actions that Departments and Ministers need to take forward in the light of the consultation with the Commission. We will establish where we can benefit most from the funding opportunities, in particular, that exist at present.

The plan is that Departments and Ministers will pursue bilaterally the agreed areas of action with the relevant directorates general. We will monitor that. The ministerial working group, to which I referred, will probably meet on a quarterly basis to monitor progress against those actions.

That is the theory of how we will take forward the initiative. I will be keeping in touch with the President's Cabinet in Brussels to advise the President and his staff of progress generally. It is our aim that, at the end of the process, we will see tangible outcomes, such as an increase in the take-up of funding and an increase in Departments availing themselves of the opportunities that this unique resource offers. It is unique. No other region across the European Union has this dedicated resource made available to it.

I will conclude by bringing you up to speed with the review of the European division. As you will recall, the Committee recommended that we have a look at the resources in Brussels. We extended that to look at the resources in the Belfast side of the division to ensure that we are working optimally to support all the European stakeholders, in particular, the Executive and Departments, in what we do and how we do it.

The Committee will have seen the terms of reference, which have been agreed with our trade union colleagues. The review is currently under way. In the past two days, I have had the opportunity to interview senior staff and permanent secretaries in Departments to take their view on how my division can help Departments with their European engagement. I hope to have a report finished before the end of the summer, and the Committee will be consulted fully in the

course of that work.

With regard to forthcoming events, at the Belfast end of the division, the European policy and co-ordination unit will be working predominately on the management of the task force process. That will be the main area of work on Paul's side, and a significant amount of work has to be done. The amount of ministerial involvement in Brussels is likely to decrease in the next few weeks in the run-up to the elections. However, we need to think about preparing to brief new ministers on European issues and, if Ministers want to come to Brussels, we need to think about preparing programmes and visits for them.

We are thinking of areas that we want to concentrate on. Clearly, there is a continued interest in justice. The aerospace industry is another area where we have had specific events, and we may want to repeat those events in the coming months. We have a specific event on 2 March where Louth County Council and Newry and Mourne District Council are coming out to show some of the work that they have been doing co-operatively in implementing INTERREG and Peace programme projects. They will also be talking about some of the work they are doing in sharing services between the two authorities. There is a significant interest in that in Brussels, and that will be a specific event and reception.

Those are some of the key areas of our work, and I am happy to take questions on any of that.

The Chairperson:

Thank you. How did you identify the areas in your discussion paper?

Dr Mulligan:

The areas were chosen because they reflect the themes that are in the Europe 2020 strategy. There are a corresponding set of targets and initiatives in the 2020 strategy. If we are going to align our actions with something the Commission will recognise and want to support, they must reflect the programmes that the Commission is bringing in; for example, research and development cuts across many of the themes. However, the areas seemed to logically align themselves with the emerging priorities in the 2020 strategy and the current European programme.

The Chairperson:

You said that you are planning to work with Departments. Did you say that it would be four Departments?

Dr Mulligan:

All Departments are involved in the task force, and four Departments would lead on each of the themes.

The Chairperson:

Do you mean that one would lead in each?

Dr Mulligan:

One would lead in each, but other Departments would contribute to that theme or to a number of themes. To be specific, we can say that the competitiveness employment theme will be led by a senior official from the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL).

Innovation and technology will be similarly led by a senior official in DETI. Climate change and energy will be led by DOE, and social cohesion will be led by our Department, OFMDFM. Other Departments will be variously distributed across the four themes. For example, most Departments would have officials involved in social cohesion and, therefore, be in relevant discussions with Commission officials. The Departments involved in competitiveness and employment will be the Department for Social Development, the Department for Employment and Learning, the Department of Education and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. Rather than go through the members of each theme, we can provide you with a summary, Chairperson.

The Chairperson:

That may be helpful. Given the significance of the common agricultural policy (CAP) budget and Europe to the local agricultural industry, I am conscious that very little reference is made to that sector. When you read out the section on competitiveness and employment, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) was not even mentioned as being involved.

Dr Mulligan:

DARD is involved in a number of themes, reflecting the fact that agriculture is very much a

cross-cutting area.

Mr Spratt:

DARD comes under climate change and energy.

Dr Mulligan:

Innovation and technology, and climate change and energy are the two main themes that DARD is involved in.

The Chairperson:

I would have thought that competitiveness would be a fairly significant aspect for DARD.

Dr Mulligan:

It was left to Departments to agree which themes that they wanted to be involved in. We are not closing the door. If, when Commission officials come in, a Department feels that they are talking about a topic that it would like to be involved in, we would be open to extending membership to other groups.

The Chairperson:

Has the Northern Ireland office in Brussels had any dealings or operational workings with the European Ombudsman?

Dr Mulligan:

We are aware of the work of the European Ombudsman. However, we have had no direct dealings with the ombudsman in any of our Brussels-based work.

The Chairperson:

Quite recently, I found out that, if there is any aspect of European legislation, regulation or directives about which someone has a complaint or query — I will be careful how I say this, because the meeting is being reported by Hansard — they are entitled to go to the European Ombudsman. I was not fully aware of that. Perhaps that is something about which we, as a Committee, need to find out more, because it is relevant to every member state and regional institution.

Dr Paul Geddis (Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister):

Several years ago, the European Ombudsman gave a seminar that was hosted by Queen's University's institute of politics and governance. To my knowledge, the European Ombudsman at that time visited the region and gave a presentation to various stakeholders. However, since then, there has been no other contact, as far as I am aware.

Mr Humphrey:

Thank you very much for your presentation. I am encouraged and pleased to hear about the work that is ongoing to raise our profile in Europe. That is very important. The Committee has had discussions about that over the past number of weeks; it is a common thread. The Committee feels, across the parties, that there needs to be greater cohesion and joined-up thinking when it comes to European affairs between your office, our offices, the Assembly, councils and elected Members. That was very much something that came out of a recent presentation to the Committee by Mr Bell and Mr Molloy. That has to be something that is departmentally cross-cutting to maximise the impact that we have as a region.

Given the economic circumstances that prevail here, there is a huge need for moneys to be drawn down outwith government. I am concerned that we are not securing enough or as much as other regions.

I went to an event in Belfast City Hall recently — I declare an interest as a member of Belfast City Council — organised by the council's European unit. Colette Fitzgerald spoke about the Republic being able to draw down some €600 million, compared with our €25 million. I appreciate that the Republic is a sovereign nation and has much more of a history of, and influence in, drawing down money. Nevertheless, there is clearly a huge amount of work for us to do in that area.

Equally, I appreciate that there is greater demand for resources from European accession countries. In our recent discussions, the forming of a subcommittee in the Assembly to scrutinise European issues was suggested. I do not mean European issues that pertain just to OFMDFM but right across Departments because greater co-ordination and cohesion are required. What do you think of that concept?

Dr Mulligan:

I will ask Paul to come in on this, because it relates to work that he was involved in through the response to your Committee's report, which touched on that issue. As I understand it, the suggestion that there should be a dedicated scrutiny committee on European affairs was not accepted by the Assembly Commission as the best way to scrutinise Departments, and that it would be left to individual Departments to ensure that their European work was taken forward. This Committee would have the role of dealing with cross-cutting European issues. That, I understand, was the outcome of that process.

Mr Humphrey:

Do you believe that that is the best system?

Dr Mulligan:

As a Department, we have not taken a view on that. We would leave it to the Committee's report.

Mr Humphrey:

That means, essentially, that Departments self-regulate.

Dr Mulligan:

Committees regulate their European business. Perhaps Paul would like to expand.

Dr Geddis:

My understanding, based on the Committee's report on its inquiry into consideration of European matters, was that the Committee decided not to implement a stand-alone specialised European scrutiny committee at this time. However, it did not exclude that possibility at some point. It is for the Committee and the Assembly to determine how they wish to scrutinise European business.

The European arena is extremely complex, given the scale at which it operates and the variety of subject matters that it encompasses, including policies, programmes and networks. The Executive and its Departments operate a decentralised system of European engagement. The Committee recognised that in its inquiry report.

I do not believe that Departments self-regulate, because decisions on any European matter taken by a Department need to be approved by the Department's advisers and Minister, and they

are accountable to the scrutiny Committees. I do not think that there is self-regulation of European matters by individual Departments.

The Chairperson:

Actions 1 and 2 of the Committee report's recommendations highlight how we thought it should be structured at this stage. Obviously, that is open to review, which is why we are continuing ongoing discussions with European and OFMDFM officials, MEPs, and Committee of the Regions representatives. However, we need to look at that on an ongoing basis.

We attended a meeting at Westminster last week with representatives of European scrutiny Committees from the Commons, the Lords, Welsh Assembly and Scottish Parliament. The Scottish Parliament is using a similar mechanism to ours by asking its Statutory Committees to look at the European issues that affect their Departments and Committees. We are trying to do that. I do not know how much success there has been on it, William, but that is how we decided to take it forward.

Mr Humphrey:

I made the comment on the back of the evidence given by Jonathan Bell and Francie Molloy. I and other Committee members clearly had concerns about how things are co-ordinated and how they are briefed, for example.

Dr Mulligan:

The arguments for either model are not clear, because there are advantages to each. If you are looking to decouple European policy from the policy for which a Department is responsible — transport or the environment, for example — there could be an advantage in a scrutiny Committee with familiarity in a particular policy area extending its scrutiny to the European element of the policy. It is a breadth/depth issue.

Ms M Anderson:

Gerry and Paul, thank you for the presentation. I would like to tease out those points further. I appreciate what William is saying. Any review must factor in when we will give consideration to the issues. The Committee is in receipt of this information today, and will send it to the Department for Employment and Learning and the other Committees that have been mentioned. However, I am concerned that, unless it is red-flagged to be scrutinised by the other Committees,

it could just become one of the many papers that those Committees receive and merely take note of.

We have carried out an inquiry with the aim of trying to improve interaction with Europe. Gerry, the presentation that you gave today at least demonstrates that there is movement in respect of profiling and trying to improve connectivity and interaction. I am keen to get a sense of whether the information will be sent directly to the four Departments that the Chairperson spoke about, and the respective Ministers, rather than to the relevant Committees.

I mention DEL because it is the first one there. OFMDFM is the same. However, in respect of DEL, you talked about Youth on the Move and lifelong learning. In the context of the discussions that we are having about student fees, the education maintenance allowance (EMA), and all of that, I am sure that that Committee for Employment and Learning would be keen to see whether there are opportunities in that regard.

As for OFMDFM, I went through the list that was presented in respect of addressing inequality and disadvantage. We got information about the social investment fund and the social protection fund, and whether there are opportunities in Europe to match-fund and increase those funds. We should probably take a closer look at the social cohesion element of the policy framework that you spoke about. I am also keen to get a sense of whether the other Committees receive the same kind of presentations or information from either their relevant Departments or OFMDFM.

One of the recommendations that you looked at concerned the EU division. You have extended that to look at your own office here in Belfast. She does not need my praise, but I must say that the assistance on regeneration that Colette Fitzgerald from OFMDFM has given in Derry has been absolutely priceless for us in the city. Other cities could benefit from a similar approach. You mentioned recommendations that relate directly to OFMDFM. Would it be possible for us to track those recommendations to get a sense of where they stand at any particular stage? That would enable us to see how effectively those recommendations have been implemented.

The Chairperson:

Just because OFMDFM is the lead Department on social cohesion does not mean that it is not

involved in some of the other areas.

Ms M Anderson:

Of course, and as a Committee we have a responsibility to look at the —

The Chairperson:

Before Gerry and Paul come in on that, Martina, perhaps it would be useful if we sent that information to the other Statutory Committees. That may be a good starting point.

The Committee Clerk:

We have not got a quorum, and we cannot make that decision.

Ms M Anderson:

We will wait until William comes back.

Dr Mulligan:

The paper is important, because it is the basis of our engagement with the Commission. I hate to use the cliché, but it is a living document, and it will be modified in light of advice and consultation from the Commission. It may identify other programmes or gaps that we were not aware of.

The Chairperson:

If it is a living document, now is the time for us to get in on it. The problem that we have with European issues is that, once they go too far, we do not get a say.

Dr Mulligan:

As it is a living document, we are obviously open to suggestions from the Committee. However, if you intend to communicate the information in the document, I must stress that it can and will be changed as the process develops. We intend that it will eventually evolve into a document with a series of specific actions that we will pursue.

The Chairperson:

And outcomes.

Dr Mulligan:

Yes, and outcomes.

Ms M Anderson:

Can we get notification of the changes that are made to the document, so that we are involved as it evolves and get a sense of where it is at? Sometimes, different versions of documents are received and we lose track of where we were, where we are at and where we are going.

Dr Geddis:

I am conscious that the document has come to the Committee as a stand-alone document, but that is not its status. It is a common reference source — a point of reference between all the stakeholders that are interested in European engagement, including Departments, Ministers, the Commission, other key stakeholders in local government and civil society, and this and other Committees in the Assembly.

The document is very much the first cut and it is marked “draft”. It is concerned with how we should develop our European engagement using the external systems of reference, which are the Commission’s 2011 legislative and work programme and the Europe 2020 strategy. That strategy is Europe’s response to the current global economic and financial crisis. European actions at a macro level are predicated on it until 2020, and, most importantly, it includes the orientation of the European Budget for the next multi-annual financial framework. All the 27 member states and the regions in Europe contribute to and are encompassed in the Europe 2020 strategy. If we do not benchmark ourselves against that external referencing, our ability to draw down additional financial resources to influence the key policies that are relevant to this region will be substantially taken away from us.

Gerry was correct at the outset when he positioned our European engagement. A great deal has changed since 2007 and 2008, and our engagement has become a great deal more difficult and meaningful, because we are in a very competitive process with other European regions. This document is about trying to position this region to meet those types of challenges.

The document does not just sit in the macro-European framework. It is for the financial year ahead, and, on a regional level, we intend that it should be mainstreamed into departmental business and financial planning processes. If it is incorporated into that planning, or elements of

it, it will attract resource and will be subject to the normal monitoring processes in-Department and the normal scrutiny processes.

Although the document appears to be a standalone document, it is not. It is very much part of a much larger engagement infrastructure, which the Executive, this Committee and the Assembly have created over the past three or four years.

Ms M Anderson:

But we as a Committee would like to be informed about a number of matters: for example, securing Peace IV programmes. We would like to know where we are at, where we are going, how that is being secured and what conversations are taking place. I understand that it is a draft, so I am not being precious about it, but we would still like to be in receipt of that type of information.

The Chairperson:

To be fair to the officials, they are implementing recommendation 10 of our report, but it is about the ongoing process as well. At least you have made a start. What we want is to follow up with the engagement.

Mr Spratt:

Thanks, Gerry and Paul, for the presentation. Gerry, I welcome the fact that there is good news coming from the new office that was opened. I think engagement in those terms is improving every day, and that is to be welcomed. I also welcome the fact that you have issued terms of reference. However, I think that there is a bit of a deficit. We are now four years into devolution. I am going to ask you to step outside the box, Gerry, and I am not sure you will be all that comfortable, but I will try anyway and see where I get with it.

Dr Mulligan:

You are making me nervous.

Mr Spratt:

To be quite frank, I do not think that the Assembly has done a lot on the Commission and trying to do something about engagement. They have been looking at costs and all the rest of it, which is all very well, and we are pushing them on some of those things, but I think that there is a big

deficit in engagement between your office and the Assembly.

My view at the moment is that, while we make up our minds about exactly what is going to happen here — I do not know how long into the next mandate that is going to take — would it not be helpful if there was even one person who was a roving go-between and could go out to Brussels on a regular basis from the Assembly and pick up on stuff? I do not whether it would need to be on a monthly basis or whatever to get some sort of briefing and bring matters back to the relevant Committee, given the cross-cutting nature of many issues. It might be useful to have a person dedicated within the Assembly to do some of that work.

I realise that we are going to get a presentation from the Commission, because I understand it has been sitting on a report now for two or three months, and we have not heard about it. I think that briefing is coming up. Would it be helpful if there were a dedicated person to liaise with you and with others on things that are happening out there?

I know that you are planning ahead for the new mandate. You mentioned ministerial briefings and visits of Ministers, etc. You used a couple of particular words; I think that you said there was a “justice interest”. Can we tease out a bit more what the issue is around justice? Wearing another hat as a member of the Policing Board, we know the issues that there have been in relation to the sex industry, for instance, and people being brought across international borders and European borders to Belfast as part of the sex trade, which is really a slave trade, at the end of the day. Is there co-operation along those lines, or are the new Justice Department and our own Justice Minister now engaged in European issues related to some of those matters? Can you give us any insight into that?

Dr Mulligan:

I will take the last point first, if I may. There is a general interest from the Justice Minister in engaging with Europe. He has indicated that he would like to have a programme put together that would bring him into touch with the relevant people in Brussels on the sorts of issues that are important to our Department of Justice.

I could not point to one issue that he is specifically particularly interested in. His interest is across the board. Justice Ministers have a programme of policy areas that they work around, namely the Stockholm programme. It covers areas such as human trafficking. Clearly, that is an

area in which we are interested. When we come to put together a programme, it will include as many of those issues as we think will be of interest. I think that it is because we now have our own Department of Justice that there is now that interest. It has not been sparked by any one particular development or problem. That interest is across the board.

Mr Spratt:

Would that have happened under direct rule?

Dr Mulligan:

Prior to devolution, there would have been senior officials who would have attended Council and kept an eye on development of policy in certain areas, such as human trafficking, and would have kept an eye on policy and legislation in the justice area. Now we have a Minister who is particularly interested in personally getting involved in Council. Therefore, there are certain protocol issues that we have to deal with, particularly if other devolved Ministers also want to come out to Council. We are simply conscious of the fact that the Minister of Justice is interested in strengthening his knowledge and awareness, and meeting other justice Ministers in Brussels. Again, there is no single particular problem area that is prompting the Minister to come out and get involved.

Mr Spratt:

What about stepping outside the box on the other issue?

Dr Mulligan:

I have been working with the Commission official who has been looking at the issue. As I said, I am a little conscious that recommendations have not as yet been made to the Committee, nor have I seen recommendations. Therefore, I am a wee bit —

Mr Spratt:

That is not what I asked you, Gerry. We are four years down the line with devolution. I reckon that we are losing out on some of the things that the Chairman, William and, certainly, Jonathan Bell and Francie Molloy spoke to us about at our previous meeting. That theme comes round continually when European issues are discussed, no matter who is here. How can we plug the gap? Will you not take that step and say that it would be helpful? Would it be helpful? Would it be unhelpful? I do not want to tramp on your toes or your office's toes. However, somebody

needs to come back here and deal with that stuff.

The Chairperson:

In fairness, Jimmy, I will not ask Gerry to duck out of answering that question if he wishes to answer it. However, it is somewhat unfair. I understand that a draft engagement strategy is going to the Commission. We are getting a presentation on it. That is an issue for the Commission and the Assembly. OFMDFM does its own work out there.

Dr Mulligan:

I am happy to give views because I have given views to the Commission official about the benefits of having somebody located there.

Mr Spratt:

I am not being mischievous.

Dr Mulligan:

There will always be benefit in having somebody located in Brussels. However, we do need to think of where they add value. It is not always in the area of accessing information. To be honest, IT systems are so good that you can get the information that this or any Committee needs through various websites. Where you add value is in being able to talk to officials in situ and being able to lobby, present and get privileged briefings that you cannot get through a website. That would always be the area where I would say that value is added. We are always willing to provide factual information and support to the Assembly Commission and its staff. There is absolutely no difficulty. Researchers are only too happy to do that.

Equally, I am conscious that the researchers here are very good. I will not mention anyone by name, but they are extremely well clued into European policy and developments. There is no shortage of expertise locally, so the question is: would there be any advantage in having that work done in Brussels, perhaps for a short time, if those researchers wanted to locate to Brussels and some intensive work needed to be done? There might be value in that.

I am putting the question back to you. Where would be the added value be of having a person located in Brussels over and above gathering information? To be honest, you can gather that information just as easily and effectively while working here. I think that there would be added

value, because you would have access to a community of interest of other parliamentary officials who work for the House of Lords, House of Commons and the Oireachtas. Clearly, working in that community of interest, there would be great advantages to anyone from the Commission who was located there.

Mr Spratt:

I want to tease that out a bit further. I am not necessarily suggesting that someone should be based in Brussels. From what you are saying, I take it that it would be helpful to have a dedicated person to look after the Assembly in Europe — perhaps that person would be based here — even in the interim until the other structures that are going to be put in place are sorted out.

Dr Mulligan:

In my experience, it is always advantageous to have a person with a central responsibility for co-ordinating European affairs and European issues. We do that in our Department, and Paul does it at the Belfast end. We see the benefits of that in the expressions of appreciation of Paul and his colleagues. Martina mentioned Colette Fitzgerald. There are always benefits in having that centralised responsibility, but the downside of that is that there is sometimes a tendency for others who are involved in policy work to see that European affairs and European legislation is someone else's responsibility and to not recognise that it is relevant to every area of policy.

The Chairperson:

It is always difficult to argue against it being of added value or of value provided you can get your money's worth out of it.

Ms M Anderson:

Recommendation 11 of the Committee's report talks about the fact that there are secondments from the Civil Service to the European Commission. In the absence of a dedicated person, do we maximise opportunities that emanate from those secondments to the European Commission, and do we have any? Is that simply a facility or an opportunity to be taken up?

Dr Mulligan:

There are a number of Northern Ireland Civil Service secondees at present, and there are a number of offers of secondments. Commissioner Hahn made a specific offer of secondments when the First Minister and deputy First Minister visited Brussels. I think that we have four

seconded, and, at one stage, we had six or seven. Without pre-empting the recommendations of our own review, I think that we could do more to take advantage of those secondments.

Ms M Anderson:

That is what I am saying.

Dr Mulligan:

We could do more when those people come back to their host organisations to ensure that they exploit the skills and expertise that they develop when they are out in Brussels.

The Chairperson:

Yes, and utilise them. Stephen Farry, you have been patient.

Dr Farry:

I hope to be brief. I have two broad questions. I am conscious that we are deciding to focus on four European policy priorities. Can you give us an idea of the other options that did quite not make the priorities for engagement? Is there anything that we are potentially missing?

Dr Mulligan:

Are you asking about the gaps?

Dr Farry:

Yes. We are focusing on four main areas of our engagement with Europe. Beyond those, are there other choices that we could have prioritised?

Dr Mulligan:

The four broad themes are reasonably inclusive. If you look at the key initiatives that the Commission is going to take forward to deliver on its targets, they cover the areas that are in our framework. There are seven flagship initiatives, the detail of which I will not go into, but they cover areas such as innovation; youth on the move, which is about improving educational performance; the digital agenda; and resource efficiency, which is relevant to the environment and energy. The initiatives also cover the areas of industrial policy, the agenda for skills and jobs and the European platform against poverty. Those are the flagship initiatives that the Commission is going to resource, and “resource” is the key word. So, as long as we can reflect in

what we do the initiatives that the Commission is developing programmes and resources around, we will have covered all the bases.

Dr Farry:

Do we have our own internal process for benchmarking and monitoring? I am trying to get an assessment of how well we are engaging and what results we are achieving from engagement on those policies.

Dr Mulligan:

That is a very good question. We obviously want to do better than other regions. At a quantitative level, we will be able to look at the amount of draw-down, the number of programmes that we are in and — depending what metric we are interested in, whether it is financial or not — the number of people whom we have brought in through secondment. So, we will use a number of metrics. As I said, it is our intention to not only benchmark what we do against others but monitor agreed targets as the Barroso taskforce work rolls out. Paul can add to that.

Dr Geddis:

In the selection of thematic priorities, when we are using external reference sources, such as Europe 2020 and the legislative import programme, our room for manoeuvre is somewhat restricted. That is the direction that Europe, as a whole, is moving in. That does not mean to say that other items of interest to this region should not be included.

One of the things that we wanted to do this time round was focus on outcomes rather than on the process. We also wanted to secure an approach that would — and I hesitate to use the word “guarantee” — almost guarantee additionality so that there would be tangible benefits for citizens and businesses in the region that would accrue through this strategic approach to Europe and that would be above and beyond what would flow naturally to the region. That is a bit of a distinction, because some of the criticisms that were made the last time round were in that area.

The benchmarking question is very pertinent. I said earlier that the process in Europe between regions is a competitive one. Therefore, there has been some thinking — although it is developing and has not been finalised with Ministers — around how we can benchmark ourselves with the best in Europe. That was one of the original components of the 2008 stocktake analysis

of the Commission's services. There was an illustrative diagram in that, which suggested benchmarking against a variety of other regions, such as regions that have a competitive edge on innovation and technology.

That idea on benchmarking outside the region is alive and well and will be developed downstream. However, before we can get to that stage, we need to know what the definitive set of priorities on which we wish to engage as a region is. That is the very difficult thing that confronts not only the Executive but also the Assembly, because Europe is so vast that your list of priorities could run into several hundred.

A largely tabular-based and monolithic approach to European engagement is not really viable in the current highly competitive and highly charged environment. Those are things that we need to address, but we need a few other steps in place first.

Dr Farry:

To follow through on that, I know that we are talking primarily about the policy angle and the effectiveness of our engagement around policy. I appreciate that this might be slightly outwith this presentation, but one of the things that has struck me about our comparisons is that the Executive have tended to benchmark our productivity on gross value added (GVA) across the UK. The argument is about whether we should benchmark ourselves with the UK as a whole or the UK without the south east of England.

I am not aware of any reason why we could not do that. However, there is logic in the Executive on benchmarking our GVA with the other European Union regions using the nomenclature of territorial units for statistics (NUTS) criteria. Is that data collection technically possible for us to do? We would, therefore, not be judging how Northern Ireland is doing against what happens only in the UK context but in the wider European context.

Dr Geddis:

I would not want to comment on whether that is technically feasible. It should be feasible, pending an analysis of whether we would be comparing like with like. The sort of benchmarking that we envisage would include not only GB regions but regions in the South and other European regions that are exemplars in specific areas.

We spoke about innovation, but we may want to benchmark ourselves against a region that specialises in recycling and is a clear leader in that arena or one with expertise in transport infrastructure or a form of renewable energy. However, the decisions on what to benchmark against rest not with OFMDFM but with the Department that has the sectoral policy competence. It is for them to justify the system of measurement, the baselines that they establish and how they measure themselves against that.

Dr Farry:

Some policies tend to cut across the devolved and non-devolved interface. For example, some aspects of the economy are devolved, but fiscal powers still operate through the UK. With regard to competitiveness and employment, we are talking about the Single Market Act and state aid. There is a clear Northern Ireland focus in some of those issues but also a UK focus. To what extent are we required to go through the national Government as opposed to operating independently? The Single Market Act refers to a consolidated corporate tax base. Given the current political debate, is there a danger that we may wish to go in one direction when Europe wishes to take us in a different direction?

Dr Mulligan:

Our interests as a region may not align with the UK position in a number of areas. Agriculture is one where, quite evidently, the UK position on the common agricultural policy may not, on the face of it, be to our advantage. However, in those areas where we do not as an Administration have the devolved competence we would work through relevant Whitehall Departments.

On state aid issues, for example, we would always initially go through the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS). It, in turn, would take up the issue with the UK representation in Brussels. However, we form a quadrilateral because, in talking to the relevant Department, we would then work with our colleagues in Brussels. Between those four organisations we would try to get an outcome desirable for us.

Dr Farry:

How frustrating is that? If you end up at the end of a very long reporting chain, is there a danger that the coherence of the message becomes more diluted at every stage that it passes along?

Dr Mulligan:

We have always found that our communication with DETI here, BIS and the UK representation on issues such as state aid has been very good. The end product of that process is to get a Commissioner to agree a favourable position on state aid for us. That requires slightly more communication, but the UK representation is at our disposal. However, where there are issues on which the UK position does not align with ours, we find that they may not be just as amenable.

Dr Geddis:

It is worth recalling that the Department's junior Ministers participated in the Joint Ministerial Committee (Europe) so there is very much an opportunity for the Executive to make their views known in front of the Foreign Secretary via the junior Ministers. After the bilateral contacts have run their course, and as the UK's negotiating position as the member state for the region develops, we have that high-level ministerial input to influence how that negotiating line is shaped, formulated and taken forward.

Mr McElduff:

I want to focus briefly on recommendations 12 and 15 of this Committee's inquiry. On recommendation 12, how is OFMDFM getting on in making sure that training is fully developed for civil servants? If that is the remit of OFMDFM — I think it is. Finally, has there been any progress towards the establishment of a formal arrangement for MEPs to feed in to the whole approach.

Dr Mulligan:

I will pick up on the point about MEPs first of all. The office will work very closely with the MEPs, and we aim to touch base informally with the three MEPs. We always, as a matter of course, invite the MEPs to our events in the office. That gives us an opportunity to talk with them and advise them on developing issues. Clearly, the Barroso task force is an example of that. We also, as a matter of course, invite MEPs to meet visiting Ministers, and that gives Ministers an opportunity to bring them up to speed.

I want to do more with MEPs, and I want to talk to them in the coming weeks in the context of the review of the office. MEPs are extremely important to us because of their influence within the European Parliament, which has increasing influence as a result of the Lisbon Treaty. Our three MEPs are extremely important to us as a way of influencing policy in the European

Parliament.

Dr Geddis:

In relation to recommendation 12, which was a reference to the European training programmes, the Centre for Applied Learning, which is responsible for delivering train across the NICS, is positioned within DFP on that. The European policy and co-ordination unit (EPCU) wrote to the Centre for Applied Learning in October to ask it to consider that recommendation. Its response was that it already has two main training courses. One is the Introduction to Europe training course, which precedes a study visit to Brussels, and, coupled with that, is an Implementing Directives training course. Those are the two main training vehicles for the NICS.

The Centre for Applied Learning was in the process of redesigning and restructuring both of those courses into a single course, but it noted to us that, to date, it had not received requests from any Departments for additions to that training programme. As it is a demand-led service, it was not proposing to introduce any further changes unless a clear demand was established. My analysis of that is that the current level of training demand within the Civil Service appears to be meeting the needs that are out there, but the door is open to adjust that, as and when appropriate.

Ms M Anderson:

On one hand we are talking about raising the profile, and you can see the amount of interaction that is going on both at ministerial level and particularly within the EU unit, but, on the other hand, we need that to be cascaded across the Civil Service so that other Departments see it as an opportunity. I am just concerned that, if training is demand-led and there has not been any uptake as a result of either this inquiry or the work being done, we might need to identify that as an issue that we have to pursue.

The Chairperson:

What I was saying earlier was that, as a starting point, we should give this document to all Statutory Committees. That is probably as far as we can go. I know you were making your point to the officials, but this Committee should circulate the document to Statutory Committees and make them aware of it. I do not know whether we can go so far as to suggest that they ask their Departments what they are doing.

Mr Spratt:

I got the impression that it this was a living document and that Gerry and Paul would be a bit unhappy about it being further circulated at the minute.

Dr Mulligan:

No; we are more than happy for it to be more widely released.

Mr Spratt:

I got that impression from earlier comments.

Dr Mulligan:

I just wanted to make clear to the Committee that the document will change.

The Chairperson:

Fine, we appreciate that.

Dr Geddis:

I will pick up briefly on co-ordination, because that is part of EPCU's remit. Huge volumes of information issue from EPCU to NICS Departments. In effect, we have two levels of input. The push-out mechanism sends routine information — huge volumes of material — to junior and middle management every day. At the higher, Senior Civil Service level, the end mechanism for strategic policy programme and networking issues that need to be developed across Departments is the Barroso task force working group, which is chaired by junior Ministers. So, yes, huge volumes of information are pushed out.

The Chairperson:

OK. That is about as far as we can pursue the matter for now. It is fine to have a living document and to try to make it more strategic, but I am always more focused on what the outcomes are expected to be and what they actually are. We can produce all the documents we want, but that is not of much use if nothing practical comes from it. Therefore, my focus is on the outcomes.

Dr Mulligan:

We value the Committee's comments, and they will help to shape that document as it evolves. Of

course, at the end of this iterative process, we will see what strategic document emerges in light of our engagement with the Commission officials.

The Chairperson:

Will you keep us up to date with progress?

Dr Mulligan:

Absolutely, I am happy to come back to the Committee periodically to bring it up to speed on European matters in general.

The Chairperson:

Thank you very much for your attendance.

Dr Mulligan:

Thank you, Chairperson.