

Junior Ministers

Mr K Robinson asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to make a statement on the recent visit of the junior Ministers to Brussels.

(AQO 1156/08)

Rt Hon I Paisley and Mr M McGuinness: Junior Ministers Gerry Kelly and Ian Paisley Junior led a delegation to Brussels on 22 November to strengthen Northern Ireland's links with Europe.

The delegation consisted of officials from a number of Departments who held meetings with their Commission counterparts to discuss priorities and develop ideas for increased participation in European opportunities. These meetings prepared the ground for the forthcoming inward visit by the European Commission Taskforce for Northern Ireland planned for early December and also for the planned visit to Brussels by us in January. Officials also held meetings with Northern Ireland's MEPs and with the UK and Irish Permanent Representatives. A total of 31 meetings took place, including the Ministerial engagements. Gerry Kelly also hosted an evening reception in the Executive's Brussels Office for Commission Taskforce members and other influential figures in Brussels based institutions.

The Junior Ministers also met with Catherine Day, Secretary-General of the Commission, and Dirk Ahner, Director-General of DG Regional Policy. Both gave assurance of the continuing high level support in the Commission for a successful outcome to the work of Commission President Barroso's Northern Ireland Taskforce. A Taskforce report is expected by the end of January.