

European Union Agenda

Mr Alastair Ross asked the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to detail what action is being undertaken in Brussels, to ensure that Northern Ireland remains high on the European Union agenda.

(AQO 336/08)

Rt Hon Dr Paisley and Mr McGuinness: The visit of the European Commission's President Barroso on 1 May 2007, demonstrated that there is a reservoir of interest and goodwill in Europe towards Northern Ireland and one of the main challenges facing us is how we can best make use of that goodwill to make Northern Ireland a better place to live, work, study and invest.

Since President Barroso's visit, the deputy First Minister and both Junior Ministers have visited Brussels and met with senior European Commission officials and the UK and Irish Permanent Representatives. We plan to visit Brussels together later this year to hear at first hand of the progress being made by the European Commission Task Force that was established following President Barroso's visit.

The Task Force provides a unique opportunity for Northern Ireland to engage with Europe, both in formulation of policy and in accessing the financial assistance that is available to regions with our needs. The European Commission is committed at the highest level to making the work of the Task Force a success and we are committed to ensuring that the Executive responds with equal vigour. Senior officials from each Department have now been asked to work with the Task Force to ensure we maximise the opportunity that has been offered.

In addition to the Task Force work, we are aware that a number of Ministerial colleagues have visited Brussels and met with senior political and official figures on Departmental business. This level of engagement is important in keeping Northern Ireland in the minds of our European colleagues and we cannot emphasise enough the value of personal contact with those people in the European Commission and other bodies who are leading on the matters that are important to us.

We must also mention the work being carried out by the Office of the Northern Ireland Executive in Brussels, which is an integral part of the OFMDFM. The Office supports visiting Ministers and officials and promotes Northern Ireland's interests in the EU. As well as working to keep Departments and Ministers advised on European policy matters, the Office takes an active role in engaging with contacts within the European Institutions, other National and regional offices and civic bodies based in Brussels.

As part of this active engagement the Brussels office has managed Northern Ireland's participation in the Committee of the Regions and European Commission 'Open Days' events. Along with partners from Spain, Portugal, France, Ireland and other UK regions, Northern Ireland, through the

Department of Social Development and Belfast City Council, is participating in a seminar showcasing the regeneration of Belfast's former shipbuilding areas. In a separate event, the Department of Finance and Personnel and the Special EU Programmes Body are hosting a seminar on the lessons learned from the EU Peace Programmes.

We have also engaged with Members of the European Parliament's Regional Development Committee in their recent visit to Northern Ireland and Ireland and we would pass our thanks to our colleagues in that House for their work in promoting the visit and ensuring that Northern Ireland remains high on the agenda in that important Institution.