

European Union Economic Taskforce

Mr M McLaughlin asked the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide an update on the progress of the European Union Economic Taskforce.

(AQO 966/08)

Rt Hon I Paisley and Mr M McGuinness: President Barroso has presented us with a unique opportunity as this is the first time there has been a specific taskforce for a single region in the EU. We want to make the most of the European Union and facilitate the development of a sustainable and mutually productive long-term relationship. In particular, it helps us achieve the Executive's aim of a vibrant, competitive economy for the good of all our people.

We have made good progress to date. Our 2007-13 Rural Development, Fisheries and Competitiveness and Employment Programmes are all now agreed with the Commission. Several Ministers have visited Brussels to continue the process of building relationships. We organised a successful EU 'Open Days' event in Brussels on PEACE funding with over 140 participants from different regions.

We will be stepping up our engagement with the Barroso Taskforce over the coming weeks and months. Our objective is to optimise the opportunities and support being offered to us. The Commission is preparing a report on our participation in the available EU initiatives most relevant to our needs and we expect it to be ready by the end of January. The Commission are keen to hear our ideas to help develop their thinking. The Taskforce will, at our invitation, be coming to Northern Ireland on 11 December. This visit and the information collected during it will influence the forthcoming report. The Commission's report must not only detail opportunities, but map out how the Taskforce will assist us over the long-term.

Although this is a European Commission Taskforce, our departments have nominated counterparts for each Commission member. To help further structure our engagement and to demonstrate our commitment, Junior Ministers Ian Paisley Jnr and Gerry Kelly chaired a meeting of Departmental lead officials on Tuesday 13th November and followed this up by leading a delegation of senior officials from across Departments to Brussels last week. They completed a series of some 30 meetings over a 2-day period including 2 key meetings between the Junior Ministers and Catherine Day, (European Commission Secretary General) and Dirk Ahner (Director General of Regional Policy.)

These meetings were very focused and productive. Having completed the necessary stocktaking, the process is focusing in on the most effective assistance which can be provided from the taskforce in the short term and beyond.

Junior Ministers also discussed arrangements for us to visit Brussels in early January to meet President Barroso, Danuta Hübner and other Commissioners.