



Northern Ireland
Assembly

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

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

**European Issues: Committee of the
Regions Briefing**

2 February 2011

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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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 Allan Bresland
Mr William Humphrey
Mrs Dolores Kelly
Mr Danny Kinahan
Mr Jimmy Spratt

Witnesses:

Mr Jonathan Bell MLA)
Mr Francie Molloy MLA) Committee of the Regions

The Chairperson (Mr Elliott):

Jonathan Bell and Francie Molloy, you are very welcome to brief us on your work on the Committee of the Regions and, perhaps, its broader work. The meeting will be recorded by Hansard. I invite you to give a 10-minute introduction and then leave yourselves available for members' questions.

Mr Jonathan Bell (Committee of the Regions):

Thank you for the invitation to be here. I will give a general outline. Northern Ireland has two permanent members on the Committee of the Regions: me and Francie Molloy. We, willingly,

allowed the two alternate members, John Dallat and Councillor Arnold Hatch, to serve also. We have divided up the four commissions for which Mr Molloy and I have responsibility so that each of the four political parties has its own commission. After I give a general outline and speak about my commission — the territorial cohesion commission — Francie will speak about the environment commission. We will then give a general outline of the other commissions.

We are a small cog in a large wheel. The Committee of the Regions has 344 members from the 27 EU countries. It is a political assembly of regional and local representatives. The purpose of our work is largely advisory. The Committee of the Regions advises the European Commission, the European Council and the European Parliament. The advice that we give generally concerns European Union policy, development and legislation.

Our aim is to influence and shape policy in advance of its becoming legislation. We also aim to ensure that the European regions have an influence and say before legislation is made and becomes notoriously difficult, if not impossible, to change. We act as guardians of the principle of subsidiarity. Where decisions can be made by regional and local government, they should be. Hopefully, we do all that all in a strong, open and transparent way.

It is sometimes difficult. People often tell us that we are only an advisory body, which is absolutely correct. The European Parliament and the European Commission are under no obligation to follow our advice. However, a good study by Milena Neshkova, published in the Journal of European Public Policy in 2010, stated that the Committee of the Regions was able to influence legislation on one third of the occasions on which it proffered advice. The study also said that, on other occasions that it could not quantify, the advice given and opinions offered by the Committee of the Regions had a role in the legislation that emerged.

The main areas that the Committee on the Regions works on are education and youth; employment; the environment; climate change; economic and social cohesion; public health; transport; the social fund; vocational training; social affairs; culture; trans-European transport; energy; and communications.

The plenary sessions are held five times a year, and the two permanent representatives attend those sessions. There are seven commissions, and they deal with regional policy and transport; economic and social policy; climate and the environment; natural resources; education, culture

and research; government and external affairs; and administration and finance. Essentially, those commissions are the engine rooms; that is where the work is done.

The work is done through a complex system, largely made up of rapporteurs, but, effectively, in the four commissions on which we serve we can submit amendments to any of the policies that are brought forward. I serve on the Commission for Territorial Cohesion Policy, Francie serves on the Commission for Environment, Climate Change and Energy, John Dallat serves the Commission for Education, Youth and Research and Arnold Hatch serves on the Commission for Natural Resources. Those amendments are agreed at the commissions and, almost like a council committee, they are rubber-stamped at the major plenary sessions. Those plenary sessions are where policies become the official policy of the Committee of the Regions.

I have probably spoken for long enough. Francie will outline some of the work by the Commission for Environment.

Mr Molloy:

Again, thanks for having us back at the Committee. The main work of the Committee of the Regions, as Jonathan touched on, involves preparation for the plenary sessions and work on the reports coming through. One of the problems, which has been mentioned many times, is that European work involves such a long process. For example, some of the stuff that we are dealing with now has already been going on for one or two years.

As a result of the Lisbon Treaty, the Committee of the Regions is supposed to have more of a say in events. It is also supposed to protect subsidiarity, so, in our case, the Assembly should have more of a say on local issues than Westminster and local government should have a greater say on issues in which the Assembly does not need to get involved. That is part and parcel of its work.

The environment commission, as the title suggests, deals with environmental issues. The big issue across Europe is climate change and its effects. That infringes on a number of other different areas, particularly agriculture. In agriculture, the big issue is CAP reform and how that will pan out. The general line is to keep the CAP similar to what it is at present, and the reports that have been delivered indicate that that will be the case with regard to direct payments. The reports also indicate that there will be a cap on the maximum payment.

We have to look at the role of the Assembly in preparation for the future. Although we are coming to the end of this Assembly mandate, we need to look ahead. This Committee's report on Europe recommended that we have a subcommittee to deal with Europe. The more meetings that I attend in Europe and Brussels, the clearer it becomes that that is the big issue. We need an advisory committee here; a subcommittee of all the Committees may be one way of doing that. At the moment, there is no way that we can keep abreast of the numerous issues that are coming.

Also, we have no indication of how Departments are looking at some of the issues that are coming up, be that CAP reform or anything else. We need to be getting reports from those Departments. We need some sort of committee here that collects and deals with that information and that looks at what is coming down the line from the European Union in a couple of years' time. Otherwise, we will always be playing catch up and rubber-stamping what is coming through from the committees. The message that I want to send today is that we need to look seriously at that matter and go back to this Committee's report to find some mechanism for setting up an advisory or scrutiny subcommittee, whatever term you want to use, that will research and develop work on Europe.

We have an excellent office in Europe and the staff there do a good job. However, they are a small group of people in a small office, whereas some of the other Administrations, such as Scotland, Wales and the South of Ireland, have big numbers of staff. We have a small number of staff there and we have no direct input here, so that is the issue at present.

Mr Bell:

I made my maiden speech on the Committee's report on European issues, one of the recommendations of which was to have a European subcommittee. That needs to be firmly on the agenda. I also recognise the work done by Dr Ken Bishop in the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) in giving information and support, particularly as it affects local government.

I will conclude by trying to put some meat on the bones of something specific that I will be doing this Thursday. The European Commission has a 2011-2020 road safety strategy. It has a target to reduce the number of road deaths by 50% over the next decade. That is a significant ambition because the figures for previous years do not reflect a good standard of road safety. It

also aims to get comparable data from across Europe. In the Committee of the Regions we have done work to support our seven strategic objectives for road safety across Europe, each of which has an accompanying action to be taken at the European Union level. Some of it is fairly basic stuff, such as improved education and training of road users; increased enforcement of road rules; a safer road infrastructure; safer vehicles; the promotion of the use of modern technology to increase road safety; and the improvement of emergency and post-injury services. There is also an aim to protect vulnerable road users, with a particular focus on motorcyclists.

The Committee of the Regions is asking the commission how each of those seven objectives will contribute to meeting the overall 50% reduction so that actions can be prioritised across the regions. The commission comes to us in advance and gives us its plans, and we then put the regional perspective back to it. We also want to know why it arrived at the figure of 50% and not 60% or whatever. Also, we want to see the European Union database on road safety, the CARE database, updated to include regional as well as national data. That would allow regional and local authorities across Europe to see where the danger areas are and tackle them, so that the target of a 50% reduction in road deaths could be effectively met.

The Chairperson:

Thank you for that. Jonathan, when you gave us what I thought was a comprehensive list of the issues that you deal with and I did not hear agriculture mentioned, I was beginning to get extremely worried, but then Francie Molloy mentioned the CAP reform. I would like to question him somewhat on that. Francie said that it appears that with the CAP reform the general line is to keep it similar to what we have. There has been quite a bit of discussion and a number of different reports on that. At an early stage, we heard that there would be significant changes to the CAP. Then, we heard that there would not be many changes. At the end of 2010, we again heard that there would be significant changes. Now, you are saying that it seems as though it will remain along the general lines of what already exists. Have you any idea whether pillar 1 will be kept similar to what exists at present? In recent weeks, there has been a strong indication that environmental issues might be brought under pillar 1, but without any finance. I should declare an interest because I am a farmer.

Mr Molloy:

The commissioner spoke after the plenary session last Thursday. Again, he emphasised that although his view is to keep the CAP similar to what it has been, many other interests are

involved now and the European Parliament has more say over that than it had in the past. His view is that it will remain similar to what it has been: direct payments will continue, but payments will be made for working farms rather than farms without stock.

Now, the view is that agriculture should be seen as the provider of very necessary food resources in Europe. That is a change from how it was over the past few years, when the focus was on rural development and other issues. The commissioner indicated that although discussion is still ongoing on pillars 1 and 2, the idea is to maintain that and that environmental issues would be part of the payment package. At that time, he did not indicate that demands to meet environmental issues would not be paid for or resourced. In his view, they would be, but those demands would have a different focus. In the past, demands were along the lines of fencing and addressing other such issues, whereas now the focus is on environmental issues attached to farming. That incorporates climate change, processes to generate energy from farm waste and various projects that could be linked into that. The view is that future payments will be made for working farms and will be linked to environmental issues.

The Chairperson:

Is that getting fairly reasonable support throughout the European community or are some countries, particularly those that have joined the European Union more recently, broadly opposed to that mechanism?

Mr Molloy:

There seems to be broad support for it. As you said, originally the clear line given was that there would be big changes. Getting agreement from the different countries has meant going back on that again, so there will not be big changes. The one change that is opposed by some of the new countries that have joined the European Union is the idea of a cap on major payments. Some big payments have been made to big estates, not so much here, but in England and Wales. There will be a cap, an upper limit, on those payments. Some new estates say that they should get the same as what was available previously and that there should not be a limit on that. That is still an area of disagreement with regard to reform. Generally, however, there has been agreement around payments and direct payments and strong support from new member states for the maintenance of farms as working farms.

The Chairperson:

My final question relates to state aid rules. Does the Committee of the Regions have any lobby in that respect? I am thinking, in particular, about the ongoing issue of the Presbyterian Mutual Society (PMS). I am not sure whether it was the UK Government, the Northern Ireland Executive, or a combination of both that applied to Europe to see whether assistance for the PMS breaks state aid rules. Is there any lobby or have you had any discussion on that issue?

Mr Bell:

We have all had individual discussions and are supportive of the position put forward by the Executive, and I notice that some of those discussions have been brought together in a joint statement from my party's MEP Diane Dodds, Jim Nicholson and Bairbre de Brún. However, the specific point has not come up in any plenary agenda that I have seen. We can provide advice on that matter, and, in response to what comes from Europe, we can look at doing that.

Chairperson, I should also say that the environment commission deals with all agriculture affairs; that is just the term that is used in the Committee of the Regions.

Ms M Anderson:

Jonathan and Francie, thanks for that. I am keen to get a feel for, or some examples of, the third of the legislation that has been affected by the work in which you have been involved. Although you both referred to the need for some kind of European subcommittee, and Jonathan made his maiden speech on that, what is the possibility of your reporting collectively to the Assembly? You said that the committee meets five times a year. I think that other Members would be quite keen to hear the information that you impart to us here, whether on agriculture, territorial cohesion, education, the environment or whatever the case may be, particularly if you were navigating your way through the system at an early stage and there was the possibility of shaping legislation.

Mr Bell:

We would certainly be willing to do that. Currently, such matters come under the remit of this Committee. However, it goes beyond us telling you and answering questions about what we are doing. The UK delegation met recently in Edinburgh, and you should see the level of resources that the devolved Administration in Scotland applies to European issues. They have specific Committees to look at not only what they can draw down but what they can feed up. I receive

briefings from NILGA and we get information from the Assembly, but I genuinely feel that the Assembly could play a greater role in feeding information directly into European policy.

At the minute, a regulation is coming up on the European social fund. We are looking to ensure that regions benefit from the European social fund, and we will welcome the call for overall European Union regulations on governing the social fund. You asked what we have actually done. However, if I were to begin quoting pieces of European legislation that we have influenced, my 10 minutes would be spent talking about paragraph c of subsection f.

An example of what we are doing is looking at the European regulations that govern the European social fund, the priority being to avoid excessive form filling. That point was put to me by community groups in Strangford, who have to pay consultants to fill out forms because they are so complex. We will look, therefore, at how to get better co-ordination of the structural funds so that actions complement each other. For instance, the regional development fund should work in conjunction with the European social fund. I genuinely believe that the outcome will be a reduction in bureaucracy, although I do not know by how much. Nobody is saying that we should take away from auditing requirements. It is just the bureaucracy that is needed to access those funds that we will reduce, and that will be an achievement that we can take back to community groups.

Mr Molloy:

A presentation to the Assembly would be a useful way of letting all Members know about European matters. For instance, the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development would be interested to hear about the numerous applications for European funding made by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD), because most of our work in that Committee relates to what DARD is doing. It is not clear what mechanism is available to make groups such as farmers, community groups and environmental bodies aware of funding schemes and how they can apply for them. I am sure that the same thing applies to the other Committees. For instance, the Barroso task force has been renewed since the First Minister and deputy First Minister were out in November.

We all sit on different Committees; has anybody asked what their Committee thinks should be put forward to the Barroso task force or what is available from that task force, so that Departments can try to draw down badly needed money from Europe? The only way that we will

be able to get that is if there is some overarching committee for European affairs that could draw down information from the various different Committees and Departments. It is not just about what the Departments want.

One noticeable comment from one Department was that it would not be applying for European funding because it would require match funding. That is curtailing what people apply for. Maybe the Committees should investigate how they could get that match funding, how they could use that money better, and how to draw down European money that is available. There is a task to be done there, and we need to be getting the message across to all Departments to ensure that we maximise the amount of money that is being drawn down from Europe. We need to ensure that other moneys and resources here can be used to do that.

The Chairperson:

I will just make members aware that all statutory Committees receive a copy of the Hansard report of every EU matter that comes before us. The other option may be a presentation on some of those issues to the Chairpersons' Liaison Group, which should have a representative from every Committee. I am not just talking about the work of the Committee of the Regions, but other European issues. The difficulty is, as we all know, once you get into detailed European issues, it is a minefield. However, a broad overview is always extremely helpful.

Mr Kinahan:

Thank you for your presentation. I feel that this is so important and we really should be grasping it. I was amused at the beginning to find out that Francie is on the environment commission and Jonathan is not, even though Jonathan is on our Environment Committee. When you look at how things are split, you realise that it is a completely different organisation. I feel that we urgently need to set up some system.

I know from my Environment Committee work, which Jonathan will know as well, that it is all being driven by Europe and we need to be involved with it from day one. If we are not going to have a subcommittee, we need you to present to the Environment Committee and tell us what is going on. I imagine that is the same for every Committee, and it is something that we have to grasp today.

Mr Molloy:

Danny's point is an important one; it is all being driven by Europe when it should be starting from here. If there are issues or schemes that we cannot manage here, we need to say to the British Government, as it would be in this situation, that we need to look at that project. It is the same thing about waste, for instance; some people think that waste targets are set by Europe, but they are set by the member states in Europe. President Barroso made that point in his talk a couple of weeks ago. He said that people are complaining that Europe is a bureaucratic system and is sending down diktats, but those diktats have been made by the member states. You may disagree with me, but the officers are only following instructions given by the member states. Every member state makes the excuse, "It is not us; it is Europe". But they are the people who are making the decisions. We need to have a greater input into the early stages so that we do not get diktats that we do not agree with.

Mr Bell:

There are critical areas specifically for Northern Ireland. For example, if we take our constituencies collectively and compare them against the European average for measures of deprivation, overall they appear to be well, but we know that within our constituencies there are pockets that are hugely below the European average, particularly for unemployment.

In the territorial cohesion commission we will try to see whether, instead of taking a complete area, we can focus on areas and pockets that are below the European average; that is, the poorest areas with the highest levels of social exclusion and unemployment and everything else. We want to address those pockets, because I fear that Northern Ireland suffers as the result of a collective average being taken. If it is compared against the collective average for somewhere else in Europe, it does not bode well for applications from here. The levels of employment in the Bowtown Estate or the Glen Estate in my constituency are well below the European average, and those areas could do with support from the European social fund. We need to change European social fund policy to affect specific areas and pockets of unemployment.

Ms M Anderson:

You talked about pockets. Is it correct that, because the North is taken en bloc, a pocket could be an area in a constituency or a constituency itself?

Mr Bell:

Yes.

Mrs D Kelly:

I thank the witnesses for their presentation. I also support Francie and his call for the establishment of a subcommittee to more rigorously tie-in European matters with the work of all Departments.

Francie, you touched on the Barroso task force, which was as much concerned with opening doors as introducing some more pragmatic measures. What has been your experience of the work of that task force? Was it taken advantage of and delivered on? Furthermore, how does the Committee of the Regions report back to the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, or does it? What system of accountability is in place for members of the Committee of the Regions?

Mr Molloy:

The Barroso task force was a means of trying to draw down all available sources of European funding. Often, we only looked to Peace I, Peace II and the EU rural development fund and not at other sources. The task force set a number of different targets for drawing money down for different schemes. One of the benefits of the task force was that one of its architects, Ronnie Hall from Tyrone, had an input into its workings and designed it to suit the situation here.

There is no evidence that the work of the task force was taken advantage of. It was a complete flop. However, it has now been renewed and now that the Executive are in a more permanent state, hopefully it can be taken advantage of. Sometimes, the different programmes were not drawn down or taken advantage of because no match funding was available. We must find out which funding streams Departments considered, what reasons were given for not applying and whether ways around that can be found. There are opportunities for us to draw down funds from various different sources in Europe.

There is no mechanism for the Committee of the Regions to report back to the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, except through this Committee. We have now reported twice, and the minutes of the Committee's meeting go to the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. If an advisory subcommittee were established, it would provide us with a further means

of reporting back and a means of looking ahead at what the needs of this area are. As Jonathan said, we can table amendments and give our views and input to the reports of the Committee of the Regions. However, we need people in the Assembly to give us the lead on that, because otherwise we could just make it up ourselves.

Mrs D Kelly:

Perish the thought.

Mr Molloy:

That is worrying. We are voting on matters and we take what we think is the view that would be most beneficial to the people here. However, by and large, we are working on the basis of our own impression.

Mrs D Kelly:

The Barroso task force has given a renewed commitment and we should take advantage of that. All the Committees are looking at the draft Budget. Could this Committee raise with the other Committees the question of whether any forecasting of match funding requirements can be done based on the opportunities that the task force presents? When I was a councillor, I asked that the council set aside a central pot from its budget. That allowed different groups to make bids, so that they did not miss out on any funding opportunities from Europe, the National Lottery or other sources. Surely, that is also the way that Departments should be operating.

Mr Molloy:

An example of that, which affects the Department of the Environment, Invest NI and others, is that £40 million is in a pot at the moment, but only £4.7 million of that has been drawn down. The rest will have to be reallocated. Jonathan and I sat on a subcommittee to try to encourage councils to draw that money down. It is for regeneration and trying to get research and development projects in place. It has to be drawn down by local government for businesses in an area, but that is not happening. Some of it has not been drawn down because councils say that they do not have the match funding. Invest NI puts up 25%, so councils have to put up only 25%. However, even that could be too heavy a load. Almost £40 million will go back to Europe or will be reallocated here. If we can find a means of drawing that down in local government, particularly to be spent on research and development, it would be a major input into the local community.

Mr Bell:

That is a good example of Northern Ireland being proactive. The difficulty with Europe is that policy, regulations and guidelines are set. If a policy was set before a lot of the global financial crisis occurred — back when Lehman Brothers was still trading and house prices in Northern Ireland were going up by more than £50,000 a year — it seemed reasonable to ask a council to provide the 40% match funding for economic regeneration. However, when such a policy was rolled out a number of years later, we were in the middle of a financial crisis. I pay tribute to the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment in that regard because, with a little flexibility, Invest Northern Ireland said that it could help councils by providing 20% or 25% of the funding, which meant that only 20% was needed from the rate area. Time is of the essence; the window of opportunity for that particular funding is closing. To a certain extent, a lot of it has been about giving councils the exact information and the Executive saying what they can do through Invest Northern Ireland to match the funding within the time frame.

We report and give information to NILGA through its European unit. The European officer, Ken Bishop, provides us with briefings and information that we share with the UK Local Government Association.

Mr Humphrey:

Thank you both very much for the presentation.

A couple of weeks ago, we had the First Minister and deputy First Minister here, and we raised the issue of Europe, European funding, the European office and so on. One of my concerns, which was also raised by a number of members when Professor Mike Smyth and Jane Morrice were in front of the Committee in the autumn, is that there seems to be a singular lack in Northern Ireland of drawing down significant levels of money as compared with our nearest neighbour, the Republic. I was at a breakfast in the City Hall recently, and Colette Fitzgerald, from the European office in Belfast, talked about the Republic of Ireland drawing down potentially £600 million and Northern Ireland £25 million. I accept that the Republic of Ireland is a sovereign state and that its Government have been very active in Europe for some time and were a net gainer from Europe for many years. Nevertheless, there is a huge amount of catch-up work for us to do. The opening of the new office in Brussels will help us along that line.

There is a common thread from members across parties that Departments need to have a joined-up approach when it comes to the management of Europe in Northern Ireland. Some sort of overarching organisation, perhaps a subcommittee of the Assembly, needs to address not just the work of the Departments here but the work of the two of you and your two colleagues, the MEPs and the other devolved Administrations in the United Kingdom and, of course, the Republic of Ireland because there could be collaborative approaches to INTERREG, Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) and so on. That is absolutely vital. I was concerned by what Mr Molloy said about voting being up to each person's interpretation and opinion. That shocks me. I am not questioning anybody's integrity or ability, but that is something that needs to be monitored. We need to have a joined-up approach.

All of us deal with groups that are working to try to secure funding from Europe. Funding from Europe has been so important to Northern Ireland and groups in Northern Ireland. Given the economic situation in the United Kingdom, the more funding we can get from Europe, the more help our community groups will get.

There is a recurring concern within our groups about applications to SEUPB. A large amount of time, ability and capacity is required, and that is just to fill in the form. Then, you have the administration, the accounting, the management and all of that. Some fairly high-level and prominent groups have run into difficulty recently.

In the community that I represent, the capacity to submit applications may not be as strong as it is in other communities. How can you represent and articulate the view out there — Jonathan, you mentioned this with regard to your own constituency of Strangford — that more needs to be done to give the community the capacity to submit applications and to help them to manage the funding? If communities do not have the necessary capacity, can the likes of the SEUPB, which administers European money through the Department of Finance and Personnel, go out into those communities and proactively ensure that the necessary skills sets are put there to allow people to draw down money?

Mr Bell:

I agree with more or less everything that has been said.

With regard to the collaborative approach, we, on our own initiative, meet with all of our

MEPs, sometimes together and sometimes separately. There was an example with the Presbyterian Mutual Society where a collective statement was made, which has been beating about for some time. We also meet with the representatives from Northern Ireland Executive office in Brussels on at least three of the five occasions that we are over each year and have a briefing directly with them. That is done as a result of our own initiative, and that is what informs us.

Francie is absolutely correct: before we go to a plenary session, nobody tells us what position we should adopt on proposed amendments. On each of the four commissions that we are responsible for, we will take advice from the Northern Ireland office in Brussels, as well as from NILGA and the UK delegation, on each of the issues. So, we do go out informed, but, as regards a specific voting mandate, Francie is absolutely correct. We do not just make our minds up there and then; we go out with some form of evidence base. However, we feel that the process could be improved.

With regard to the collaborative working, we often sit in on meetings between the Irish and UK delegations, both formally and informally, that are held in the Northern Ireland office and the Irish office, particularly those on discussions around agriculture and environmental issues. We also look at inter-regional funding, which Mr Humphrey referred to. That is key funding. For example, an equestrian centre in Greyabbey got €15,000 of European moneys.

The difficulty with a lot of European funding in Northern Ireland is that it gets filtered through various other channels. For example, as Mrs Kelly will know as the Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning, hundreds of job-training and professional-development courses have been provided via the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) and Europe. However, those are all announced through budgetary headlines from DEL, so you would have to specifically dig down to find out where the money for those courses came from. When he launched the cohesion report in Belfast, Maurice Maxwell was able to stipulate that hundreds — I cannot recall the precise figure — of training opportunities were provided with European money. So there is a level of collaborative working.

Specifically, you correctly identified the hottest issue, which was the SEUPB and the difficulty with what seemed to be an almost contradictory approach. Some of the community organisations that spoke to us, either through NILGA or directly, told us that they got a response

back to say that they had given too much information. Their report was sent back, and they were told to summarise it and to make it specific. We then held a meeting with the SEUPB, which informed us that it was not getting enough information and that it was not of a satisfactory grade to get through.

The outcome of that was that NILGA hosted a European Union conference, which the First Minister opened, at Templepatrick to look specifically at European funding issues. Shaun Henry from the SEUPB attended, and he got input on what the specific problems were. One of the SEUPB officers there, Teresa Lennon — she used to be the NILGA European officer — gave a commitment to provide information, support and advice to the groups as they make their progress through Europe.

The Committee of the Regions has a lobbying function. We ask not for new legislation but for the existing legislation and policy to be made amenable to the groups that directly need it on the ground. We can certainly do that for you, if there are specific cases. It goes back to what Francie asked for at the start. I am picking up things in my own spheres, but if there was some sort of collective committee that could come together and reflect everything that the Northern Ireland Assembly was saying —

The Chairperson:

That would be some committee.

Mr Bell:

I mean collectively in terms of the experience of the European funds. It could say that we have got £4 million out of £40 million from a particular fund and ask what we can do about the fact that we are 90% under. It could outline how that is affecting DEL, the Department for Social Development (DSD) and the Department for Regional Development (DRD). If the Committees for each of those Departments could provide us with that information, it would certainly feed into and inform our opinions far better. It is not as much about looking at what has gone before — there is a lobbying function in relation to tightening that up — as it is about looking to what Northern Ireland could play with in the future.

Mr Molloy:

I welcome the idea of direction, because that is what is lacking at the moment. We may not like

all of the direction that we get, but at least we would be getting direction that we could follow. The UK delegation gives a briefing or guidance, but it largely deals with England, Scotland and Wales, not, nationally, the interests of here. The interests conflict at different times. What we really need is the Assembly to tell us the issues that it is negotiating on and dealing with in Europe at the present time and that it needs the Committee of the Regions to have an input to that. That would give us a direction in which to work.

One of the things that Barroso touched on was that a lot of European legislation consists of add-ons. That needs to be addressed. People in the South of Ireland also say that legislation becomes heavier and heavier all the time. It does not all come from Europe. I am not defending Europe, but when there is some criticism regarding scrutiny, monitoring or accountability, the SEUPB or some other body adds on another dimension. That is the case with the local action groups (LAGs) at the moment. The amount of bureaucracy and paperwork needed just to assess programmes and give someone £5,000 is unbelievable. We need someone here to say that they are giving enough monitoring as is necessary and, as long as it is accountable and traceable, the European Union would be able to respond to that situation.

Mr Spratt:

I thank both of you for your presentations. Jonathan, I think that Martina asked you one of my questions. I was going to ask you about how successful we have been in influencing policy and legislation, but I will not go back there, given that you told Martina that it might take you until tomorrow morning to answer that.

Mr Bell:

And that was only the summary.

Mr Spratt:

So, we will not go back there. However, one or two other interesting points were made. Jonathan mentioned the 2020 road safety strategy. I have concerns about that, given the good, proactive work that has been done by the Department of the Environment (DOE), the PSNI and the gardaí, which has dramatically reduced the number of road deaths in Northern Ireland. Furthermore, DRD's new system for managing road layouts — rights turns and so on — has dramatically reduced, and continues to reduce as the programme is run out, the number of serious injuries and fatal accidents, which is brilliant.

I am a bit concerned about the cross-cutting measures, because you mentioned that some of that would relate to post-injury services and to motorcyclists. Frankly, driving habits here are much better than those in some European cities. There is an opportunity for you to showcase the work that has been ongoing in Northern Ireland on road safety strategy and on advertising, including programmes aimed specifically at motorcyclists. That has not happened in just the past two or three years. I can remember, in my policing days, co-operation with the gardaí in combating drink-driving and all of that. So the process has been ongoing over many years, and it is now paying off. We hope that the number of road fatalities will continue to reduce. I am worried, though, about Europe tinkering around the edges of some good stuff that we have here and, maybe, rendering it not as good in the future.

The other point was made by Francie in relation to the Assembly. Almost everything that the Committee has done on Europe has had the theme that not enough is being done to influence matters. I understand that the Assembly appointed someone — I think that it was Stephen Graham — to look at its overall strategies. I know that there are issues of cost and all the rest of it. However, if we have an official who is already working along those lines, why should that official not be actively involved in, if you like, spearheading stuff towards Europe? A champion on European issues on each Committee would feed back to somebody in the Assembly. I would like to hear your views on that.

We may not get an all-singing, all-dancing committee at this time, but we are just dithering. We are not doing anything, and that has been going on for months. Chairman, maybe one of the questions that we should be asking is exactly what has happened. I know that that is probably an issue for the Commission, but the Committee is responsible for European issues and it should ask: what have you done to progress the matter or to put up something that allows us to be proactive in some of this stuff? Big issues and big money are involved. There are big issues for every community in Northern Ireland.

Therefore, the Assembly must stop its dithering. It is already supposed to be doing stuff. Tell us what has been done. Let us get something up and running, so that there is some place for you guys to interact with that enables you to pass stuff back to various Committees and all the rest of it. I know that minutes and so on are passed around, but sometimes you have to identify issues.

There are cross-cutting issues in the area of road strategy for the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, DOE, DRD, the Policing Board, the PSNI — right across the board. It is also cross-cutting with our neighbouring state. We need to co-operate on road safety, reducing deaths, being able to deal with injuries, and so on. That is maybe not so much a question as a comment.

There were a lot of interesting points in what was said. However, I really do think that it is time to put up or shut up, and it is time that the Commission came back to us and told us exactly what it is doing on a European strategy because, as far as I am concerned, work has been ongoing and I have not seen very many results.

The Chairperson:

I understand that the European engagement strategy is in draft form and ready to go to the Commission.

Mr Spratt:

I am glad to hear that. Maybe we could get a briefing on it.

Ms M Anderson:

How long has that been the case? I heard that almost three months ago.

The Chairperson:

I have no idea, Martina. We can ask.

Mr Molloy:

I welcome the fact that it is in draft form. However, it would have been useful for us to have an input into what should be in the draft.

Mr Spratt:

This Committee has never been asked.

Mr Molloy:

I like the idea of having a champion in each Committee, and we could even match that with someone from each Department to have a Department line and a Committee line. That liaison

would be very useful. They may not have to meet very often, but it would enable co-ordination across Departments, and we could have an input into the direction. Europe is a massive project and, no matter what way we handle it, we will only be dipping into it. However, we could at least focus on what issues we want and need to deal with in the short term and how to develop that. That role would be very important. The crucial part is that, although we can continue to go backwards and forwards to Brussels for meetings, unless there is some direction, the purpose will get lost. We can have an input into Committees and so on, but I feel that, unless we have a direction and it serves a purpose to the Assembly, it is basically meaningless.

Mr Bell:

I will outline the work on road safety. We can input and will be inputting throughout, and we will take great pleasure in inputting some figures. I know that the Environment Minister released figures that show one of the most successful years in recent times with the reduction in road deaths. Also, we can bring to bear good practice. It should be noted that those are road safety guidelines for the 27 nations across Europe to implement. There will be no opportunity — I put your mind at rest — for reducing down what we are doing. It will take the collective figures for road deaths across the 27 nations and set a guidance target that we want to reduce the number of deaths by 50%. We will bring the good practice in from Northern Ireland. There is no chance of that guidance reducing anything that a national Government here want to do.

Dr Farry:

I have one relatively simple question. In some senses, it touches on Jimmy's point. Do we, as Northern Ireland in Europe, tend to build up patterns of alliances with the other regions in these islands — I am using neutral terminology as best I can — or are there other regions in Europe with which we tend to side and with which we can build up strong alliances?

Mr Bell:

We get a direct briefing from Northern Ireland local government, and we use information that we pick up here and directly from the UK delegation. We also work very closely, particularly on agriculture and inter-regional funding, with the Irish delegation. We attend their briefings, and they attend ours. We attend all sorts of joint events, but there is nothing formal as such. I have links to different groups through the presence of parties such as the European People's Party and the Party of European Socialists. We all know members in each of those major delegations, and we input backwards and forwards with them. There is no formal alliance, as such.

There is a point of going in and batting for Northern Ireland. To the best of my knowledge — I am being careful because this is being reported by Hansard — the UK is a net contributor to Europe. That relates to the point that I am making about the European social fund. We may have an average level of wealth that, collectively, means that the UK is a net contributor, but there are significant pockets of deprivation within our areas to which we need to attract that European social funding. I would not say that we should operate independently of the national delegation, but we have a key role of going in and batting for Northern Ireland plc.

Mr Molloy:

We have an opportunity if issues are identified in England, Scotland, Wales and the North. It goes back to the same thing: unless we can identify the issues, we do not know what to align with. That is one of the problems, but the opportunities are there. The whole idea across Europe is along the lines of forming alliances and pacts and voting within them. If there are issues, you will certainly get support. Members are keen to exchange views and opinions. Regardless of what delegation you are talking to, you will get opinions, papers and its response to the issue. It is a good way of doing things. That is where we could benefit from having a clear direction.

Mr Bell:

Once a year, we meet with the head of the UK Permanent Representation to the European Union. I have to be careful to get the terminology right. I was going to say the UK ambassador, but we are not allowed to refer to him as the ambassador because Europe is not a foreign country. We meet at least once a year to raise the issues that concern us most. One of the big issues that concern us is gold-plating. When the regulations come down from Europe to the UK Government, the UK Government add 14 pages of additional regulations. When those regulations go to Paris, however, four pages are added. That is the sort of difficulty that we raise. We also meet, informally and formally, with the Irish ambassador and the head of the agriculture division.

Ms Anderson:

You talked about the window of opportunity for councils to try to tap into funding and to maximise support for local SMEs. Is that going on? I ask that because some councils are striking a rate at the minute. You said that the window is closing. Will it come back? Will it reinvent itself? How alert are councils to the opportunities that exist so that they can maximum them?

Mr Bell:

The information from the working group that we were involved in was sent to all the council areas. Your council area and Mr Humphrey's council area are proactive. Your councils have European departments and designated European officers.

Ms M Anderson:

Belfast City Council has. It is only as a result of this Committee's inquiry that we have put measures in place in Derry.

Mr Bell:

The issue for a lot of other councils is that the European issue is divided around a number of different officers and does not have a specific unit. I have seen at close quarters the work that Belfast City Council has done, and it is highly impressive. It would be helpful to see if there was a means whereby that good practice could be replicated across all councils.

Mr Molloy:

There were two meetings of officers of different councils, back in September or October, in Dungannon. One thing that concerned me was that there was no councillor representation at either of those meetings. Officers sat at that those meetings and decided that their councils could not afford it and that they could not go down that road. That is part of the problem. Jonathan then chaired a subgroup comprising representatives from NILGA, Invest NI and other groupings to try to ensure that councils were aware of what was available, what the project was and what could and could not be funded. It was not about the regeneration of town centres, for instance; it was about how SMEs and others could be funded for research and development projects. So, there was an attempt to make that information available across the council areas.

Belfast City Council has a big European office and is driving that. To some extent, the rural councils need to look after themselves. Otherwise, the money will finish up in one or two areas. There is an important role there, and the Assembly has to play that role. It makes quite a statement about the Assembly if one council has a better structure for European funding than the Assembly does.

The Chairperson:

Thank you very much, members. Thank you, Francie and Jonathan, for attending this afternoon's meeting and for answering the questions.