



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Employment and Learning

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

European Policy Developments:
Department for Employment and Learning

22 April 2015

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Robin Swann (Chairperson)
Mr Sydney Anderson
Mr William Irwin
Ms Anna Lo
Mr Fra McCann
Ms Bronwyn McGahan
Ms Claire Sugden

Witnesses:

Mrs Patricia McVeigh Department for Employment and Learning

The Chairperson (Mr Swann): I welcome Mrs Patricia McVeigh, head of European policy branch. The session will be reported by Hansard. Patricia, good morning and over to you.

Mrs Patricia McVeigh (Department for Employment and Learning): Good morning. I apologise for not having prepared anything for the Committee: my understanding was that the Minister and colleagues were coming along today and that there was therefore no need for a paper. I will highlight two major things the Department is doing currently that would be of particular interest to the Committee, and then I am happy to take questions.

As the Committee knows, the Department is committed to supporting the Executive in achieving its EU targets and, indeed, to having stronger engagement with the EU. One key thing of interest that we are looking at is European priorities. The Department's contributions to the 2015-16 priorities are being finalised and are awaiting approval by the Minister. Work is also under way to report on the associated targets for the end-year review for the 2014-15 targets which were commissioned by OFMDFM. Those targets will be updated and shared with the Executive.

The other key thing is competitive EU funding, and, as the Committee knows, the target of 20% for EU funding has been extended, having been increased to 50% for all Departments. DEL has been a major contributor to achieving the target in the past.

The new programmes, ERASMUS+ and Horizon 2020, have been operational since 2014 and cover the period from 2014 to 2020. Initially, when the Department was asked to predict its drawdown under the new programmes, we indicated a dip in the 2014-15 year. We anticipated that because the assessment criteria and application process for the new programme are different from those in the old lifelong learning programme and the 7th Framework Programme for Research and Technological Development (FP7).

We looked at the 2014-15 drawdown for Horizon 2020 and ERASMUS+ recently, and the initial look at the figures indicates that we have exceeded our projections, which is good news. We think it is due, in part, to the fact that some of the funding is carried over from the previous lifelong learning programme into the figures for this year. We also think it is due, in part, to the work that DEL officials have done, working with the national agency, in highlighting and promoting the new programmes and working internally and externally with stakeholders to try and facilitate awareness of the programme and support applications and, in relation to Horizon 2020, the infrastructure that DEL supports in the Northern Ireland contact points. I just wanted to outline those two major things, but I am happy to take questions or cover anything that I can.

The Chairperson (Mr Swann): Thanks, Patricia. The briefing was on European matters and the European social fund (ESF), but the Minister is not here with regard to ESF. As regards the role of European policy branch, the Minister has indicated that, at times, the funding for the previous ESF programme was stalled because of compliance issues.

Mrs McVeigh: I do not cover ESF. I cover EU policy that impacts on the Department, should that be mobility, EURES, and that sort of thing. The funding I would be looking at would be what we describe as competitive funding, which is primarily ERASMUS and Horizon in connection with the Department.

The Chairperson (Mr Swann): Who do you see as being the organisations that will utilise ERASMUS+?

Mrs McVeigh: In the past, the key direct beneficiaries would have been individuals, but organisations on lifelong learning would have included higher education institutions that support the mobility of students and, to a lesser extent, further education colleges.

We are now promoting it, and our expectation is that it will increase. Equally, the Department is looking at utilising ERASMUS+ to cover the mobility of a wider sector. For example, the Department's new apprenticeship strategy is looking at how it can utilise some of the ERASMUS+ funding to support mobility in apprenticeship schemes, and more widely, any youth provision that will include an element of affording the young person an opportunity to experience a programme outside Northern Ireland. So, we want to extend the opportunity to utilise ERASMUS+ to fund and support other programmes.

The Chairperson (Mr Swann): Is the mid-term review of Europe 2020 within your —

Mrs McVeigh: It is. From the Department's perspective, we get information that we are asked to comment on from various sources. Some policy areas get that information directly from their policy sources in the UK. Also, the UK Government, through the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS), might come through DFP and ask Departments for input. That is what happened with Europe 2020. We have responded to Europe 2020. In the early stages of the mid-term review, we were asked to comment on the UK's view. The Department concurred with the view that the UK had articulated to the Commission on what the focus of the 2020 strategy would be. However, we always reserve the right to not exclude the possibility of Northern Ireland setting its own targets in a range of economic and related policy areas, because they are devolved. So, we concurred with the UK's view.

Ms Lo: You said that you hope to increase the target from 20% to 50%.

Mrs McVeigh: That is an Executive target.

Ms Lo: The 20% was obviously far too low. We exceeded that in about three years before the end of the period. How much extra money are we going to get out of the pot of competitive funding? How can it help the Department?

Mrs McVeigh: The 50% is a target for Northern Ireland, and all Departments will contribute to that target. In the past we have probably exceeded that.

Ms Lo: You did.

Mrs McVeigh: We did. How much? There is a target for what the 50% is. To be honest, I have not got that figure to hand, but I know that it is published. There is a target for Horizon 2020.

Ms Lo: I think there was a dispute last time about exactly how much you got, is that right?

Mrs McVeigh: Yes. That is why we indicated that we felt that there would be a dip, but other Departments are increasing their drawdown of competitive funding. There is a new target for the Executive set for Horizon 2020 for the lifetime of the programme. That target will be primarily for DETI and DEL. It is €145 million, I think, over the lifetime of the programme. There has been a slight dip in 2014-15 in relation to Horizon 2020. The issue for us is to review the infrastructure and see how we can support increasing the drawdown, but the Department does not have a specific annual figure under ERASMUS+ that it has to achieve.

Ms Lo: How many are in the pipeline with the universities like Queen's or Jordanstown in terms of using Horizon 2020 money?

Mrs McVeigh: My understanding is that the universities are still significant contributors to the drawdown. I know that, currently, their performance is slightly less than the UK and than what they anticipated, but my understanding is that they have several major projects in the pipeline that could be successful. The universities are still major contributors to the drawdown. The Department is meeting the universities in May to see how they can enhance their performance further.

The Chairperson (Mr Swann): Anybody else? OK, Patricia, thank you very much for your time.