

European and External Affairs Committee

Date: 14 October 2004
Time: 09:00 am
Venue: Committee Rooms 3 and 4, National Assembly for Wales, Cardiff Bay
Title: UK Presidency of the Council of the European Council 2005

Purpose

1. This paper updates the Committee on preparations for the United Kingdom's Presidency of the Council of the European Union, which commences on 1 July 2005.

Summary

2. There will be a considerable number of Ministerial meetings held in the UK and in Brussels during the Presidency, pursuing a policy agenda set out in a three-year rolling programme. The Welsh Assembly Government will continue to explore with the UK Government the potential for more of these high-level events to be held in Wales.

Background

3. The United Kingdom will hold the Presidency of the European Union during the second half of 2005, following Luxembourg and preceding Austria.
4. The Welsh Assembly Government wants to contribute to the achievement of the UK Government's objective of managing a modest but successful Presidency. An official has been nominated to co-ordinate our involvement; and she and her team are working closely with Whitehall to maximise the potential benefits to Wales of the Presidency. In addition, it has been agreed with DCMS and UKRep that an official from the Welsh Assembly Government will be chairing the EU Cultural Affairs Committee to be held during the Presidency.
5. A number of events are scheduled to take place throughout the UK as part of the Presidency, though the main summits are to be held in Brussels, as provided for in the Nice Treaty. The key events in the UK will be a number of informal Council meetings, the costs of which will be borne, in the main, by the host Department.
6. During the Presidency, UK Ministers and officials will be expected to participate in a heavy schedule of meetings. An early Whitehall estimate of the possible scale of meetings is:

- 2 European Councils
- 40 Councils of Ministers
- around 10 informal Councils of Ministers (to be held in the UK)
- 60 Ministerial appearances before the European Parliament
- 80 COREPER meetings; and
- 2,200 Council working group meetings

Other expected events include 100 third country meetings and 53 country summits with India, China, Russia, Canada and the Ukraine.

Youth Event in Wales

7. In addition to the meetings listed above, it is customary for Presidency holders to host other complementary high-profile events, and it has been confirmed that Wales will host a Youth Event. The theme of the event will be 'the participation of young people in policy-making and delivery at local, regional, national and international levels'. Preliminary arrangements have been made to hold the event in Cardiff City Hall over the period 25 -27 October 2005.
8. This will present a good opportunity to promote the excellent work happening here in Wales, and help further raise our awareness of and involvement in, the European youth agenda.
9. I have discussed with UK Government Ministers, including with the Prime Minister, my hope that at least one informal Council of Ministers can be located in Wales. My officials have been working closely with their UK Government counterparts on this for some months. I will report on this to the Committee when I am in a position to do so.

Policy Priorities

10. The UK Presidency falls halfway into the 2004-06 Multi-Annual Work Programme. This is the first three-year strategic programme endorsed by the European Council. The European Parliament has also been informed about the programme's purpose and content. It has been prepared jointly by the six presidencies which, in turn, will assume stewardship of the Council over that period: Ireland, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, the United Kingdom, Austria and Finland. They are collectively responsible for seeing that the Council delivers on its agreed priorities up to 2007 efficiently and on time. The Assembly Government was consulted on the UK input to this Programme.
11. The Programme is intended to steer the Council's work by setting milestones and, where possible, a structured timeframe for implementing commonly-agreed priorities without pre-empting the outcome of future negotiations. It sets out specific objectives to be achieved as part of the drive for economic competitiveness, full employment, social inclusiveness, environmental improvement and internal and external security, key concerns for citizens in all Member States.
12. The multi-annual programme has been produced in close consultation with the Commission and complements the Commission's own annual policy strategy.
13. The UK and Luxembourg are also involved in the preparation of an annual operational

programme for the European Council for 2005, on which the Assembly Government has been consulted. Some of the principal themes of next year's programme are: the future Financial Perspective of the EU (2007-13 budget); the mid-term review of the Lisbon agenda (including better regulation); the Constitutional Treaty; and future EU enlargement.

Financial Implications

14. In the main, it is expected that the Assembly Government's contribution to the success of the Presidency will be based on the administrative contribution being made by officials. Should any informal European Councils of Ministers take place in Wales, we would consider how we could maximise the potential to showcase Wales, taking the likely costs carefully into our considerations. These would have to be met from within existing budgets: the Treasury is making no additional funding available to UK Government Departments for Presidency activities, so there will be no Barnett consequential to Wales. For the youth event, the European Commission is expected to contribute the lion's share (75%) of the costs, with the question of funding of the remaining 25% currently under discussion between Welsh Assembly and UK Government officials.

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