

## COMMITTEE ON EUROPEAN AFFAIRS

**Date**                    **23 May 2001**

**Time**                    **9.00am**

**Venue**                   **Committee Room 3&4, National Assembly Building**

**Title: Wales Forum on European Affairs**

### **Purpose**

1. To consider the future structure and work of the Forum.

### **Recommendation**

2. Committee members are invited to consider the proposals put forward and to reach a decision on the future structure and work of the Forum

### **Background**

3. The Wales Forum on European Affairs was established in recognition of the

Assembly's objective to develop the profile of Wales in Europe and internationally

and stems from one of the recommendations made in the European Strategy

Group's report "The National Assembly for Wales and the European Union"

published in 1998.

4. The decision to establish the Forum was taken at the first meeting of the European

Affairs Committee on 1 July 1999, when it was agreed that the Forum should be

exploratory and interactive in nature and include people working at a grass roots

level in Wales. **A copy of EUR-01-99 (p.3) setting out the initial purpose,**

**structure and membership of the Forum is attached at Annex A.**

5. The Forum has met twice - on 22 October 1999 and 12 May 2000, at Cardiff International Arena. Both events were attended by a wide audience from public, private and voluntary organisations. The first meeting was addressed by the Vice President of the European Commission, Neil Kinnock, and explored a number of key issues on the European agenda, including transport and trans European networks, State Aids, Equal Opportunities, the work of various EU institutions and Welsh representation in Brussels. The second meeting was addressed by Lord Brittan of Spennithorne and focussed on the effects of the EU on business in Wales.

6. Efforts to hold subsequent meetings have been unsuccessful for a number of reasons, but mainly due to the fact that speakers of the appropriate calibre have not been available because of prior engagements. To address this deficiency in part, the St David's Day programme of events included a forum type conference to which a number of those from prior audiences were invited and included an address from An Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern TD, on the Irish view on the future enlargement of the

European Union.

## **Future role and work of the Forum**

7. If the Forum is to continue, there is a need to keep its work relevant and focussed, particularly in the longer term. To this end, the First Minister wrote to party leaders inviting their views on the role and work of the Forum so far and any ideas they might have for future meetings. The Committee has also heard from the Welsh Centre for International Affairs with its proposals for how the Forum might proceed. Drawing on those proposals and the views of the party political leaders who responded, a number of options have been identified.

- Option 1 - Continue in the same vein as before – ie large "conference" style gathering of delegates, high profile speakers, break-out sessions – to consider overarching European strategic issues - useful to take advantage of visiting dignitaries, raising profile of Wales, good for information sharing but insufficient time for in-depth discussion, hence no real outcomes.
- Option 2 – smaller gathering, invited speakers and audience from specific sectors – eg 3 Es (E commerce, Euro and Exports) - more focussed – more likely to appeal, more opportunity for discussion.
- Option 3 – small working group or "think tank" – flexible membership of informed people, experts charged with the task of considering a particular issue in depth and making recommendations to the Assembly – opportunity to hear from people "on the ground"- would need to choose members carefully – might raise unreasonable expectations.
- Option 4 - combination of all three – annual conference plus one or two (at most) smaller more focussed events as appropriate eg European Council conclusions, Euro implications etc – more flexibility, greater degree of interaction and feedback between different levels of working.

8. Members of the Committee are invited to consider these options and a number of

practical suggestions put forward by the Welsh Centre for International Affairs for

making the Forum more relevant :-

- Participants (other than the National Assembly) should be given the opportunity to suggest themes
- National Assembly officials should have more input on the day with regard to leading discussion groups and seminars (including staff of the Assembly Office in Brussels and secondees)
- Other agencies and organisations should present papers or lead in discussions eg Universities, major players in the private sector, the Wales European Centre, European Commission Representation in Wales
- A detailed report on the work of the Forum should be a regular feature of the European Affairs Committee

## **Compliance**

9. The Assembly can rely on sections 33 and 40 of the Government of Wales Act

(which have been delegated to the First Minister) which provide for the Assembly

to consider and make appropriate representations about any matter affecting Wales,

and to do anything which is calculated to facilitate, or is conducive, or incidental to,

the exercise of any of its functions. There are no issues of regularity or propriety.

## **Financial Implications**

10. The cost of holding two Forums in each year is around £6,000.

Expenditure up to this level during this financial year can be accommodated within

the 2001-2002 Miscellaneous Support Services Budget.

**European and External Affairs Directorate**

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