

**RESTRICTED – EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE***file*

EC(M)(99)3

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE: TUESDAY 14 DECEMBER 1999**

**Present:** First Minister  
Deputy First Minister

Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development  
Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure  
Minister of Education  
Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment  
Minister of the Environment  
Minister of Finance and Personnel  
Minister of Further and Higher Education, Training and Employment  
Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Secretary to the Executive Committee

**ITEM 1: MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING AND MATTERS ARISING – EC(M)(99)2**

- 1.1 The Executive Committee approved the Minutes of the meeting of 7 December.
- 1.2 North South Ministerial Council: a draft of the report on the inaugural meeting of the NSMC which the First Minister and deputy First Minister proposed to make to the Assembly that afternoon on behalf of all the Ministers who had attended the meeting was circulated to Ministers and agreed.
- 1.3 Decisions had not yet been made on appointments of Chairpersons and Vice Chairpersons of Implementation Bodies. Proposals would be brought to the Executive Committee at a future meeting.
- 1.4 Belfast Harbour: A note from the Department for Regional Development about action in relation to the sale of Belfast Harbour was circulated to Ministers. The Chairman also read an extract from a letter of 13 December from the Minister for Regional Development.

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- 1.5 The Committee noted the reference in the DRD note to a possible progress statement in the Assembly. The Committee resolved that paragraph 4.4 of the draft Ministerial Code should now be adopted, setting in place the requirement for appropriate notification and clearance of any statements or announcements to the Assembly.

**ITEM 2: PUBLIC EXPENDITURE – EC(99)14**

- 2.1 The Minister of Finance and Personnel presented EC(99)14 which covered the range of issues raised with him by Departments in relation to their budgets and which sought approval to make a statement to the Assembly on Wednesday 15 December, setting out the proposed budgets for 2000/01 which would then be considered by the Assembly and its Committees.
- 2.2 It was agreed that presentational improvements could be made by inserting appropriate footnotes to some of the figures.
- 2.3 The Minister of Finance and Personnel agreed to discuss with the Assembly Commission, on behalf of the Executive Committee, the scope for easing resource pressures by phasing the recruitment of additional staff to the Assembly.
- 2.4 The Committee resolved that all savings in budgets or other resources becoming available to Departments, including receipts, must be notified to the Executive Committee. The Minister of Finance would bring proposals for reallocation to the Executive Committee for approval.
- 2.5 The Committee agreed the paper for laying before the Assembly.

**ITEM 3: EU STRUCTURAL FUNDS/NEW PEACE PROGRAMME – EC(99)15**

- 3.1 The Minister of Finance and Personnel presented paper EC(99)15 which was an introductory paper seeking the Executive Committee's agreement to the broad principles which should underlie the Structural Funds Plan, and agreement that officials should be authorised to take forward exploratory discussions with the European Commission.

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- 3.2 The Minister of Finance and Personnel intended to bring forward a detailed paper for consideration by the Executive Committee in January, following discussions between DFP and other Departments. This would include proposals for the implementation mechanisms which should be used.
- 3.3 Following the Committee's consideration of the detailed paper in January, it could be appropriate for a joint visit to be made by the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to the Commission, followed by a visit by representatives of the Commission to Northern Ireland. The whole process of agreeing the Plan was due to be completed by May 2000.
- 3.4 It was agreed that an appropriate balance needed to be struck between an economic focus and social inclusion. It was further agreed that consultation between Departments and the Social Partners would be important as more detailed work moved ahead.
- 3.5 The Chairmen referred to the related issue of Northern Ireland representation in Brussels. A DFP paper on this had been circulated in error and had been withdrawn. The matter was now the responsibility of OFMDFM, and proposals would be brought forward in due course to the Executive Committee. Separately from this, the First Minister, Deputy First Minister and the Minister of Finance and Personnel would meet to consider the proposed leasing of new premises for the representation in Brussels, ensuring that the decision taken did not close down any options relating to the wider question of Northern Ireland representation in Brussels.

**ITEM 4: PROGRAMME FOR GOVERNMENT**

- 4.1 The Chairmen reported that a paper on the process for drawing up the Programme for Government had not yet been finalised; it was hoped to bring it forward for the Committee's next meeting. The process of devising a Programme for Government would extend over a period of some six months. The importance of consultation with all Executive Committee colleagues was stressed.

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**ITEM 5: BRITISH IRISH COUNCIL – EC(99)17**

- 5.1 The inaugural meeting of the BIC would take place in London on Friday 17 December. The five Ministers attending from Northern Ireland would be:
- First Minister
  - Deputy First Minister
  - Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment
  - Minister of Finance and Personnel
  - Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.
- 5.2 The Committee noted the proposed Agenda and agreed that the draft Memorandum on Procedural Guidance should be approved.
- 5.3 It was agreed that, in the future programme of work, Northern Ireland should opt to lead on Transport in sectoral format.

**ITEM 6: FOOD STANDARDS AGENCY – EC(99)18**

- 6.1 The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety presented the paper to the Committee, outlining the opportunity which existed for Northern Ireland to decide whether to join in a UK-wide Food Standards Agency or establish a separate Northern Ireland Agency. The Committee agreed to defer the Commencement Order on the Food Standards Act as it applies to Northern Ireland pending a decision by the Executive Committee.
- 6.2 It was agreed that a detailed paper should be put to the Executive Committee for discussion in January, setting out the options which existed, the resource implications of each, and other relevant factors involved. The NI Forum response to the Government's White Paper on "The Food Standards Agency – A Force for Change" would also be circulated.

**ITEM 7: DEVOLUTION: MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING AND OVERARCHING CONCORDATS – EC(99)19**

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- 7.1 The Chairmen stressed the importance of the Memorandum of Understanding and Concordats which had been received from the Secretary of State, and the need for early discussion of their terms. The papers would be considered in detail at the next meeting of the Committee with a view to signing off on them as soon as possible.

**ITEM 8: YEAR 2000 AND THE MILLENNIUM BUG PREPARATIONS – EC(99)20**

- 8.1 EC(99)20 set out the action taken to avoid systems failures at the millennium, the contingency plans in place in case problems did arise, and the arrangements for monitoring and reporting on the position over the millennium period.
- 8.2 Ministers noted the need for them to be available in the event of major service disruption affecting their areas of responsibility.

**ITEM 9: ORAL QUESTIONS – EC(99)21**

- 9.1 The Chairmen presented the rota for Oral Questions, for information. Any views could be forwarded to the Procedure Committee once established.

**ITEM 10 – PARLIAMENTARY PRIVATE SECRETARIES – EC(99)22**

- 10.1 The Executive Committee clarified the position of "Parliamentary Private Secretaries" in relation to the work of Departments. The Committee resolved that "PPSs" should not be given official recognition by Departments, should not have access to Departmental papers or meetings, and in this role should not be supported directly or indirectly from public funds.

**ITEM 11: DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

- 11.1 It was agreed that the next meeting of the Executive Committee should take place on Tuesday 11 January.

**ITEM 12: DRAFT PRESS RELEASE**

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12.1 The Executive Committee agreed the terms of the draft Press Release which was circulated at the meeting.

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