

European & External Affairs Committee

EUR(2) 05-06 (p.2)

Date: 22 June 2006

Venue: Committee Room 3, Senedd, Cardiff Bay

Title: Committee's response to the White Paper on a European Communication Policy

Purpose of the paper

1. At the last meeting, members discussed the European Commission's White Paper on a European Communication Policy. The Committee agreed to respond to the White Paper.
2. During discussions at the last meeting, the Committee requested further information on the status of the Welsh language in relation to the EU's Institutions which the Welsh Assembly Government has provided - (EUR(2) 05-06), Note on the use of Welsh in relation to the EU's institutions. The Committee also requested information on the portrayal of the EU in Welsh media – see paper (EUR(2) 05-06 Paper 3) Coverage of EU issues in Welsh media prepared by the Members Research Service.
- 3 The draft response in paragraph 7 is based on Members' discussion at the last meeting. Members are invited to consider this response and any other additional points they may wish to raise with the Commission, in response to the White Paper and in light of the further discussions at this meeting.

Background: European Commission's White Paper on Communication

4. The European Commission is inviting comments by 1 July 2006 on its proposed communication strategy which aims to involve a wide range of players to work in partnership to help close the gap in understanding between the European Union and its citizens. The White Paper (COM(2006)35) can be found here:

http://ec.europa.eu/communication_white_paper/doc/white_paper_en.pdf

5. The background to the European Commission's White Paper on a European Communication Policy can be found in the paper to this European and External Affairs Committee, (EUR(2) 04-06 Paper 2), Citizenship education on the European Union in Wales and the White Paper on a European Communication Policy, 12 May 2006:

http://www.wales.gov.uk/servlet/EuropeanAffairsCommittee?area_code=37D6B0F100072F6F0000125D00000000&document_code=N000000000000000000000000043938&p_arch=post&module=dynamicpages&month_year=5|2006

6. Members may also be interested to note the conclusions of the House of Lords European Union Select Committee report on communicating European issues to the public (EU Legislation—Public Awareness of the Scrutiny Role of the House of Lords, 25 May 2006, HL 179, 2005-2006). The Committee believes that their role in raising public awareness of the policies and proposals emerging from Brussels, is best served through promoting their work on scrutinising the UK Government's decisions on EU legislation. In relation to the media, they conclude that they could be more proactive in promoting their work, looking beyond the national print media and consider more effectively serving the needs of the specialist and regional press. For further information see:

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld200506/ldselect/ldeucom/179/17902.htm>

The Committee's draft response to the White Paper

7. On the basis of discussions held at the last Committee meeting, the following is suggested as a basis for the draft response:

i. The Committee welcomes the Commission's White Paper as a means of initiating debate on how the EU can be better communicated to citizens. Promoting better engagement of people in the political process is not only an issue for the EU's institutions, but a challenge which faces all political institutions, whether regional, national or European.

ii. The Committee would welcome and support initiatives to improve awareness throughout Wales of what it means to be part of the European Union, both in terms of the impact that the EU can have on people's daily lives, as well as how they can engage with it politically – either directly or through regional or national institutions. The Committee recognises that there are many ways in which this could be done.

iii. However, the Committee agrees with the Commission's analysis that the national education system plays an important role in relation to people's understanding of politics and their rights as citizens, and believes that the most effective route to changing perceptions and improving awareness of future generations is through civic education in schools.

iv. As a result of discussions stimulated by the White Paper on Communication and the Commission's Plan D, the Committee is intending to review how civic education in relation to the EU is taught in schools both primary and secondary and how general awareness about the EU and its Member States is dealt with within the curriculum.

v. The Committee also agrees that raising awareness of people's rights as citizens of the EU should not be limited to the education system, and should be tackled beyond that.

vi. The Committee is interested in exchanging good practice with other Member States and regions, and would welcome any support from the European Commission in facilitating this exercise in a structured / more on-going way.

vii. The Committee looks forward to continuing this dialogue with the European Commission and would be pleased to share the results of its review with the European Commission.

Additional points to consider

Communicating with the EU institutions through the medium of Welsh

8. The White Paper states that "all citizens should have access in their own language to information about matters of public concern". At the last meeting, Members queried to what extent citizens can communicate with the European Institutions through the medium of Welsh. The Welsh Assembly Government has provided more information on this – see (EUR(2) 05-06 - Note on the use of Welsh in relation to the EU's institutions.

9. The Committee may wish to comment on the arrangements being put in place and may wish to pursue to what extent the Commission's activities in Wales are or can be conducted bilingually.

Involving the media more effectively in communicating Europe

10. The Members Research Service has provided a paper to note, reviewing coverage of news in the Welsh press relating to EU legislation or policy since January 2006 (EUR(2) 05-06 (p3)). The paper concludes that, on the whole, coverage in the Welsh press is well balanced and accurate.

11. The Committee may wish to comment on these conclusions. On this point, the European Commission wishes to encourage public bodies at European, national and regional level to work more closely with the media to supply them with high-quality news and current affairs material; establish new links with regional and local communications systems.

A partnership approach to EU Communication policy

12. The White Paper states that "many European policies and programmes are implemented at regional and local levels. Thus local and regional authorities are well placed to engage in dialogue with citizens and to actively involve local communities in EU issues."

13. The Committee may wish to respond to this point as the Commission does not make any concrete suggestions on how this partnership with the regional level can work, other than building on the work of the Committee of the Regions to encourage regional and local discussions of European issues.

Reaching out to the citizen

14. Apart from improving civic education, the Commission has made other suggestions on how to reach out to the citizen. The Committee may wish to comment on some of these:

- i. Transforming libraries into digitally connected European libraries that could work as information and learning centres for all citizens.
- ii. Member States could establish new meeting places for Europeans, to host cultural and political events relating to Europe.
- iii. The EU institutions and bodies could work together to co-ordinate, improve and extend their visitors' programmes.
- iv. The EU institutions should explore the possibility of complementing EU websites with online forums - 'virtual meeting places' – with links to external information sources.
- v. The European Commission's minimum standards for consultation could be reviewed to ensure a more balanced representation of interest groups and a more responsive follow-up.
- vi. The three main institutions could also consider organising joint open debates to complement Parliamentary debates, taking questions from the public or from journalists.

Other issues

15. The Commission is proposing that a European Charter or Code of Conduct on Communication to guide information activities on European issues could be produced as a means of engaging all actors – including regional governments/ institutions in a commitment to these principles. The commitment would be on a voluntary basis.

16. The Commission is launching a six month consultation on the desirability and purpose of such a Charter. The Committee may want to consider it further at that point.

17. The Commission also makes suggestions on how more can be done to gauge European public opinion: setting up a new network of national experts in public opinion research to help exchange best practices; and setting up an independent Observatory for European Public Opinion.

Action for Subject Committee

18. To agree the draft response and any additional points to convey to the European Commission and other relevant organisations.

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