Ms Danuta Hubner  
Member of the European Commission  
Commissioner for Regional Policy  
Berlaymont Building  
Rue de la Loi 200  
BE1040  
BRUSSELS

Dear Danuta,

As Minister of Finance for a region of Europe that has benefited greatly from Cohesion Policy in the past, I welcome the opportunity to comment on its future and to play a part in this debate.

The Northern Ireland Executive are determined that Northern Ireland will participate more fully as an EU region in the future and are very pleased that the President Barroso has established a Commission Task Force for Northern Ireland. A key component of this is better engagement of the region with European Policymakers and we intend to play an active role as a region in European policymaking.

The First Minister and deputy First Minister have already provided thoughts and comments on the detailed response to the consultation questions you will have received on behalf of the UK. However, I am also attaching a short general statement on behalf of the Northern Ireland Executive which outlines economic growth as the main driver for reducing disparities between regions of the European Union.

Rt Hon Peter D Robinson MP MLA  
Minister for Finance and Personnel
NORTHERN IRELAND INPUT TO COMMISSION CONSULTATION ON COHESION POLICY

Northern Ireland has benefited much from cohesion policy in the past, including special PEACE funding, and has made significant progress as we have moved from a Transnational Objective 1 region in 2000-06 to a Competitiveness and Employment region for 2007-13 after over 10 years of sustained growth. We have recently achieved record levels of employment and our levels of unemployment are among the lowest of UK regions. However, despite these positive experiences the relative change in our GDP per head has been much less marked. Our economy requires structural change to meet the challenges of globalisation and to increase the contribution of the private sector and to increase innovation and enterprise to achieve productivity led growth.

Growing a dynamic, innovative economy is to be the top priority and primary focus of the Northern Ireland Executive in the coming years. Sustainable economic growth will provide the opportunities and means to enhance quality of life, reduce poverty and disadvantage, increase wealth, health and wellbeing and build stronger, more sustainable and empowered communities.

Northern Ireland seeks EU cohesion policies that support these efforts, that enables regions to achieve and sustain growth and that is sufficiently flexible to allow regions to implement their own approaches to achieving their full potential. Meeting the challenges of globalisation, innovation, enterprise, productivity and skills are our priority. Social and territorial dimensions are also needed to enable all to contribute to and share in the benefits of growth on the basis of equality of opportunity. Overarching EU policies on jobs and growth should establish the overall strategic approach for cohesion policy and provide the framework for all EU regions. Within this cohesion policy needs to maintain its main focus on enabling lagging regions to improve their relative performance. EU enlargement means greater disparities within European regions and cohesion policy should place its emphasis on addressing disparities. Co-operation between regions is a clear area where cohesion policy adds most value and could be strengthened.

It is essential too that cohesion policy respects the respective roles of each different level of Government and ensures performance and added value is maximised at each level in line with the subsidiary principle. Delivery mechanisms must be further simplified, transparent and subject to the highest standards of financial control.