

Key priorities of the European Union

Introduction

The European Union's key political priorities are set by its Member States when the Heads of State and Government meet around three times a year in the European Council. Other priorities are agreed in the various Council of Ministers' meetings. The European Commission then produces an annual strategy and work programme to address these priorities. The European Parliament can also call on it to take action.

The **Lisbon strategy** for Growth and Jobs is the Commission's core strategy. In 2000, EU leaders meeting in Lisbon agreed the target of becoming by 2010 "the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world". Five years on it was clear that the EU was not on track. In 2006, it was relaunched with the less ambitious strap-line, focusing on modernising the economy, innovation and improving its people's skills. Member States produce national action plans detailing efforts at national, regional and local level towards achieving the strategy.

The other key strategy is the EU's Sustainable Development Strategy – sometimes referred to as the "**Gothenburg agenda**". Revised by the European Council in June 2006, it provides a long-term approach for making all EU policies more sustainable.

In Autumn 2005, under the UK Presidency, the EU agreed to put **globalisation** at the centre of its policy agenda. At Hampton Court, a set of interlocking policies was identified as needing a European response: research and development, universities, demography, and energy, along with security and a more effective external response.

Tackling **climate change** has risen to the top of the agenda more recently, together with meeting the energy needs of the EU. An **EU energy package** to establish a common policy was launched in January 2007, with the aim of achieving sustainability, competitiveness and security of energy supply. Justice and home affairs issues are also high priorities – managing **migration** flows and the EU's external borders – as is **development aid** to countries outside the EU.

While it continues to deliver its policy agenda, the **EU Constitutional Treaty** is still sitting on the shelf waiting for Member States to decide what to do about it. In particular, they are still keen to achieve the institutional reform of the EU which is regarded as necessary after the EU's enlargement from 15 to 27 Member States.

For the Commission, **communicating with citizens**, explaining its priorities and debating the future of Europe has become a key priority following a general feeling of disenchantment with the EU across Member States. The Commission Office in Wales has organised a series of debates on the EU in Wales. Better regulation is a key governance issue for the EU, as is ensuring the proper enforcement of EU laws.

Forthcoming EU and UK primary legislation

- ◆ A proposal for a legislative framework for **health services** addressing the mobility of patients and professionals in the EU is expected in November 2007.
- ◆ European directives for economic **migrants** establishing rules and rights for them and on admission for highly skilled workers are expected in September 2007.
- ◆ A review of the **EU Emissions Trading Scheme** with a view to extending its scope for the third trading period starting in 2013.
- ◆ The revision of the **working time directive** is on hold as Member States have failed to agree on the opt-out of the 48 hour week – a key issue for the UK.

- ◆ The UK government and devolved administrations have to implement and enforce the **REACH** (Registration, Evaluation and Authorisation of Chemicals) EU legislation - it comes into force on 1 June 2007.
 - ◆ The UK government and DAs are working on implementing the **services directive** – designed to break down the barriers to cross-border trade in services.
- See individual topic briefs for other EU legislation expected.

EU policy

These are some of the Commission's major initiatives expected this year:

- ◆ The Commission is undertaking a **Single Market review**, it will set the scene for the Single Market into the next decade and recommend further legislation.
- ◆ The Commission is consulting on the development of an **EU maritime policy** and should produce its initial recommendations in October 2007.
- ◆ The Commission is undertaking a comprehensive **stocktaking of European society**, to serve as a basis for a new EU social model agenda.
- ◆ A **white paper on health strategy** will set out how the European level can contribute to health policy, expected in July 2007.
- ◆ The Commission will also consult on a European **climate change adaptation** programme and **climate change policy post 2012** (end of Kyoto Protocol).
- ◆ Also, Wales' two **structural funds programmes** (for West Wales and the Valleys and East Wales) and its **Rural Development Plan** should be approved by the European Commission and put into action before the Autumn.

Key Assembly Government strategy documents and action plans from the Second Assembly:

- ◆ The Welsh Assembly Government produced a paper for the European and External Affairs Committee to indicate their likely priority areas arising from the European Commission Legislative and Work Programme 2007 (February 2007).
<http://www.wales.gov.uk/cms/2/EuropeanAffairsCommittee/37D6B0F100072F6F0000125D00000000/4a6c29b9ecd803bd72b6d4455e6eceb0.htm>

Legacy issues from the Second Assembly

Each Committee highlighted several European issues of potential interest in its legacy paper for the attention of the Third Assembly – too many to list here, but they include the items listed above.

Useful links

1. The Welsh Assembly Government has a website on the European Union:
http://new.wales.gov.uk/topics/international/european_union/?lang=en
2. Members Research Service European Affairs intranet page:
<http://assembly/presidingoffic/mrs/europe/euro-e.htm>
3. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office "Britain in the EU" website:
<http://www.fco.gov.uk/servlet/Front?pagename=OpenMarket/Xcelerate/ShowPage&c=Page&cid=1007029391674>
4. The EU's gateway website:
http://europa.eu/index_en.htm

Further information

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