

EU Informal Competitiveness Council (Ian Lucas, Parliamentary Under-Secretary (Business and Regulatory Reform), Department for Business, Innovation & Skills)

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The following statement provides information on the EU Informal Competitiveness Council that took place in Umeå, Sweden on 14 and 16 October. My officials Andrew van der Lem, head of EU strategy (at the industry and internal market sessions on 14 and 15 October) and Professor Adrian Smith, director general of Science and Research (at the Research Council sessions on 15 and 16 October) represented the UK.

At the internal market session on 14 October, priorities for future EU single market policy were discussed. The Commission is planning to make proposals by 2012 on a new single market package. In discussion, member states prioritised recovery from the economic crisis and financial stability, focusing on external (i.e. outside EU) competitiveness, improving the business environment and boosting consumer confidence. The importance of implementation of the EU services directive was also stressed. The UK emphasised the need for a joined up approach to EU single market, industry and research policy, with a focus on outcomes, the evidence base and external competitiveness. The UK also stressed the need to make the EU single market more accessible. The presidency concluded there was broad support for a new Commission package on the single market.

At the industry session on 15 October, the presidency hosted a discussion on eco-efficiency from a competitiveness perspective, which included presentations by two businesses and a policy think-tank. The EU presidency suggested that EU member states should take a global lead in promoting growth and jobs through an eco-efficient economy. There was general support among member states that economic growth and environmental protection can be mutually reinforcing, not conflicting. However member states also stressed the need for a global "level playing field" and the importance of agreeing a global deal at the United Nations climate change conference at Copenhagen in December. In the informal breakout sessions, the UK stressed the need for the EU to be a good place to do business, for EU companies to have access to global markets, for a global carbon price to be agreed and for targeted EU funding and EU public procurement to help develop a low carbon economy.

At the research Council sessions on 15 and 16 October, on the afternoon of the first day research ministers held discussions in break out groups on the future governance structures of the European Research Area (ERA); the outcome of these discussions was considered in a plenary session in the morning of the second day. While there was little support for the idea of establishing regular "ERA Ministerial" meetings, there was agreement that links between research, innovation and education policies needed to be strengthened and that the mandate of the Centre for Renewable Energy Systems Technology (CREST) advisory committee needed to give that body a more strategic role. Ministers also discussed expected cost overruns on the international ITER (International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor) nuclear fusion facility. The UK stressed the need to find an acceptable solution to the funding issue.