

Regional Policy Commissioner Danuta Hübner

Opening of the Europe Direct Centre - Leeds
12.00, Friday 17 November 2006

Going Local on European Issues

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to be in Leeds today, in this historic civic building. For a European Commissioner for Regional Policy it is always a pleasure to visit regions in transition, and Yorkshire and Humber is no exception. I feel tempted to say that Leeds, you are an inspiration for many other cities which are in the process of economic transformation. Over the years, the city has been transformed from being a capital of wool and textiles capital to being a vibrant centre for everything from environmental technology to financial services.

It is also a pleasure to be here today for the launch of this Europe Direct Centre. From the beginning of our mandate in November 2004, this Commission has recognised that there is a need to communicate Europe more effectively. "Plan D" where the 'D' stands for democracy, dialogue and debate has set out our new approach to communication.

I have been told by my colleagues that people from Yorkshire have a reputation for plain speaking. I also want to speak plainly and to emphasise one key aspect of this plan – the need to 'go local' with our Communication efforts. Centres such as this one are at the heart of the new approach. This Europe Direct centre will act as a channel between the public in Leeds and the European Union.

During my many visits to the regions which I mentioned a moment ago, I have had first hand experience of the importance of this local approach to the provision of information on Europe. It is through local media for example – regional newspapers, radio stations and television programmes – that people most readily identify and it is often to these media that they turn for information. In short, if information provision is to be meaningful for people, then it is up to the local practitioners who know those people, the make-up and the economy of Leeds and Yorkshire, who are best placed to get together in providing the facts about the EU. Centres like this are tailored to answer information needs close to the source. And it is not just for adults. it also for children and I am glad to see so many of them here today, and to hear of the future activities you are organising for them.

You have a big task ahead of you. Over 30% of people in this region say they know nothing about the EU or its policies. Yet more than 70% agree that being in the EU increases opportunities for business. This centre is one concrete step to filling the knowledge gap.

The service you provide will range from providing the names of your representatives in the European Parliament to providing guidance to specialist business advice or to the results of research and development which may be of interest to local businesses. You will provide information on the rights that many people have as citizens of the EU, and of which they are unaware: the right to work and to study in other member countries on the same terms as nationals of the country concerned; or, at the other end of the age scale, the right to retire to other member states and to receive your pension there. And for all of you, the right to medical treatment in other countries paid for under the National Health Service.

I hope that you will help to explain other benefits that arise from our joint action in the European Union – the cheap flights that have resulted from the liberalisation of Europe's skies, and the Charter of Air Passengers' Rights which goes alongside side it. The EU-led liberalisation of telecommunications markets has brought increased competition, and cheaper phone calls, and our current actions to bring down roaming charges for mobile phone users making calls abroad.

I could go on listing such examples. Instead, however, I want to express one sincere hope. And that is that this Europe Direct Centre, and indeed all the others, will not only be a source of factual information, but that it will also help to stimulate a broader interest in European affairs. It should encourage people in this area to reach out for that information and to inform themselves.

Of course providing information will not automatically change people's minds. But I think that by providing the facts, by correcting misunderstandings, and by stimulating discussion, you have a key role to play in promoting constructive debate and engagement on European issues. This EUROPE *DIRECT* centre is a window for Leeds on the things that the EU does. Staff here are in a position of trust. They understand the social and political background to questions more fully than people working in Brussels — and are an essential compliment to the excellent work being done by Reijo Kemppinen and his team in the Commission representation in London.

You are now part of a network of over 400 such centres across the EU, from the Azores Islands in the middle of the Atlantic to Cyprus, and from the Canary Islands to Rovaniemi in the North of Finland. This centre puts Leeds

on the map of key information providers in Europe. I hope it can also put Europe on the map in Leeds – I wish it every success and declare it open. Thank you.