

Northern Ireland Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Economic growth in Northern Ireland: new and emerging sectors, HC 183

Monday 29 June 2026

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[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Tonia Antoniazzi (Chair); Chris Bloore; Claire Hanna; Simon Hoare; Mike Kane; Mr Paul Kohler; Katrina Murray; Gavin Robinson; Robin Swann.

Questions 187 - 267

Witnesses

[I:](#) Blair McDougall MP, Minister for Small Business and Economic Transformation, Department for Business and Trade; Matthew Patrick MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Northern Ireland Office; Paul Flynn, Deputy Director for Windsor Framework Taskforce, Northern Ireland Office; Sally Jones, Deputy Director, Industrial Strategy Implementation, Partnerships and Place, Department for Business and Trade.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Blair McDougall, Matthew Patrick, Paul Flynn and Sally Jones.

Q187 Chair: Welcome to the Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee inquiry on economic growth. This is our ministerial session today, so thank you very much to Blair McDougall MP, Minister for Small Business and Economic Transformation from the Department for Business and Trade, and to Minister Matthew Patrick from the Northern Ireland Office. We are also joined by Sally Jones, deputy director of industrial strategy implementation, partnerships and place from DBT, and Paul Flynn, deputy director of the Windsor framework taskforce in the Northern Ireland Office. Welcome, everybody.

Minister Patrick, the Government's response to our report on economic growth in Northern Ireland noted that the NIO's "economic vision" seeks to "address structural weaknesses in the economy". However, it also acknowledged that responsibility for skills, energy, planning and infrastructure are devolved, so how are you going to tackle Northern



Ireland's barriers to growth?

Matthew Patrick: You mentioned a couple of issues there, and you are right that they are devolved matters, but it is really clear, whether it is myself, the Secretary of State or Baroness Anderson, that we are not here to pass the buck when it comes to these things, where we can work with the Executive on helping drive the breadth of skills.

I know that you and your Committee have been right across Northern Ireland, and you will see it for yourself. The depth of skills is evident, but there is not always the breadth that businesses can take advantage of. Our role is not to sit by and say, "Yes, we have cut a cheque for a record settlement, greater than ever before in the history of devolution, and we will just watch what you do with it". Our job is to actively engage with that. That is why, whether it is city and growth deals or continued engagement with DBT and other parts of Government, we are really pushing to help Northern Ireland.

Q188 **Chair:** You disagreed—and I do not know how you can—with our recommendation to introduce forecasts for additional growth, employment and productivity, so how will the NIO measure progress towards achieving its economic vision?

Matthew Patrick: The metrics that all of us would naturally look at in terms of growth in Northern Ireland, the growth of businesses in Northern Ireland, employment opportunities and wage growth are really important things that every one of us will look at, but we will also judge ourselves on some of the inputs. I am sure that, later in this session, you will be asking me about some of that in terms of the one-stop shop and how we are going to support some of the businesses that are trying to grow their books. It is inputs and the broader outputs that everyone would recognise.

Q189 **Chair:** One of the measures that you highlighted in your response is the public sector transformation fund. It appears to us that the Executive have surrendered budget in this year's main estimates allocation specifically for this fund. What challenge do you offer to the Executive for public sector transformation?

Matthew Patrick: On public sector transformation, it is so apt that we are being asked about it in this inquiry, because you do not get the level of economic growth that you want without the public services that can back it up. When you speak to businesses, if one of their team is trying to focus on when they are next going to get a hospital appointment—and they might be waiting years—that is not good for their productivity; it is not good for their contribution.

That is why UK Government have put £235 million into the transformation fund. The transformation board is chaired by our permanent secretary, because we have to turn around some of the services in Northern Ireland to deliver better for those who live there.



Q190 **Chair:** When that is something that is devolved, how do you turn it around?

Matthew Patrick: Through direct funding. There are issues around planning, for instance, which is devolved. We are putting a direct pot into hiring and training more planners, so that quicker decisions can be taken and there is not the backlog that we have seen and that was referenced in the Secretary of State's reply to you.

It is also the case that I respect totally the devolution agreement; I think it is incredible. That does not mean that we do not work collaboratively, that we do not engage and that we do not provide support and challenge where necessary. We will always do that, and that is borne out in the conversations I have with Executive members across Northern Ireland. They value that engagement. We get to bring expertise back and forth, for what it is worth, for everyone's benefit.

Q191 **Mr Kohler:** Can I push you a bit, Matthew? You told the Committee previously that your first responsibility was to lead on economic growth. We suggested to you in our interim report that you set out an economic vision with some smart objectives. The NIO came back to us and said, "That is not realistic". Why not? You cannot measure just inputs. You have to measure how effective those inputs are. Why is it unrealistic to have some smart objectives?

Matthew Patrick: It is a really fair challenge, Mr Kohler. The reality is that a separate vision with separate metrics and separate stats from the Northern Ireland Office could, frankly, muddle things. We have a Government that have a very clear agenda around growth. We all know what the metrics are for when it is working.

For what it is worth—let us make sure it is on record—the economy in Northern Ireland is booming and very positive. We need to make sure that the opportunities continue and are felt right across Northern Ireland, but it is already strong, with a real opportunity to grow further. There are metrics that all of us would naturally understand—employment rates, wage growth and GDP—which would make sense to you, me and every one of our constituents and everyone in Northern Ireland. Us stepping in and creating another set of metrics and another set of tests might muddy that.

Q192 **Mr Kohler:** Why not some targets with regard to the metrics that do exist? I am not asking for new metrics. I am asking for targets in respect of those metrics. Would that not help focus minds?

Matthew Patrick: I am sure that it could. There is work that we are doing to ensure that there is support to grow those businesses across Northern Ireland. I mentioned the city and growth deals before. That is hundreds of millions of pounds of public money that we will invest in infrastructure, skills and opportunities right across Northern Ireland. We will clearly be judging the success of those city and growth deals based on each one of them, as you would totally expect.



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Q193 **Mr Kohler:** How are you judging them? Unless you are telling me what your target is, I do not know if this has been a success or not, or are you saying that any fractional increase will be enough? As you say, hundreds of millions of pounds are being spent. Surely you should have an idea of what you are trying to achieve with that rather than some sort of amorphous idea that things will improve. Surely you have to be tighter than that.

Matthew Patrick: If we go to specifics, the Belfast region city deal is £1 billion. It is £350 million from UK Government, £350 million from the Executive and money coming in directly from businesses too. Academia plays a crucial role in taking advantage of these things. There is the input of the advanced manufacturing innovation centre. The opportunity to suddenly have a base that all businesses across Northern Ireland can tap into and utilise, and benefit from that expertise, is clearly going to benefit those businesses.

Q194 **Mr Kohler:** That sounds great but, unless you have a target you are working to, how do we know whether you have succeeded? You have invested all that money. Surely you would say, "We are investing this money. This is what we are trying to achieve"—a minimum of blah, blah, blah—"on the various metrics that exist". Why not have that as a target?

Matthew Patrick: On the individual deals that have been signed, city and growth deals—some are still being developed as well—I am sure that there will be metrics that people have for success of those.

Q195 **Mr Kohler:** You are the person in charge of this.

Matthew Patrick: I am not in charge of individual deals. We have co-funded. We collaborate with the Executive. That is really important work. It is clear that you want to see businesses have more opportunities. You want to see better employment opportunities, better-paid jobs and more jobs. These are clearly things we would like to see. I do not think that saying that this is the specific bar, from the Northern Ireland Office's perspective, is necessary to hold to account some of these funds that we are putting money into. We work closely with the Executive. They clearly will have some of their own metrics as well, and our job is to drive economic growth.

Q196 **Robin Swann:** Thank you very much, Minister Patrick. Picking up on Mr Kohler's points there, are you telling this Committee that you accept the Executive's targets for growth, investment and employment, rather than the NIO creating or measuring its own? What do you do if the Executive are not meeting those targets, having received government money?

Matthew Patrick: There are shared ambitions. It is really important that we have economic growth in Northern Ireland. There are huge positives in the economy. We need to build on them. We need to remove other barriers and build on them. They are shared ambitions, whether you are in UK Government or the Northern Ireland Executive. It is an ambition to see good jobs and more jobs. It is an ambition to see more opportunities.



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In terms of apprentices, when I am visiting businesses right across Northern Ireland that are taking advantage of the opportunities from that collaborative working, they really value that. That is the focus that we have, which is to try to support those aims that we all share.

Q197 **Robin Swann:** So it is aspirational in aims, and NIO is not looking for a hard metric with regard to a hard number to measure success or failure against.

Matthew Patrick: We have not specifically said, "This metric has to be at this level or this will not have been achieved". I mentioned city and growth deals. There is a real opportunity to measure the outputs of the defence growth deal as well, and clearly that will be in the jobs created, the businesses saved, the businesses created and the economic output. These are the metrics that we will all be judged on, whether they are set by the Northern Ireland Office or not.

Q198 **Robin Swann:** Will the Northern Ireland Office or the Executive be judged on them?

Matthew Patrick: All of us. Everyone who is committed to growth in Northern Ireland will naturally be judged on those. You cannot set metrics that are not applicable to and recognised by people. If every single person I speak to is asking, "Has economic growth been successful?", they are going to be thinking, "Are there good, well-paying jobs? Are there businesses that are thriving and booming?" They will be the tests, really.

Q199 **Robin Swann:** What about value for profit or value for money input?

Matthew Patrick: We will always be seeking that. There is a huge amount of engagement that goes into the city and growth deals. Take the transformation board we were talking about before. There is not an expectation that the money goes in and we walk away and think, "I hope that worked". Of course, you pore over every single penny of public money and make sure it can deliver the best opportunities for people right across Northern Ireland, clearly.

Q200 **Robin Swann:** Did you say that the permanent secretary of the NIO chairs the transformation board?

Matthew Patrick: She is on the transformation board.

Q201 **Robin Swann:** You said earlier that she chaired it.

Matthew Patrick: She chairs the Northern Ireland growth co-ordination group, but I might have misspoken, so apologies.

Q202 **Chair:** I am going to butt in as well now, because Robin brought up apprenticeships. When we were at the Balmoral show, we heard small businesses saying how difficult it was for them to take on young people. While it is predominantly devolved, they were not feeling the benefit of the levy, so I was wondering if you were doing any work around that.



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Matthew Patrick: The Executive hear that really clearly. I regularly do business roundtables. I sit down with small businesses. I do chambers of commerce. In Derry/Londonderry, I did the angel investors as well. You hear right across the board in Northern Ireland about this, and I know it is a well-rehearsed concern that the Executive themselves will have heard, but it is clearly a matter for the Executive. It is for them to work out what they do with that levy, and I know they have regular engagement with businesses on the back of it.

Q203 **Katrina Murray:** We finally now get on to the Northern Ireland growth co-ordination group that you already referred to, Minister Patrick. The government response to our report noted that the NIGCG—golly, we like an acronym, don't we?

Matthew Patrick: We do.

Katrina Murray: It noted that it ensures "that the pillars of the industrial strategy make the most of Northern Ireland's strengths". How effective has the group been in doing so?

Matthew Patrick: It was established about a year ago. Clearly, you have to establish this and get things up and running, but what it is focusing on are some really important issues in Northern Ireland. The discrepancy in access to research and development funding in Northern Ireland will not be lost to this Committee. I hear it in businesses right across Northern Ireland, which feel that they do not get a fair chance at some of this funding.

That has been a topic of discussion recently in the co-ordination group, and I really welcome that, but it is not simply left to the co-ordination group either. It is being raised directly by the Secretary of State and myself with counterparts in UK Government. I was sat with the Minister for the Economy just a month or so ago, discussing how we can understand—and I am sure the Committee will have views themselves—why, for instance, on the research and development shortfall, it is the case that Northern Ireland does not get comparatively the same. Is it because of the nature of the bids? Is it because of the nature of the structure of the funds?

We are doing some work with the Executive to ascertain that so that we are in the strongest possible position to remedy that going forward. That is the type of focus that this co-ordination group is giving, and I really welcome that.

Q204 **Katrina Murray:** How often has the co-ordination group met?

Matthew Patrick: It has met four times. It is meeting again pretty soon, and the plan is to meet bi-monthly.

Q205 **Katrina Murray:** So it is still getting to beyond a quarterly meeting, then. If the meeting is quarterly, is it working in subgroups? Are there work streams falling into it?



Matthew Patrick: The work that falls out of that is taken forward by officials. The issue that I mentioned earlier about research and development is a prime example. On the back of conversations that we have been having, it has been raised in that group. Simultaneously, we have been raising that with UK Government Ministers and Northern Ireland Executive Ministers, so the work is a team effort.

Q206 **Katrina Murray:** Apart from the co-ordination group, how else does the Northern Ireland Office collaborate with Executive Ministers on economic matters?

Matthew Patrick: I meet with them regularly. I have sat down with the Minister for Infrastructure. I have spoken to all of them about this. It has been very helpful to have those conversations. We talked before about public service transformation as well. You cannot have one without the other. They go hand in hand in terms of being able to drill down and understand in more detail some of the issues. Bringing some of the expertise that exists in UK Government to Northern Ireland and sharing that, but also bringing straight here some of the stuff that is happening in Northern Ireland that is ahead of where we are in the rest of the UK, has been really helpful. We have quite a collaborative relationship with regular meetings, and economic growth is clearly the centre of those.

Q207 **Chair:** You said that the NIGCG has met four times. Would you have the dates of those four meetings, Minister?

Matthew Patrick: Somewhere in my pack I will, but, to save the Committee time through me rifling through papers, am I okay to write to the Committee with those dates?

Chair: Yes. Thank you very much.

Matthew Patrick: I know that the first meeting was May last year, but I do not know the other dates off the top of my head. I apologise.

Chair: No, that is fine. It is quite a detailed question anyway.

Matthew Patrick: I would like to have been able to answer it. That would have been impressive.

Q208 **Robin Swann:** Minister Patrick, when you were finishing on Ms Murray's comment there, the specific Minister who you mentioned you met was the Minister for Infrastructure. Your Northern Ireland Office annual report noted ongoing work with the Executive on the development of an infrastructure strategy, but your response to our report did not provide any further information. Can you update us on what recent progress you have made with the Executive on developing an infrastructure strategy?

Matthew Patrick: Clearly, because that is devolved, that is for the Executive to take forward. I have met with the Minister and it is recognised right across the Executive that to get growth that is an important thing. One of the issues that we have around infrastructure is planning, and having enough planning officers to be able to make the



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decisions so that things can get built, that houses can be built, and that businesses can benefit from that.

The consequence of not having that is pretty clear. It does hold up growth. That is why one of the things that we have invested in as part of the transformation fund is funding more planning officers and making sure that training is available so that decisions can be reached more quickly. That is really important. That is us supporting the Executive in their mission to improve those outcomes.

Q209 Robin Swann: I get that, but your annual report noted ongoing work with the Executive specifically on the development of an infrastructure strategy. You have said that it is devolved, so are you working with the Northern Ireland Executive to develop an infrastructure strategy or not?

Matthew Patrick: As I said when I met with the Minister, when there is any information, expertise or lessons learned that we can share, we will always do so. Officials work really closely with counterparts across the Executive.

Let us be clear. The issue of not building infrastructure is not unique to Northern Ireland. It has been an issue that the rest of the UK has faced for about 14 years—maybe 16 now—and we have some catching up to do. Right now, every part of the United Kingdom is trying to go forward at pace to recover those lost years. Where there are things happening in the UK Government that can be shared across into the Northern Ireland Executive, so that their systems are faster and more able to take advantage of those opportunities, we will share them. Clearly, if it is vice versa, we welcome that too.

Q210 Robin Swann: Are you directly inputting into an infrastructure strategy as NIO, or is it solely by engagement, sharing best practice and building up what is happening across the UK?

Matthew Patrick: They are the same thing. If you share best practice and what is working and going well, that is contributing to an infrastructure strategy that is going to be built by the Executive, because it is, as I say, a devolved matter. They are the same thing.

Q211 Robin Swann: Have you any idea when the Executive will publish the strategy that you are inputting to or engaging on?

Matthew Patrick: That is clearly a matter for the Executive. I do not have a date.

Q212 Mike Kane: Minister Patrick, the NIO, in its annual report for 2024-25, said that it would be publishing an economic strategy. Do you know when that is? If you do not, fair enough, but are there any titbits that you could give us about what will be in that to get our salivary juices flowing?

Matthew Patrick: Quite honestly, it is not about having a separate vision and a separate strategy. It is about recognising that there are huge opportunities across Northern Ireland. We need to make sure that,



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where we can contribute, invest appropriately and support with advice and information, we do. I do not think that it is about creating our own separate strategic vision.

Mike Kane: I am not quite the greyhound at the bit there with the juices.

Matthew Patrick: Your juices are not flowing. I am so sorry. I was accused of low energy in the last one and juices not flowing in this one, so I dread to think what next week will bring.

Q213 **Mike Kane:** I will be coming to Minister McDougall in a second about this, but, in terms of what evidence there is that UK Government Departments are prioritising economic development in Northern Ireland, are they champing at the bit, to continue the metaphor?

Matthew Patrick: I think so. The Minister will speak for himself on this, but when you are in government here you look at Northern Ireland, which is a fast-growing part of the United Kingdom and an economy doing well, with really exciting opportunities in cyber-security, manufacturing, the creative industries and defence. We had the defence growth deal announced just a few months ago. There is a lot of support coming directly from UK Government, and there is a lot of interest in the Northern Ireland economy as well, but I am sure that the Minister himself will add to that.

Blair McDougall: Essentially, Chair, what he said. The key thing for Northern Ireland is that there is nothing but opportunity there. The overlap between the sectors we have identified within the industrial strategy and the sectors the Executive have identified within their economic plans as well shows that there is a consensus. We know where we are pointing at with the sectors that Minister Patrick mentioned.

As he mentioned, we have the investment zone. We have the defence deal. We have the local innovation partnership funding as well. There is certainly a sense of urgency and ambition there. In the various reporting that we are doing to mark the first anniversary of the industrial strategy, you will see that running through those pages.

Q214 **Mike Kane:** Minister McDougall, there is no one in the room more expert than you in devolved Administrations, as somebody who kept the union together in 2014 as leader of the Better Together campaign for the nation—and we are grateful to you for that—before you were in this place. Do you think it works as well as it could do in terms of devolved Administrations and central Departments in Whitehall?

Blair McDougall: I view myself as a devolutionist, first and foremost. As Minister Patrick said, it is healthy for there to be a bit of challenge and mutual impatience with each other. There might have been a speech touching on an element of that earlier on today in your part of the world, and that is healthy.



Mike Kane: I will come to that in just a second.

Blair McDougall: If I can give an example, I meet quarterly with the Economic Ministers from each of the devolved nations, and then meet bilaterally as well. One of the things around the industrial strategy that has worked with devolution is that, on the front of the industrial strategy, it has the UK government crest, but we are really convening and curating a lot of this. This is a consensus position across different levels of government in the UK, but also with industry in every part of the country. One of the reasons that the industrial strategy is working is that it is a beast of a devolved United Kingdom rather than highly centralised.

Q215 **Mike Kane:** Thank you for that very impressive answer. In a previous life, you worked to a certain extent with the Member for Makerfield, and even more closely with his potential chief of staff. How do you think policy might change if we see a change of leadership in that direction?

Blair McDougall: I was going to say that I am watching and listening to these developments as keenly as you, or probably slightly more keenly than you. I had a real sense from that speech earlier on—and I will be at risk of mixing metaphors here—of the telescope being turned round. Within the industrial strategy, there has always been a real focus on place and on making sure that those clusters that exist around different parts of the UK are properly recognised and resourced.

What you will see is someone focusing on it who has been at the user's end of that, and this is where I will mix my metaphors. I do not think that what you will see is a change of destination in the sat-nav. What you will see is a putting down of the foot on the accelerator around how, working with different levels of government across the UK and with industry, we have an even greater sense of urgency around supporting those clusters, but we will see.

Q216 **Simon Hoare:** I am sorry to break up the Andy Burnham love-in, but let us concentrate on the current Government, rather than a putative one. Mr McDougall, you have given us a flavour or an indication of the implementation of the industrial strategy as it relates to Northern Ireland. Just as a starter for 10, is there anything that you want to add or embellish to give this Committee a flavour of the day-to-day route map to implementation and the mechanics that sit behind it?

Blair McDougall: There are official-level conversations all the time. One of the things about the industrial strategy is that it is, by its nature, expansive and touches on lots of different parts of the economic landscape. To touch on a few of them, my officials work very closely with Queen's, for example, to try to make sure that we are properly abreast of the innovation pipeline that is coming through in Northern Ireland. That, in turn, is linked to the work that my Department has recently announced on improving the service that we give to scale-ups within the UK.

We are very good in this country at putting our arm around overseas investors, welcoming them and reassuring them that we will smooth out



regulatory barriers or problems with accessing talent, planning issues or whatever it is. We are often less good at doing that for our homegrown companies. That is an example of, at the official level, there being a relationship and that feeding into that bigger strategy.

Minister Patrick spoke about trying to improve, for example, the pipeline or the amount of funding going into innovation in Northern Ireland. When I met with Minister Archibald the other day, I was stressing, again, within the context of that scale-up conversation, our keenness to work with her to make sure that we are identifying those investable propositions in Northern Ireland. We agreed to work closely together on that, and I think you can see the Northern Ireland Executive taking an increasing interest in the UKRI bids.

Q217 Simon Hoare: I always have a worry, so I would just seek assurance on this, that these strategies sometimes get cast into tablets of stone and take on the significance of the Ten Commandments and the declarations of independence and everything else.

Mike Kane: No new tablets of stone.

Simon Hoare: No new “Edstones”. I am sorry for reliving the nightmare. Do you see the strategy as being iterative and organic in order to reflect emerging opportunities to be exploited?

Blair McDougall: The short answer is yes. I think you are trying to do two things with the industrial strategy. First, you have to have a long-term set of commitments. You have to say to the world, “This is the basis on which we are doing business. Here is what we think we have to offer the world, and our competitive advantage”. That has to be long-term and sustained in order for the business investment to have confidence in what you are doing. They are also looking for short-term signals. They are looking for that sense of prioritising and getting things done, so you have to do a little bit of that.

The other thing to say is that you are right about strategies sometimes not coming to life off of the page. It is important, again, to say that the industrial strategy itself is an iteration of other things. As we, for example, have developed the advanced manufacturing sector plan, which unpacks part of the industrial strategy, that has taken into account the Northern Ireland Executive’s advanced manufacturing strategy as well. These are dynamic relationships, but you will see us unpacking it with the sector plans and the jobs plans, which are under way at the moment as well.

Q218 Simon Hoare: That is very helpful. I am sure—I certainly hope you will agree with me—that there are usually two things that business needs, among other things. Clarity and simplicity are often paramount. You may be aware, but we have heard concerns from businesses about the complexity of having different strategies put forward by Westminster and then by the Executive. At the end of the day, we are talking about public moneys, and so avoiding duplication and maximising bang for the buck



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are the obvious aspirations.

How are you, as a Minister and as wider Government, ensuring that the strategy sector plans complement the sectoral plans set out by the Executive and are not trying to pull people in opposite directions, or duplicating and overlapping?

Blair McDougall: It is by continuing that sense of it being a collaborative project. Our officials are constantly in contact with them about that.

I understand and agree with what you are saying about the danger of complexity if you are a business or an investor. This is where it is important to remember that our job as Government is to translate that into digestible advice for investors, either through the Office for Investment or just through improving our business advice service and making it a bit more focused and bit more single front door.

You see that through the Business Growth Service and the advice that we offer to businesses, so that they do not have to disentangle what are, rightly, often quite complex strategies. You see it through the scale-up support that we are giving, which will give an enhanced service to people. You also see it through things such as the British Business Bank finance finder. We are trying to make it as simple as possible while being unapologetically sophisticated in our approach to the strategy.

Q219 **Simon Hoare:** I have a couple of questions for Minister Patrick, but while I have you, Mr McDougall, we have called for a Northern Ireland representative to be on the Industrial Strategy Advisory Council. Would you welcome devolved nation representation on it?

Blair McDougall: We have Dr Rice on the Industrial Strategy Advisory Council. Part of the issue with this is that you have the eight sectors plus the foundational industries within the strategy. If you add to that 12 nations and regions, you start to have a council that is too big and unwieldy. The trick and what we try to do is to make sure that you have that mixture of sectoral expertise that also gives us regional and national understanding. Dr Rice gives us that understanding of the situation on the ground in Northern Ireland, but also has lots of industrial experience as well, similar to the Scottish representative.

Q220 **Simon Hoare:** How does Dr Rice garner the data and information in order to make a beneficial input?

Blair McDougall: She would be better to answer that than me, but my experience with the Industrial Strategy Advisory Council is that these are people who are deeply connected in their sectors. They have deep experience of doing business. The Industrial Strategy Advisory Council also has a secretariat, which supports them in discrete pieces of research and work, so that is there to support them as well.

I should say that I find the Industrial Strategy Advisory Council incredibly helpful, not just in terms of being there to bang the drum for investment



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and for the sectors, but also in terms of challenging us and being at our back, driving us on.

- Q221 **Simon Hoare:** Just on that, and just for clarity, how would you then check that that Dr Rice-type figure had done their homework and was speaking with knowledgeable authority, having engaged relevant sectors to feed in views, rather than just regurgitating their own lived experience without casting the net further, in order to maximise that understanding and input?

Blair McDougall: ISAC members are out there consulting. That is part of what they do. When I am out and about in the nations and regions, meeting with particular sectors and clusters, members of ISAC are in the room with me a lot of the time as well. Again, these are people who have been chosen because they are at the top of their game, with really deep experience.

- Q222 **Simon Hoare:** Thank you. You can take a glass of water now, because I am going to turn to Mr Patrick with a couple of questions, if I may.

The Government's response to our report notes that you recently met SMEs in Northern Ireland, and that this provided a "clear framework to refine" the industrial strategy. What does this framework look like? What are the logistics of delivering refinements to it and what, if any, have you identified to date?

Matthew Patrick: Some of that is ongoing work. Very recently, I sat down at Catalyst with a number of very successful businesses that had benefited from the industrial strategy and gave their feedback to it. When I say that is ongoing work—and Minister McDougall will know this—we are ranked quite highly in the world for supporting start-ups, but, as he alluded to, bridging that gap to help them then scale, commercialise and grow is still a challenge. Feeding that in and making sure there is support for those small businesses to really grow is important for the economy, as well as for those communities and those families. Family businesses set up with a bit of hard work and a creative idea, and the opportunity to support them to grow, make money and help the economy is a privilege we welcome.

- Q223 **Simon Hoare:** Again, the Government's response to our report said that you were considering how "Northern Ireland voices can be more clearly and effectively heard within national policy development". How, and what specific measures do you have in mind?

Matthew Patrick: It is partly my job, to make sure that, when I am engaging with Executive Ministers, with businesses and with those right across Northern Ireland, I am effectively communicating their needs.

- Q224 **Simon Hoare:** With respect, that was not what your quote said. You were considering Northern Ireland voices being more clearly and effectively heard.

Matthew Patrick: Do you mean in relation to representation on boards?



Simon Hoare: Do you mean through you or directly, or both?

Matthew Patrick: I think both. The Minister mentioned Dr Rice and her role on that committee. There will be other opportunities to do that too, and we should take advantage of that. This is not a question of passing that over to them. I take that responsibility really seriously. When I sit down with businesses, I make sure I am feeding that back into the various Departments, whether that is DSIT, DBT, HMT or others, so that Northern Ireland's voice is at the table here and at the table on these bodies and groups.

Q225 **Simon Hoare:** Can I just make a plea to both of you? It is one that I have often made to Ministers of both stripes, so I make no apologies in making it to you. There is always a tendency—this is not a criticism of officials—to have a list of go-to people because they are known. They are on the Rolodex; they have their numbers etc. It is often quite a challenge to go out and find fresh perspectives, new voices and new insights. Can I urge both of you, in that Northern Irish context, of course to use the reliable, known and trusted voices who speak with great clarity and authority, but to search continually for new perspectives?

Blair McDougall: Can I respond to that on two levels? Tina McKenzie, a fantastic Northern Irishwoman from the FSB, is chairing the regulatory deep-dive sprint that we have going on, looking into what we are missing on regulatory burdens as part of our overall plan to reduce the regulatory administrative burden by 25%. That is looking at what we are missing with the smallest companies, which is exactly an attempt to get to where you are talking about. It is not the same cast of faces coming to us all the time. That is just as an example of exactly what you are talking about.

Matthew Patrick: If I can just add, I take that challenge seriously. It is a fair challenge. It is the right challenge. Naturally, you come in and you rely on bodies that are very well respected, and rightly so. It is partly a challenge that I have to give to those bodies to say, "Are we getting full representation here?" That is important.

I do not just go to those. When I was in Derry/Londonderry speaking to the chamber of commerce, that was very interesting. I left that meeting to go straight to another one made up exclusively of women entrepreneurs and women investors. That was a very different perspective. There was some clear overlap. For me, it was important to hear something that I would not naturally hear. It is a fair challenge and I take it seriously.

Q226 **Chair:** As a Committee, we are seeking clarity around this. I wrote down what you were saying earlier, Minister Patrick. You said, "We are hearing it. I am going out there. I am meeting all of these people", as you have reiterated now. You then take that away—you are very engaging; you are a good Minister—but what happens next? Where does it lie? How do we know that you are speaking to Minister McDougall and making the case for Northern Ireland?



I have the rest of the quote here. This is what the Secretary of State said in response to us. “We are currently considering how Northern Ireland voices can be more clearly and effectively heard within national policy development structures, including having Northern Ireland representation on UK-wide decision-making panels”.

You have spoken about individuals, Minister McDougall, but we want to know that the NIO is having that conversation with Treasury, that you are chasing it up, that these things are happening and that the minority voices in this space—as you said, you have met with women leaders—are being heard and getting through. When we met people at the Balmoral show, as I pointed out, they were not happy with certain aspects around apprenticeships, which you have rightly said is devolved. It is those difficulties. How do we iron out those difficulties as a Committee and get that across?

Matthew Patrick: I hear that loud and clear. I can give you an example of where an issue has been raised with me and I am taking it forward as is the Secretary of State.

Chair: That would be useful.

Matthew Patrick: You will be familiar with the AI growth zones, which are opportunities for clustering in private investment. As I am sure the Committee knows, there is a minimum energy threshold capacity, which has not been met in Northern Ireland. We hear people say what benefit that might bring to Northern Ireland, what additional investment it might bring and what jobs it might create.

That is not something that we hear and think, “It would be really nice if someone did something about it”. It is something that I personally, along with our Secretary of State, have sat down with the DSIT Minister about. There has been a direct meeting about it. I do not think he enjoys the voting Lobby, because when I am there I will always mention it to him. As of today—we signed off a letter at the end of last week—we have done a follow-up letter to push on this because we want to make progress.

That is a direct example of us hearing something and taking action. It is a bit like—I know we might be a couple of years away from an election—“You said, we did”. I want to build up an evidence bank of, “You said, we did”. On AI growth zones, I always say to people, “I can never guarantee you the outcome, but I guarantee I am going to fight for this”. We are working hard to make sure that we can make progress.

Chair: I really appreciate it.

Q227 **Chris Bloore:** Minister McDougall, when we visited Northern Ireland, we talked about trade quite a lot. There was quite a mixed picture of feedback and reaction from both the businesses and the trade associations, which were concerned about whether we were making the best efforts that we could to support businesses in Northern Ireland and specifically to attract international investment. As you know, Northern



Ireland is an extraordinary patchwork of small and micro-businesses that are ripe for investment. When you throw in the option of dual access to two markets, that puts them in an even stronger position theoretically.

The evidence and feedback that we got from the ground was that there is a concern about whether DBT is properly investing both time and staff in Belfast. That was reflected by the challenge over the Export Champions scheme itself being paused. Although I understand the dynamics at play, there was a feeling that we were not meeting Northern Ireland's potential in our work there in terms of attracting that investment.

Do you acknowledge that those challenges are still ongoing? How does DBT work to help those businesses attract the investment from abroad that they need?

Blair McDougall: I acknowledge that there is a huge appetite for export-related advice, and little wonder, because it is the single most impactful thing that you can do to grow your business and make it more resilient.

I referenced this earlier on. When I ran a small business myself, I remember that feeling of having 20 different tabs open as you desperately try to find the right bit of Government to help you with whatever the issue was you were having, including export support.

Support with export advice and the whole range of issues that you might have as a business is increasingly being put into one place through the Business Growth Service. It should be easier and quicker to get some of that support. The export advice that we have within the Department is particularly linked to trying to make the most out of the trade deals that we have done.

The other thing I would say is that, yes, some of the time the challenge with exporting is about advice and expertise, but a lot of the time it is about money and financing as well.

You mentioned small and medium-sized enterprises in particular, but across the board there has been a huge increase in the firepower of UK Export Finance. Too often we think of UKEF as being what we reach for if you are selling a frigate to Indonesia or a bridge to Nigeria. Increasingly, it is more effective at helping SMEs to make investments so they can take advantage of this as well. UKEF has a whole suite of support that it offers alongside that financing.

Q228 **Chris Bloore:** Can I just come back on a couple of things? The Business and Trade Committee recently went to Canada and saw first-hand how the federal and provincial governments are working hand in hand on exporting. There is a very similar position in Canada, where there are lots of small businesses that make up the framework of the businesses across the country. They are investing a lot of money in bodies on the ground to give that sort of support to those businesses to get things moving quicker. If you stay in this role when the new Prime Minister takes office, will one of the things that you ask for be more resources to be able to



staff more people in places such as Belfast on behalf of DBT? That would be well received.

Blair McDougall: We will always want more resource. As a Department, we will always make the case for that. The truth is, as the Department for Business and Trade, that we have to show the same level of efficiency and smart deployment of staff that the businesses that we work with would expect from themselves.

What I would say—this runs through the place-based elements of the industrial strategy and the sector plans—is that a huge part of attracting that investment is about telling a consistent story that makes sense to external investors. The work that is being done around the clusters within Northern Ireland—it is similar to other nations and regions in the UK—is about telling a story to the world about the scale of the investable opportunities that are out there.

Q229 **Chris Bloore:** On telling the story, do you know when the Export Champions scheme will be unpaused and restarted?

Blair McDougall: I do not, but I can get you that information.

Q230 **Mr Kohler:** The Windsor framework was meant to offer Northern Ireland businesses the best of both worlds: frictionless access to the EU and the rest of the GB. However, a recent report tells us that two-thirds of Northern Ireland-based business respondents have no understanding of the framework and have not taken advantage of it, while a third of UK-wide respondents who move goods between the GB and Northern Ireland have stopped supplying their customers.

I have two questions. What has gone wrong? Will the one-stop shop that we recommended, which you have applauded and said you will indeed bring in, solve the issue?

Matthew Patrick: It is always fair to reflect that this situation is not a position that I would choose to be starting in.

Mr Kohler: No, nor would I.

Matthew Patrick: Yes, I suspected it was the same for you, Mr Kohler. Fundamentally, it is about reducing those frictions at every opportunity. It is about supporting those businesses to trade. There are a lot of positives that we can speak to. Progress is evidently being made, and I look for more progress each and every day. That is right. We are in a stronger position today than we were a few years ago.

Q231 **Mr Kohler:** How is progress being made if a third of those who used to transfer goods to Northern Ireland have stopped doing so? That is not progress, surely.

Matthew Patrick: There is progress in terms of the nature of the deals that we are going to be striking with the European Union.

Q232 **Mr Kohler:** I am talking about Northern Ireland companies and the trade



between Northern Ireland and GB and Northern Ireland and Europe. All the evidence that we see is they are not getting the benefits while, in fact, many of those who supply goods from GB to Northern Ireland have stopped doing so. That is not progress being made; that is us going backwards.

Matthew Patrick: One thing that I will say is, from the Northern Ireland protocol that we had and the level of checks that had to take place, we are in a substantially better place. I would like to think that, after the food and drink deal and an SPS agreement are struck and implemented, we will be in a better place again, but that will not be enough. I will continue to want to make sure that businesses are supported right through this to improve trade.

I noted that 71% of businesses said that dual market access is actively helping them grow or increase sales. That is important. That dual market access is something that is talked about in Northern Ireland and recognised by investors around the world. When I was trying to drum up investment and support in Boston, many of those businesses—some of them already had ties and investments in Northern Ireland, some were looking to expand and some were potentially looking to move into the market—recognised the benefit that brings.

Q233 **Mr Kohler:** Can I press you on that? I have a statistic here that says two thirds of Northern Ireland businesses have no understanding. You are telling me that over two thirds say it is helping them.

Matthew Patrick: Dual market access is helping. Let us be clear. You are right—you mentioned the one-stop shop—to point out that we do not want complexity. The point was made by Mr Hoare earlier that businesses are looking for simplicity and certainty. We are not looking for complexity. That is why we are working closely with the European Union. It is why it is so important that we have reset that relationship with the European Union, so that we can negotiate a much better system for people.

You mentioned earlier the one-stop shop. For me, that goes to the challenge we got earlier. It has to be there. This Committee has put a significant amount of weight behind that recommendation too, and we take that really seriously, as have others. That has to really help those businesses navigate this.

I note that the Committee in its report suggested that it should go further: that this one-stop shop should not simply talk about this issue but look at what other things can be done. That is interesting. You would rightly say to me, "Get the basics right first", which we need to do.

Q234 **Mr Kohler:** What is the timescale on getting the basics right, getting the one-stop shop up and running? What are we talking about?

Matthew Patrick: If we think about it, it was announced last year at the Budget. Naturally, no money was available until this financial year. There



has been some really important engagement to work this out with businesses across Northern Ireland. That is quite important. We are engaging with all the businesses that would be impacted by this one-stop shop.

The next steps are to start building this out and getting the technology working. Within this financial year, I am hoping we will have a one-stop shop up and running and available to those businesses.

Q235 **Mr Kohler:** That is by April next year.

Matthew Patrick: I have no doubt, yes. If not, I will be before the Committee in April next year.

Q236 **Mr Kohler:** You will. You will guess this next question. By what metric will we judge its effectiveness?

Matthew Patrick: I love these metrics. It is a really fair question. I do not have an answer directly. If I think about that openly, what would the metrics of success be for this? Presumably, it would be the number of businesses that are accessing it.

After they have utilised this system, we should make sure that we are trying to get some feedback to hear how that is working for them and how it is not. I am an optimist. Even the most optimistic part of me does not think you get this right first time and everyone goes, "This is swimmingly brilliant". When people are utilising the system, when they are making use of this one-stop shop, what feedback are they giving to us, the many politicians, I am sure to yourselves and to business groups? We will have to absolutely reflect on that and make sure that we are improving it.

Q237 **Mr Kohler:** Before I turn to Mr McDougall, can I ask you, not now but later, to write to the Committee telling us the source of your 71% figure, because those are not the figures that we have seen? You do not need to do it now.

Matthew Patrick: Yes, I will happily give you the source of that. As of October 2023, 71% of businesses recognised the benefits of dual market access.

Mr Kohler: That was before the Windsor framework became operational.

Matthew Patrick: I was talking about the benefits of dual market access, which is particularly important.

Q238 **Mr Kohler:** The Windsor framework is dual market access. The result is that it has not provided that for them. Yes, I am sure many thought it was a good idea. The trouble is that now two thirds are saying that they are not getting any benefit and do not know how to access it.

Mr McDougall, as I said earlier, many GB-based businesses are not or have stopped exporting goods to Northern Ireland. Much of that is due to ignorance, we are told, not knowing how or being scared by the supposed



obstacles. What are we doing to educate them in how they can maintain trade with Northern Ireland?

Blair McDougall: As I said earlier on, we are trying to improve the simplicity and accessibility of our business advice across the board. One of the things that I will take away from this conversation is to make sure that we are thinking about that in terms of internal trade as well as external trade. It is a perennial problem. As Mr Hoare referred to earlier on, any complexity in trading will often result in people making the decision not to act. We miss out on a huge amount of economic activity because of that.

It is something that I will take away from this Committee and make sure that, through the Business Growth Service—

Q239 **Mr Kohler:** You will make sure it is something that you are communicating with GB-based companies about.

Blair McDougall: Yes. We are also, through the Business Growth Service, looking at the introduction of AI-powered advice as well. I was recently shown—I think the term is “beta version”—an early version of it. I threw at it, “I am a cake manufacturer seeking to export to the United States”, and I was really surprised with the accuracy of the advice and how tailored that advice is. That is where we would like to get to with advice, not just for exporters but for internal trade as well.

Q240 **Chair:** The data that Paul was using was from the FSB survey, which was published in June of last year. It is different data to what you were giving us, Minister, about attitudes towards dual market access and the opportunities that are there.

Matthew Patrick: In 2024 there was a substantial increase in exporting to the European Union, which would demonstrate to me that there are real benefits that many businesses do recognise. I hear the point; I take the point.

Mr Kohler: The Windsor framework only came into effect in May 2025, of course. We are talking about post then.

Q241 **Chair:** There is confusion over what paperwork needs to be used. When I raised the issue over paperwork from GB to Northern Ireland, it was said that the invoicing system did not need to be used, but hauliers were getting involved and saying that it did need to be used. There are a lot of myths to dispel. We recognise those difficulties.

Blair McDougall: That is something that we can take away and work together on. We can make sure the business advice is simple and accurate.

Q242 **Chair:** With the one-stop shop, AI may be the way the Government are going to take it forward, but people in Northern Ireland, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises, need to have person-to-person contact as well.



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Matthew Patrick: I totally take that because the advice will be for GB businesses looking to trade in Northern Ireland too. To your point, there is nothing more frustrating than dealing with a chatbot and thinking, "I am not quite sure about this". There will be the opportunity for people to pick up the phone and speak to a human being. If I could replicate that across every service I ever have to deal with, I would be a happy man.

Q243 **Gavin Robinson:** Good afternoon. Apologies for not being with you at the start of the session. Minister Patrick, you mentioned the one-stop shop. It was announced, as you said, in the Budget in 2025. Whenever something is announced in the Budget, that is an indication that the Government are going to allocate money to it. The Chancellor would not have allocated money to something without detail. I am scratching my head, wondering why the six months between the budgetary event and the next financial year is not sufficient and it is going to take an additional 12 months to get this off the ground. Why is that?

Matthew Patrick: We need to make sure that we are doing that proper engagement with those businesses. You would rightly criticise me if we launched and on day one there were holes in the system. It is appropriate to take the time to get it right.

Q244 **Gavin Robinson:** Hang on. It was conceptualised, a business case was put together, a funding package was built around it, and yet there had never been any engagement with business.

Matthew Patrick: No, there had been, but you want to have continued engagement. The moment that you are in the position to say, "How do we make this a reality?", you need to think about everything from, when you are going out to procure this, whether you are building it in-house or bringing in other expertise for some or all of it. You want to make sure that you have thought about every aspect of that. We have done important engagement. The next stage is about how we build the system, test the system and make sure it works for businesses.

Q245 **Gavin Robinson:** You have a business case and you have all the concepts put together. You go to the Treasury, it allocates the money and it takes 18 months. We are still talking about a further nine months from today for this to be operational. Most businesses would have closed if they were relying on that level of support. They will be scratching their heads, if this is the efficiency that they get from Government.

Can I ask you to think about dual market access, because you have mentioned it a number of times now? Split it into two. "Dual" means "two". A market is somewhere that you can buy and sell. The experience that Mr Kohler is referring to is the fact that we have many businesses in Northern Ireland that know they can sell into the European Union and sell into Great Britain, but they cannot buy easily from Great Britain. That is where the barriers are. That is where the politics comes as a consequence.

Do you recognise that continually talking about dual market access fails



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to recognise that a marketplace is somewhere where you can both buy and sell and that it is our Government that are putting barriers on the ability for businesses in Northern Ireland to buy from the rest of their own country?

Matthew Patrick: As I said in the start of my answer, if I was asked to put us into a position, it would not be this one. I did not support Brexit. I did not want to go down that route, but that is the route that we went down.

I talk about dual market access because I really believe in the Northern Ireland economy. I believe it when I see it right across Northern Ireland. When I speak to investors, they recognise the benefits that that brings. They recognise that their investment into Northern Ireland is a good investment. That is what is particularly important.

I hear your point about trade between Northern Ireland and Great Britain and going both ways. Of course, that is one of the reasons that we are trying to strike important deals, so that we smooth out all the trade friction that we can.

Q246 **Gavin Robinson:** Can you give us any sense of a timeline on that? We know that the 22 July date has been vacated. There is not going to be an announcement on that day. It seems as if it is all lying in abeyance, yet you still talk of dual market access. You know in your heart of hearts that that does not live up to reality and it does not live up to reality for any businesses in Northern Ireland.

Matthew Patrick: The aim—I appreciate that it is an aim—is to have arrangements in place by next year on an SPS agreement.

Q247 **Gavin Robinson:** It will be next year.

Matthew Patrick: Yes.

Q248 **Gavin Robinson:** When do you expect there to be an announcement? I assume it will take a year for that to be considered, engaged on with businesses and implemented.

Matthew Patrick: I do not have the details of when that will be announced.

Q249 **Gavin Robinson:** No. Was it due to be announced on 22 July?

Matthew Patrick: I do not have the details of when it is going to be announced or when it was due to be announced.

Q250 **Claire Hanna:** Minister, I will pick up with you again. You are correct to identify that businesses want to be able to trade north, south, east and west without friction. We met both InterTradeIreland and Intertrade UK, and I wanted to ask you about the latter. In your response, you endorsed our view that Intertrade UK has the potential to be a key source of advice. Since its establishment in 2024, in February, how has it performed and how has it improved the trading landscape for businesses



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trading east-west?

Matthew Patrick: It has been really helpful because it has already offered advice directly to us on a range of issues, including east-west trade, vehicle type approvals and veterinary medicines.

I will always be taken back to a conversation I had with Baroness Foster, who chairs it, prior to any funding being agreed for the body. We talked about the UK economy and NI-GB trade both ways and we reflected upon the importance of promoting the opportunities and giving people exposure to the other opportunities. I asked the question, "In the event that there is no money attached to this, can we make progress? Can we help drive forward trade?" She was unequivocal. "Yes" was the answer.

To boost that with a funding package of more than £2 million is exciting. There are events that it is planning to deliver—these will be business-facing promotional events, including in a member of this Committee's constituency—to make sure that trade between Britain and Northern Ireland is growing and strong.

Q251 **Claire Hanna:** You think it has the capacity to do that. I do not know which member you are referring to.

Matthew Patrick: It is Mr Jogee.

Q252 **Claire Hanna:** You think it has the capacity to promote to businesses in Britain the ease, viability and advantages of trading east-west. That is great. What issues have you received advice from them on?

Matthew Patrick: We have received advice on east-west trade.

Q253 **Claire Hanna:** "East-west trade" is a very broad concept. What do you mean specifically? What did they advise you on that you did not already know?

Matthew Patrick: I do not have the letter before me so I cannot give you the details, but I am happy to do that. They come forward with advice, which the Secretary of State and I read and take very seriously.

This is also on an ongoing basis. It is only recently that the funding has been allocated, so in terms of judging their performance, we will start to see more of these promotional events, which are really important. The Farnborough International Airshow is coming up. I want businesses right across Northern Ireland to know that they have an opportunity to get there, to sell, to trade and for there not to be a concern about what that might look like. For me, that is really important.

Q254 **Claire Hanna:** One of the items that we discussed with Baroness Foster was the lack of understanding from businesses in Britain about how they should and could trade. We recommended that you appoint a GB representative. Do you plan to do so?

Matthew Patrick: In a word, yes.



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Q255 **Claire Hanna:** When?

Matthew Patrick: There is a process to go through in terms of reappointing, but there will be something soon on this. "Soon" is as much as I can give you. We take the recommendation seriously. It is what we would like to do, but clearly that will be subject to people agreeing to be on it and doing that.

Q256 **Chair:** There is just a follow-up from me for a bit of clarity, really. You said that you had already taken advice from Intertrade UK and Baroness Foster. Was that a formal meeting with the other members of the board or was it just a meeting?

Matthew Patrick: That was a letter from the board, from Baroness Foster in her capacity as chair, directly to the Secretary of State.

Q257 **Chair:** Do you know how many times Intertrade UK has formally met?

Matthew Patrick: I do not have that. I can ask them and come back to the Committee, if that is what you would like me to do.

Chair: Yes.

Matthew Patrick: Okay.

Q258 **Robin Swann:** This inquiry is based on economic growth. For economic growth, we need a workforce. You mentioned metrics at the start of your presentation, Minister Patrick. One of the most challenging that we have in Northern Ireland is that of economic inactivity. The local growth fund was a very important fund in regard to supporting the individuals and organisations that were trying to get those people who were furthest from work into employment.

You will be well aware that the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action has told this Committee that the organisations that it represents have seen a 60% to 70% fall in funding under the local growth fund. In your opinion, who is responsible for addressing that unmet need as a result of the fall in UK Government allocated funding?

Matthew Patrick: We all have a duty. I was really clear about this. I know that the Chair and the members of this Committee have pressed very hard on this issue multiple times, and I know that they will continue to do so.

From my perspective, the value of what those groups do is not in question. I have sat across the room from these people and I have heard directly how valuable that work is. I am not doubting the benefit of that. I am really not. I know it disappoints this Committee that the split will not change, but we have been clear about that for some time.

If I look at what has happened since the issue arose, more than £300 million in Barnett consequential has gone to the Executive. Clearly, they



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have written to us as well. It is entirely proper that I point that out. A substantial amount of money has gone in subsequent to that letter.

It was also not the case that we wanted to leave it there. That is why the Secretary of State and I convened a meeting with the PEACEPLUS programme and some of these bodies, including NICVA, CO3 and others, to ensure that we could continue to pursue the opportunities for some of these groups. I understand that, on the back of this, applications have gone in. I do not yet know the status of those.

It was also the case that the meeting uncovered something for me, which is that the Executive can almost claim back money from the PEACEPLUS programme against expenditure that has already taken place, provided that they could justify that. I made sure that was on the agenda for Executive Ministers.

From my perspective, I hear the frustration. I know it. I really understand that. Along with the Secretary of State, we have done everything that we can think of in terms of rolling up our sleeves, being creative and trying to find a way to support those organisations. As I say, I recognise that they do really important work and this Committee has been a central champion for them.

Q259 Robin Swann: You said in an earlier answer that you were the voice for businesses when it came to interacting with other Government Departments and that you were responsible for representing Northern Ireland. In regard to the local growth fund, do you feel you have been an effective voice in Whitehall in articulating those specific needs when it came to the local growth fund? You were not listened to.

Matthew Patrick: I am one of the voices. Clearly, we need to have humility there, but I take responsibility for being heard. On the local growth fund, we had that conversation. We reached that decision and we made sure that it was communicated very clearly.

For me, taking responsibility and trying to do my best by those groups that do such important work means that it is not enough for me to say, "I know this is a difficult message that you might not want to hear and I am sorry". It is about doing what we have done by getting those people—the PEACEPLUS project is something that the UK Government fund to the tune of hundreds of million pounds, I should add—around the table and trying to find a way to support those groups to access it.

This is a theme of the conversation more broadly. How many of those groups would know how to navigate the system with PEACEPLUS? How many people would naturally be plugged into it and know how to access it? One of the reasons that we got involved was to make that a bit simpler and clearer for people.

Q260 Robin Swann: If I could add to that, it is also about that ability and that intelligence. In regard to the local growth fund and the capital spend, you



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mentioned the imbalance that has happened now, which has upset or annoyed many of those organisations. Can you tell me why your Department has only recently begun the consultation in regard to that, even though you made the announcement back in December?

Matthew Patrick: We launched a consultation. I think it concluded as of Friday. The process to reach that consultation is naturally one that you would work with the Executive and others to agree some of the questions and talk about different experiences to make sure that we can make the most of that.

There is always a difficulty about the amount of time that you give, because some of the funds will have to go out the door this financial year. If you take too long and if your consultation is too long, you will end up in a situation where you have a very narrow window in which to spend some of this and make sure you are investing in growth. We have had a consultation. It took about seven weeks and it concluded, as I say, last Friday.

Q261 **Robin Swann:** You engaged with the Executive in regard to the preparation of that consultation.

Matthew Patrick: We spoke with them about it. It was our consultation, not a joint one.

Q262 **Robin Swann:** Who exactly in the Executive were you engaging with in regard to that?

Matthew Patrick: There were definitely official-level conversations going on with the Department of Finance and the Department for the Economy. I can come back and confirm if that is needed.

Q263 **Robin Swann:** That would be useful. In regard to that, are there any lessons that you have learned from your Department's handling of the local growth fund? Would you change your approach for similar programmes in the future?

Matthew Patrick: It is a really fair question. Some of this was done just as I came into post, and I spoke to officials about how we did this. There are some lessons that we definitely can learn. We need to make sure we are crystal-clear. Officials might have thought that they were being very clear about what was happening with the fund and where things might be going, but, if that left an inch of a door open for someone to think that things might change, that is not healthy because it means you do not end up getting confronting the issue as we see it. There is a conversation about whether you prevent that happening at all. When we had reached that stage, that decision had been taken. On reflection, it is about making sure you are crystal-clear and communicating as early as possible.

Q264 **Robin Swann:** Have you built that into NIO programmes?

Matthew Patrick: I have definitely fed it back to officials and made sure that it is understood.



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Q265 **Robin Swann:** We will not see that again.

Matthew Patrick: I would obviously hope that is not the case.

Q266 **Robin Swann:** Are you saying that officials did not hear you say it?

Matthew Patrick: No. I am sorry. I would hope it is the case that we do not see this again, but I could never guarantee the future. What I can tell you is that I have taken it seriously; I have heard. This Committee has been a crucial part of getting that message across, and I am grateful to the Committee for it. The requirement to be clear and communicate early is something that I have communicated.

Q267 **Chair:** Just to pick up on the NICVA situation, I do hope that lessons have been learned, Minister, particularly because sitting in a room with so many stakeholders was quite life-changing for me as the Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee. I am sure my colleagues will feel the same. Finding out on the last working day before Christmas that funding was no longer going to be available was very hard-hitting and ruined quite a few Christmases. Are you aware of whether NICVA has engaged with the PEACEPLUS scheme? It quoted it to us as being a non-starter.

Matthew Patrick: There are groups that have. We have engaged with a range of groups and applications have gone into the scheme. I am interested—I am sure this Committee is interested as well—in what the outcome of those applications will be. I am pressing officials to support, however we can, to find out that information. I am very happy—I expect that the Committee would be interested—to share the answer on this when we get one.

Chair: That would be welcome. Thank you very much. I will call the session to an end.