

# Northern Ireland Committee

## Oral evidence: Work of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, HC 264

Thursday 14 May 2020

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Members present: Simon Hoare (Chair); Caroline Ansell; Scott Benton; Mr Gregory Campbell; Stephen Farry; Mr Robert Goodwill; Claire Hanna; Ian Paisley; Karin Smyth.

Questions 1-70

### Witnesses

I: Rt Hon Brandon Lewis MP, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Madeleine Alessandri, Permanent Secretary at Northern Ireland Office, Mark Larmour, Director at Northern Ireland Office, and Colin Perry, Director at Northern Ireland Office.

## Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Rt Hon Brandon Lewis MP, Madeleine Alessandri, Mark Larmour and Colin Perry.

**Q1 Chair:** Good afternoon, colleagues, and welcome to this meeting of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee.

It is a great pleasure to welcome the new Secretary of State, Brandon Lewis, and his team. The Secretary of State was due to appear before us just before Easter, but that had to be rearranged. Brandon, we are very pleased that you are able to join us this afternoon.

This inquiry is with regards to covid and devolution. We have other inquiries going on—on “New Decade, New Approach”, customs and legacy—but we will not deal with those issues today, Secretary of State, although we hope that you and Minister Walker will be able to make yourselves available, as and when appropriate, to appear for the NIO on those issues.

Without any further ado, Secretary of State, will you introduce yourself and your team for the record, and make some introductory remarks?

**Brandon Lewis:** Good afternoon. Thank you for inviting me and the team. Our Permanent Secretary and Mark and Colin are with us today.

I look forward to having a good relationship with the Committee so, absolutely, as you go through those other inquiries, we will do everything we can to ensure that we play a full part, to respond wherever we can and to be as helpful as we can. I look forward to discussing, generally, my work as Secretary of State with all of you.

I understand, as you outlined, that this session is focused primarily on coronavirus and the work that we are doing with the Northern Ireland Executive to support the response in Northern Ireland. We all recognise that coronavirus represents an unprecedented challenge, something that we have not seen in our lifetimes, and it has had tragic consequences.

I take this opportunity to pass on publicly my sincere condolences to all the families and friends of those who, sadly, have lost their lives. I also express my thanks to all those who work in care and are caring for and supporting people during this crisis. Throughout the response to the pandemic in Northern Ireland, we have seen community spirit at its absolute best, with people coming together and doing extraordinary things to support one another, and businesses playing their full part as well.

Since the start of the crisis, my colleagues in the UK Government and I have worked closely with the First Minister, the Deputy First Minister and the rest of the Executive to have a co-ordinated response to benefit people in Northern Ireland. Across the United Kingdom, we have been guided at all times by data and the science in the approach that we have taken. We

have been clear that we need to work together across the UK to respond to this virus.

I will give the Committee one example of some successful work—which I am sure we will touch on in more detail later this afternoon—between the Executive and the UK Government. We worked well, in a real team effort, jointly to deliver the vital support package that we wanted to see, and that we needed, to ensure that our ferries and airports were able to maintain the vital supply of critical goods. Obviously, that also ensured that key workers could continue their roles as we safeguarded the connectivity of the entire United Kingdom.

This week, the newly published Northern Ireland Executive’s “Roadmap to recovery” is a good example, I would say, of devolution in action. We will learn more about the plans, I think, from the Executive later on today. It is the Executive taking its own decisions in the best interests of the people of Northern Ireland, within and as part of the UK-wide framework. We absolutely stand with the Executive as it works to support lives and livelihoods in Northern Ireland. Together, we will gradually look at how we begin our journey out of lockdown.

I look forward to taking your questions throughout the afternoon.

**Q2 Chair:** Secretary of State, thank you. As I mentioned at the start, this session is obviously about covid and devolution. Before we turn to that, I hope you don’t mind if we raise with you the recent totally disgraceful and indefensible threats against some journalists and politicians in Northern Ireland, one of whom is a colleague on this Committee. What discussions have you had with the PSNI on its analysis of and response to those threats?

**Brandon Lewis:** Actually, I spoke to the Chief Constable of the PSNI, Simon Byrne, this morning and we discussed this issue. I hope you appreciate that I am not going to comment on particular cases, but I am happy to say that we are in contact on these issues and discussing them later today. I am aware of these reports more generally, as I have been over the course of this week.

Without commenting on particular media reports, I would add that I am sure all of us will have a strong view that there is absolutely no place for threats or violence, or threats of violence, of any type in Northern Ireland, or elsewhere, against politicians, anyone in the media or indeed anybody, full stop. We all have a role to play in absolutely condemning this kind of behaviour. It is something that I will continue to be in contact with the PSNI about.

**Chair:** Thank you. We now turn to our first question, which is from Mr Campbell.

**Q3 Mr Campbell:** Thank you, Chairman. You are very welcome, Secretary of State. It is good to see you at last. I have a couple of questions. In terms of the stats, Northern Ireland has seen quite a low number of those who have got the disease or who have sadly died as a result of it. Are you



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getting an indication from the Department of Health, and the First and Deputy First Ministers, that those numbers are continuing to decline?

**Brandon Lewis:** Yes. I talk to the First and Deputy First Ministers every week, often more than once. I have been keeping in contact with the Minister of Health, Robin Swann, as well.

As of 14 May, sadly, the number of people who have died in Northern Ireland after contracting the virus has risen to 454. I have stayed in contact about that, and from the conversations I have had, even just today, we believe we are past that peak. We are starting to see a downward trend, but it is still early days in terms of having confidence around making sure that we don't get a second peak.

Q4 **Mr Campbell:** Okay, thanks for that. Turning to the wider cost implications of the covid crisis, I was looking at some of the figures yesterday and today. I know you have not been in office for long, but you are probably aware that the average wage in Northern Ireland is about £27,000 per year. For those who are on furlough, the Treasury is picking up 80% that. The latest estimates show that there are about a quarter of a million people in Northern Ireland furloughed. By my reckoning, that makes a bill, month on month, in excess of £300 million. Is that roughly approximate to what you've been told?

**Brandon Lewis:** We don't actually have a breakdown yet in terms of what the furlough scheme costs for any single part of the UK. I can't comment on what the particular cost of the furlough scheme is to Northern Ireland.

The Treasury and the Chancellor are determined to make sure that we've got that support for businesses, by ensuring that they cover the salaries of their staff in the furlough scheme, but also, importantly, for individuals, who know that 80% of their salary is guaranteed. Hopefully, that means that, as we come through the virus, there is an opportunity for businesses to come out of hibernation and start to rebuild. They can take their staff back, with their salaries, and protect their jobs in the long term.

In terms of what we spend in Northern Ireland, whatever the final cost is—as I say, we have not got the breakdown of that yet—I think it has been an investment that has been the right thing to do for people across the United Kingdom.

Q5 **Mr Gregory Campbell:** It is just that if the cost is approximately £300 million a month, that is in addition to the £10 billion subvention that Northern Ireland receives from the Treasury year on year. You said that you have been in constant contact with the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister; would you be able to remind them—perhaps the Deputy First Minister, in particular—of where Northern Ireland would get sums of that scale? As part of the United Kingdom, we are subvented by £10 billion per year, and now an additional £300 million a month on top of that.

**Brandon Lewis:** What I think we have seen through the way we have dealt with the coronavirus—whether it is the job retention scheme, the



loan scheme, the bounce-back scheme or the £1.2 billion in Barnett consequential that has come to the Northern Ireland Executive—and the way it has all worked, is a really good example of what the Treasury has been able to do. The benefit of having a United Kingdom approach to this means that we have all had that support from the whole of the United Kingdom. That has absolutely worked to Northern Ireland's benefit, but it has worked both ways, because Northern Ireland has done things, particularly with the PPE that has come across to mainland UK, and that is a good thing. It has been a good example of the whole United Kingdom, as one family, being of benefit for all parts of it.

**Mr Gregory Campbell:** I have one final question, Chairman. Yesterday at Northern Ireland questions, Secretary of State, you repeated the Government's assurance on unfettered access between NI and GB. I know that this is a slightly tangential issue, but it is very important—

**Chair:** Mr Campbell, that is very tangential to what we are talking about today. Can we leave that for—

**Mr Gregory Campbell:** It is, Chairman, but I would like to have an answer. *[Inaudible.]*

Q6 **Chair:** Mr Campbell, let us deal with those issues and have the Secretary of State back before the Committee when we are dealing with unfettered access and those arrangements at a very quick moment after Whitsun recess. I am very keen that, today, we stick to devolution and covid.

Secretary of State, following on from Mr Campbell's initial questions with regard to the statistics—you may need to write to the Committee on this—how are the predictions and the actuality bearing up with regard to the impact of coronavirus on Northern Ireland? How would you compare those with the Republic's predictions and actuality?

**Brandon Lewis:** That is a very fair question. We touched on coronavirus yesterday, so if it is helpful for the Committee, I would say that I stand by everything I said at the Dispatch Box yesterday. I hope that will help with a few queries, including the previous question.

Let me turn to your direct question, Chairman. We need to be clear about two things. I am wary of drawing comparisons with other countries, even the Republic of Ireland, with which we share that land border, because there are differences in how different countries approach things, not just in terms of data but in terms of epidemiology and the state and position of the cycle. Those kinds of comparisons can be difficult, but what I would say about the predictions that you referred to is that it is important to recognise that, at the beginning, what people were looking at was a modelling exercise, which was not really intended to be a prediction, necessarily. That modelling exercise obviously did set out a reasonable worst-case scenario, which I think is what you are referring to, and that has been reduced from 3,000 to 1,500. We have been able to do that—the experts have been able to do that—because there has been a continuation of, and really good adherence to, the guidelines and the measures that have been set out by both the UK Government and the Northern Ireland



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Executive. Huge credit is due to all the frontline staff for the phenomenal work they have done in Northern Ireland, and to the people of Northern Ireland, who have followed those guidelines. That has allowed us to get to a position in which, although any loss of life is obviously tragic and unwanted, it has been of a different scale to what it could have otherwise been. That has been down to the very simple fact that every single person who follows those guidelines plays their part in saving lives.

**Q7 Chair:** What is your assessment of the R rate at the moment with regards to Northern Ireland?

**Brandon Lewis:** As the First Minister outlined just yesterday, we believe that the R rate is about 0.7 in Northern Ireland, so we must make sure that we keep on top of that. That is why it is so important that people follow the guidelines, particularly as we start to come out of this—as we start to see some easing and as we start to exit from lockdown. The Northern Ireland Executive are setting out their plans for that. It is important that people continue to follow the guidelines in the stages that are set out, because they are based on data and on science, and that is the best way that we can make sure that we keep on top of that R figure.

**Q8 Chair:** Is there a differential in the R rate the closer that you get to the border?

**Brandon Lewis:** I am not aware of a breakdown that gives us that level of data on the R rate, so I would not want to comment too much on where it changes in the different parts of Northern Ireland. As I have said, the overall R rate is between 0.7 and 0.79, so it is important that we stay on top of it.

**Q9 Chair:** Is the data available but just not to hand, or is it not collated?

**Brandon Lewis:** I am not aware of the data being broken down in that format.

**Q10 Chair:** If you were made aware of it—

**Brandon Lewis:** I would be very happy to share it with the Committee. I would bring you absolutely up to speed, yes.

**Chair:** That would be helpful. Thank you. Caroline Ansell, please.

**Q11 Caroline Ansell:** I will come on to ask you about the Coronavirus Act 2020 and the powers therein, and also about the potential impact, as you see it, of those three years without the devolved Government in play. My opening question, though, is to understand what your Department has specifically done around the covid response in Northern Ireland.

**Brandon Lewis:** Over the past few weeks, the Northern Ireland Office and the UK Government as a whole have been working with the Northern Ireland Executive on a range of things. I have a weekly meeting with the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. I also jointly chair a meeting with the First Minister and her Health Ministers—the UK Government, the Irish Government and the and Executive. We have been working together on a range of things. There have been issues with the connectivity of



ferries and issues with airports, as I outlined in my opening remarks. We have been working together on PPE. We have seen a commitment of 5.5 million pieces of PPE to go to Northern Ireland from the UK Government. We have also seen PPE coming from Northern Ireland, and we have seen companies in Northern Ireland changing what they produce. Just this week, I was talking to a company, which produces Hero visors now. They are all playing their part in delivering PPE. We have seen a good joined-up approach. I have to say that I have had a very positive experience in how everybody has worked together for the benefit of the people of Northern Ireland, and we will continue to do that.

- Q12 Caroline Ansell:** On the Act and the range of powers that have been devolved to the Executive, which of those powers do you see as being the most important, or as having the most far-reaching impact?

**Brandon Lewis:** The thing that has probably had the most impact in Northern Ireland is the fact that health is devolved. The Executive in Northern Ireland have that direct control because health is devolved. Robin Swann and the team working together have had the ability to make decisions that are in the best interests of Northern Ireland. They have done that, I have to say, working in partnership at all times with us and as part of UK-wide policy. They have been part of the committees—generally, the ministerial group committees—and the Cobra meetings that have made decisions.

There has been a proper joined-up approach, making sure, for example, that the police have the powers that they need to do their job. Again, what we have seen in Northern Ireland—when I have been talking with the PSNI—is that ability to ensure that people can do good social distancing in respect of the guidelines. That has been important in keeping the R rate lower than it might otherwise have been. It brought the rate down quicker than might otherwise have happened. As I have said, credit for that must go to the people of Northern Ireland, who followed those guidelines in the first place.

- Q13 Caroline Ansell:** The final part of my question is around those three years when the Executive were not in place. Obviously, health and the challenges therein were very much in the minds of the people of Northern Ireland. Do you feel that, in those three years, decision making was made rather more difficult? Was it far more difficult to move forward and to make progress on some of the important reforms? Do you feel those three years have, in any way, been carried over, or had any kind of effect in the ability of the healthcare system to respond now?

**Brandon Lewis:** With the Executive not functioning for such a long period of time, and given that reform of healthcare takes time, this is a very clear reminder—this was picked up by all the parties in the “New Decade, New Approach” deal—that keeping the Executive up and running is hugely important, so that these long-term, sometimes difficult decisions can be made and followed through. I would like to take this opportunity to recognise the phenomenal dedication, work and resolve of the staff across the social care system and the civil service more generally in Northern



Ireland over that period, who kept things going with their determination to ensure that patients and people in Northern Ireland still had good-quality healthcare and were able to deliver that.

We have seen the Executive re-established, which is a really good thing. The “New Decade, New Approach” deal recognises the need to see reform and changes in the health sector, which I hope they will take forward and see through. The First Minister has shown great leadership, working with the Deputy First Minister and Health Minister Robin Swann. It is a really good joined-up approach to making sure that the right decisions are being made and that the resources and support are there for the health team, so that they are able to do things as quickly as possible. We have seen the benefits of that. To go back to the discussion I was having with the Chairman a few moments ago, the difference between some of the early modelling and where we have ended up is a result of that really good teamwork and commitment from people, and particularly the amazing people on the frontline.

**Q14 Caroline Ansell:** Presumably that applies particularly to the raising up of additional capacity in critical care.

**Brandon Lewis:** Absolutely. We have seen the Executive come together to make decisions and make sure that support has been there, so that when they have needed to surge in certain areas, they have been able to do that. It has shown the importance of having the Executive there, working and delivering for people. As I say, the work across the parties has been absolutely excellent over the last few weeks, and hopefully that is a good sign for things to come as we come out the other side from the virus.

**Q15 Caroline Ansell:** That sounds hugely promising for the future. So you do not feel that the last three years has unduly created a shadow over provision now?

**Brandon Lewis:** As I say, there is a recognition in the “New Decade, New Approach” deal that people want to see the health service in Northern Ireland improve and reform. That is specifically outlined in the deal. It is important that the Executive are able to focus on that. Obviously right now, their focus is rightly on coronavirus, and I have seen them work together really positively through that process. It is a good reminder of why it is important that we do not have that gap—none of us wants to see that gap in leadership on the Executive again in the future—so that they can get on and deliver. There will be some difficult areas with some tough decisions for people to make. The stability of the Executive is important to allow that to happen.

**Chair:** I should have said at the outset, Secretary of State, that if any of your officials wish to chip into our discussions, they should feel free; if they indicate, I will call them. Karin Smyth, you wanted to come in on this question.

**Karin Smyth:** Actually, Chair, it makes more sense for me to come in on the next question, because it is about the data.





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**Chair:** Very well. We will go to Stephen Farry then.

**Stephen Farry:** Welcome to the Secretary of State and his team. Before I ask my question, Chair, I want to assure you that this is framed in the context of covid-19; I am not straying beyond the brief.

**Chair:** I will be the judge of that, Mr Farry.

Q16 **Stephen Farry:** Okay—let me get to the end of the question, and then you can judge. The Northern Ireland Office, rightly, laid the regulations in relation to abortion at the end of March. Without going into the rights or wrongs of that and the detail, that is now the law. The Department of Health in Northern Ireland has so far refused to commission services. Some trusts are trying to do something, but without support. So we have a situation where women in Northern Ireland are still being advised to travel to England—

**Chair:** Mr Farry, I am taking an executive judgment on that. I think that that falls within the definition of “tangential” unless you can very quickly convince me otherwise.

**Stephen Farry:** Okay. Basically, women from Northern Ireland are being advised to travel to England to access services, but in practical terms, because ferries and planes—

**Chair:** No, I do not think that that is relevant to what we are talking about today.

Q17 **Stephen Farry:** If I can push back, it is an issue in relation to devolution and how the UK Government can ensure that their human rights obligations under CEDAW are being implemented. Due to covid, women from Northern Ireland cannot access services in England, and therefore they are being placed in a very vulnerable position. I think people do want to see an answer from the Northern Ireland Office on how that will be taken forward.

**Chair:** Mr Farry, you have rescued yourself with the reference to the covid travel arrangements. I will allow the Secretary of State to respond to that very briefly, and then we will turn to Mr Paisley.

**Brandon Lewis:** Thank you, Chairman. I am very happy to correct Mr Farry’s information, because he is a little bit out of date there. I am pleased that an interim solution has been reached on the ground in Northern Ireland so that the health and safety of women and girls can be protected by access to services locally, therefore limiting the need for travel. Obviously, we have kept that connectivity point, but there is now a solution on the ground locally in Northern Ireland.

Q18 **Ian Paisley:** I must say that I will be coming back on that answer, but I certainly welcome the Secretary of State. It is good to see him here. I agree wholeheartedly with some of the points he has already made with regard to our frontline workers—with regard to our social care workers and the great work that they have been doing, and the fact that they



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have been able to continue with normal services to help the sick and the injured. I witnessed that personally in the last 24 hours, when the emergency procedures kicked into place and saved the life of a very young child who was in a road traffic accident in my constituency. I can only commend the health service in that particular case.

I also welcome the point the Secretary of State made in response to my colleague Gregory Campbell, when he said that the response so far has been playing to the strengths of the Union. That is a very important point. I am making a small “u” unionist point here. Without the additional resources of £300 million per month and more on top of the subvention of almost £13 billion a year, we would not be able to respond in the way that we have been able to respond for our self-employed and for those people in employment who have been put on furlough. Those points are well made, Secretary of State, and should not be lost on anyone.

I do, however, want to address the issue of co-operation. The Secretary of State quite rightly said, with regard to the publication of the Northern Ireland road map, that we had seen good co-operation between the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. However, what is his analysis of north-south co-operation between the United Kingdom—Her Majesty’s Government—and the Republic’s Government, at the beginning of this crisis and, indeed, probably up until the last couple of weeks, in terms of sharing information? What has his assessment been of the internal relationships within the devolved settlement? Has he been worried that those relationships have not worked to their optimum level? Has Northern Ireland lost out as a result of that?

**Brandon Lewis:** I appreciate the comments about the position that there is a whole-UK approach. As I say, I wholeheartedly agree with that; we have seen to the benefit of everybody in the United Kingdom how the United Kingdom family is stronger for working together and being together. Importantly, we have been able to ensure that support is there for people and businesses across Northern Ireland. I do regular roundtables with businesses and business groups across Northern Ireland, and it has been very clear that that support has been hugely important for making sure that, when we get to the other side of this virus, there is an opportunity for the economy to start to come back again. There are going to be some very difficult times, and obviously we will have examples of businesses that do not quite make it through, but they have a better opportunity because of that support being there.

On the wider support, right at the very early stages, as the virus started to come in and particularly as we were just looking to go into lockdown, there were comments across the media, and the First Minister made a really good comment that I think we can all relate to. When you have five different parties forming the Executive, the reality is that there will be things they disagree about, and there will be issues and things we have to work through. That is what democracy is about; it is the job of all of us to find a way through that for the benefit of people.



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I have to say that, as we have gone through this over the last few weeks, my personal experience of working with the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister—I have also had dealings with the Minister for business, Minister Dodds, as well as with Minister Mallon and Robin Swann—has been that everybody, ultimately, has been focused on getting the right outcomes and making the right decisions for people in Northern Ireland, whether those have been about infrastructure and connectivity, PPE, or how we manage the lockdown process and deal with this virus more generally. Everybody has been focused on that. I have found that to be a positive experience and I think that potentially bodes well for the future stability and success of the Executive.

In terms of North-South, obviously one thing I instigated early on was what we call “the quad”; I am joint chair, with Simon Coveney, and this has been roughly fortnightly over the past weeks. We have met three times and we are due to meet early next week, if not later this week. Through that, we have had an opportunity to share experience and understanding across the border; the First Minister and Deputy First Minister have always been part of those meetings, and we have the Health Ministers of both the Republic of Ireland and Ireland. Of course, we have seen that memorandum of understanding this week between the Northern Ireland Executive—the health team—and the Republic of Ireland. All of that has shown a good approach to a joined-up way of working that recognises and respects the difference—the fact that we have two different countries where we share a border. We have issues where people may live on one side but go to school or to work on the other side of the border, so where there are differences of approach we need to be clear about and explain to people why that is the case and what the correct guidelines are for them. We saw some benefit of that particularly with the furlough scheme and some of those packages we put in place.

So, I think it has worked relatively well. This is an unprecedented situation, so as we go through this all of us are learning new things we can be doing and new ways of working, but, ultimately, the focus has always uniformly been about getting the right outcomes for people in Northern Ireland.

**Q19 Ian Paisley:** What I am getting from that is that any playing of politics has not actually interfered, in terms of the internal Northern Ireland relationships, to damage the delivery of service for the people of Northern Ireland. I think that is probably a fair take from your comment. I am just wondering whether I can push you a bit further on something. Because the relationship is so tricky and, I would suggest, bad between Leo Varadkar and Sinn Féin, have you picked up anything where there has been a breakdown in communication, where we have perhaps not had access to the information that we should have had at an earlier stage? Has that impacted on the relationships? Or is that just internal Republic of Ireland politics getting in the way?

**Brandon Lewis:** I am going to resist any temptation to comment on the internal politics of another country, particularly the Republic of Ireland. I am not best placed to comment on what may or may not be happening



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there. What I will say is that in the conversations I have had with Robin Swann he has felt that the relationship and the way of working between him and Simon Harris, the Minister in the Republic of Ireland, has been good, he has got the information and it has worked well. I think the chief medical officers have worked well together. But if there are any issues there, they would certainly be something you would have to take up with Robin Swann more than myself, I suspect. All through this, the UK Government and the Irish Government have been communicating at all levels. Not just me, but other parts of government have been communicating with the Irish Government, so that, wherever we can, we have a sensible approach and a joined-up approach to how we deal with the virus.

- Q20 **Ian Paisley:** I do not think there is any problem with the relationship between Leo Varadkar's Government and Northern Irish Unionists, whether they are in the DUP or the Ulster Unionist party. I think there is a breakdown in the relationship between the Deputy First Minister's party and Leo Varadkar, and that that could have an impact, potentially detrimental, on how we share information across the island and across the islands. That is the point I am making, Secretary of State. It is not about Unionist problems; it is about internationalist problems.

**Brandon Lewis:** As I say, I could not comment and I would not portray myself to be any form of an expert on what issues there may be, if any, between Sinn Féin and Leo Varadkar in the Republic. I can only talk of the experience I have had, and I have to say that working at a UK Government level I think the approach has worked well, but that is a matter for the internal workings of the Irish Government, rather than me, I am afraid.

- Q21 **Ian Paisley:** I can understand that. You gave an answer—Mr Chairman, I will keep within your rulings on this—just before I was called on the issue of how the covid situation was potentially informing decisions that have to be taken with regard to abortion decisions for individuals in Northern Ireland. Is it right that the solution that you have found, Secretary of State, is that people's homes—the homes of people who have access to abortion rights—become the legitimate and legal place where abortions will actually take place? Is that what has ultimately happened in your arrangement?

**Brandon Lewis:** What we have done is that we have found a solution that works and that means that women and girls in Northern Ireland do not necessarily have to travel across to England. Obviously, they still can; we have kept the connectivity for that. But I will let one of the team come in. Mark, is that one for you to go into any detail on?

**Mark Larmour:** I would just add what you have already indicated—that whenever the regulations came into force at the end of March, a solution was put in place that allowed for the fact that during the impact of the coronavirus crisis, the service was available in Northern Ireland, and that remains the case.



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- Q22 **Ian Paisley:** I understand the point about travelling, Secretary of State, but that is not the point I am making. The point I am making is that the legitimate and lawful place for abortion to take place has now been legalised as the home of the person taking the medication; their home is now the lawful place for an abortion to take place. That would require a law change in Northern Ireland.

**Brandon Lewis:** What I would say with regard to the—

**Ian Paisley:** *[Inaudible]* for the individual if there's a medical problem also.

**Brandon Lewis:** Sorry, can you say that again? I missed part of it.

**Ian Paisley:** It would pose a further medical problem for the individual taking the medication if they had complications, and that would certainly put pressure on our hospital services at this time.

**Brandon Lewis:** First, on the hospital service in Northern Ireland, one of the things we have been working on and one of the things I think the Robin Swann and all the team have done very well is to make sure there is still capacity there for people who need support from the health service. That is certainly the case at the moment.

In terms of abortion more generally, as I said, there is a solution now in place in Northern Ireland. Of course, with the way the regulations work, the Executive themselves have an ability to amend those regulations should they wish to—should they feel that is appropriate—but as I said, we now have in place a situation whereby people can get the care and support that they need in Northern Ireland.

- Q23 **Ian Paisley:** Thank you. Finally on that, have you legalised it for GPs and pharmacists in the Republic of Ireland to be included in the process of giving advice and giving pills to people in Northern Ireland who wish to access those rights?

**Brandon Lewis:** Did you say, "Have we legalised"?

**Ian Paisley:** Yes.

**Brandon Lewis:** Well, it would not be for the UK Government to set laws for the Republic of Ireland.

- Q24 **Ian Paisley:** No, this is not about the Republic; it is about access to processes and individuals, whether they are GPs or pharmacists in the Republic of Ireland. Are they now assisting with abortions in Northern Ireland? Is that part of the solution that you have put in place?

**Brandon Lewis:** That is not part of the solution we have put in place. Obviously, the Health Department in the Northern Ireland Executive—health is devolved, and on the regulations, ultimately it will be a matter for the Northern Ireland Executive, if they wish to amend them, to take a decision about what they think is appropriate. What we have put in place is a solution that is in Northern Ireland, but obviously people can still access services in England as well.



**Q25 Ian Paisley:** Is the Republic of Ireland factored into this?

**Brandon Lewis:** I haven't got the Republic of Ireland factored in, as far as I'm aware, but I can look into that and come back to you, if that is helpful.

**Ian Paisley:** That would be very useful; thank you.

**Chair:** Karin Smyth, you indicated that you wanted to come in.

**Karin Smyth:** Actually, I'm not sure where to come in on the back of some of that, Chair, as we have diverged because the issue clearly is that—

**Chair:** Yes, well, can we end the divergence?

**Q26 Karin Smyth:** The Prime Minister has said that people should not travel unnecessarily, but the UK Government are still funding women travelling to England for abortions, which surely must be the issue that concerns all of us. That women post-10-weeks need to travel in these dangerous circumstances is unacceptable. Women are now being caught between the Secretary of State, who has been put in a very difficult position, and what is happening in the Northern Ireland Executive when the law in the United Kingdom is very clear. I sympathise with the Secretary of State's position at this particular moment, but I sympathise more with those women who are travelling in these covid times, and I hope people do take some note of that.

**Brandon Lewis:** Can I say this again? It is important to be clear. I think that is a slightly different point from the one that Mr Paisley was making and I will look into the details of his point about the Republic of Ireland. What I would just say, and it is important, is this. We had anticipated that services continuing while the Northern Ireland system was being set up meant that we would need to continue to allow people to come to England. That connectivity was one of the things that was very clear; we needed to make sure we kept connectivity so that if people needed access to that kind of care, they could get that. However—it is really important to be clear—we have now got, and I am pleased we have got, an interim solution that means that there is some provision on the ground in Northern Ireland at this time, so that people do not necessarily need to come to England to get that care and support.

**Q27 Karin Smyth:** That is only for under 10 weeks, Secretary of State, unless you are telling us something different.

**Brandon Lewis:** No. Where access is sought in other circumstances and it cannot yet be provided in Northern Ireland, we are continuing to engage very closely with the British Pregnancy Advisory Service, who are contracted to provide the Government-funded scheme. You are quite right. While travel options are limited, some services can be provided. We are keeping the matter under review, but it is important that if people need that kind of support, we are able to make it available—even if it means they may have to come to England for certain services.





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**Karin Smyth:** The UK Government is providing that service, but the service should be commissioned in Northern Ireland and those women should not have to travel.

**Chair:** I am going to intervene. I want us to get this session back on track, please. I look to no greater authority, as a former Transport Minister dealing with tracks, than Mr Robert Goodwill.

- Q28 **Mr Goodwill:** Thank you, Chair, and good afternoon, Secretary of State. We are starting to build up a good picture of the degree of co-operation between yourself, the Northern Ireland Executive and the Irish Government. In your opening remarks, you talked about your engagement with the First Minister and the Deputy, which I think you twice called the joined-up approach. Also, with meetings with Simon Coveney and Health Ministers in the Republic, it seems that this is working very well. Given that many think this is a disease that probably needs an all-island approach, because we've got the sea barrier, to what extent do you think that Northern Ireland and the Republic themselves need to build that approach, and maybe we would have a different approach in GB? Is that something that is starting to emerge?

**Brandon Lewis:** Through the quad meetings that we have had, we share experiences and information and knowledge, which has made the decision-making process a fluid one, or a solid one, if you like, in the sense of understanding what each other is doing at different stages even when we have moved sometimes at different points on the curve or acted at different points on the curve. At the moment, on the R rating—I don't know the breakdown of different parts of Northern Ireland or indeed of the Republic—generally across the Republic and Northern Ireland we are in a similar place. We have been trying to achieve—I think we have done—a UK-wide approach following the data and the science, but recognising what devolution means. A devolved authority has the ability to make decisions that are right for its area. We recognise that different parts of the United Kingdom—Northern Ireland is a good example—are potentially moving at different stages of the cycle of this virus and therefore can respond to that in a way that is appropriate for them. That can apply, as we are seeing, in different parts of the island of Ireland as well. Having a joined-up ability to understand what that means—we saw it in terms of how we dealt with, as I said earlier on, some of the schemes for furloughing and things like that—has made life better for the people of Northern Ireland as a result.

- Q29 **Mr Goodwill:** Could I turn to Mark Larmour, who might be able to give us an idea of officials' engagement. You have talked about political meetings, but could we have a picture of the regularity of meetings, the conference calls, and how that has been co-ordinated at official level? I understand, as a former Minister, it is the officials that often do all the Sherpa work and the Ministers make the decisions, but all the work is done behind the scenes by officials.

**Mark Larmour:** There are two aspects to that. One is the communication and the pragmatism that has gone on between Ministers particularly, but



also between officials. As the Secretary of State has indicated, one of the benefits of how we have acted over the past 10 or 12 weeks has been the way in which we have communicated between both the UK Government and the Executive. As an example, I sit in every morning on the central co-ordination group set up by the Northern Ireland Executive, chaired by the head of the civil service, David Sterling. It is a joined-up meeting. I am able to understand some of the issues facing the Executive and then try and take those back with colleagues into the UK Government space to try and work out how we can work together and find solutions. That then leads to official conversations during the course of the day. At the end of the day we have a wash-up on those issues together.

Equally, in the margins of the quad that the Secretary of State mentioned, which brings together the First and Deputy First Minister, the Irish Foreign Minister, who is also the Tánaiste, with the Secretary of State and the two Health Ministers, we have regular contact at official level to try and understand how we can resolve issues. To be fair, given the nature and scale of the crisis, everyone has approached this from a very pragmatic point of view, and we have spent a lot of time just trying to resolve how we manage some of the communications around that, so that there is a clear, consistent message going out to the public. From my observation, the singular aim of the Executive is to try to give a clear message to the public in Northern Ireland about how they need to behave and what needs to be done to tackle this.

In my experience, looking at relationships between parties around talks, and between Governments north and south, the support that the UK Government have been giving to the Executive has been an extraordinary effort across the board, which gives me confidence for how people might work together in the future.

**Mr Goodwill:** Thank you. That is very encouraging.

**Chair:** No other colleagues indicated that they want to come in on this, so I will now turn to Mr Farry.

**Q30 Stephen Farry:** Going back on script, but just to say, on the controversy that we have had—

**Chair:** Mr Farry, can we stay on script, please?

**Stephen Farry:** I'm just going to close that one off.

**Chair:** Could you ask your question, please?

**Stephen Farry:** Yes, yes, yes. I want to ask about the lockdown strategies across the UK and Ireland. In a sense, five different approaches are being taken. That is a sign of local decision making to fit local circumstances. But there is also huge interdependence between each of the different jurisdictions and knock-on consequences for decisions that are taken.

Can the Secretary of State comment on the UK's approach to how that is



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being managed? In particular, a lot of concern has been expressed by all three of the devolved nations or regions over the decisions taken by the UK Government, which do not seem to have been based upon consultation with those Governments and Executives.

**Brandon Lewis:** To save time, Chair, after this meeting, I will write to the Committee outlining the situation and dealing with some of the issues and some of the misunderstandings a number of colleagues have had around the abortion regulations, so that you will have a full answer and can deal with that later.

**Chair:** That's very helpful.

**Brandon Lewis:** In terms of the points Mr Farry has just made, I fundamentally disagree. I am afraid I think he is fundamentally wrong in the assessment he closed with. First of all, I have not seen any critique yet—he may prove me wrong on this—from the Northern Ireland Executive, which have been quite clear about the joined-up approach that we have taken.

What I will say more forcefully—this is a matter of fact—is that all the devolved authorities have been part of the decision-making process, as I outlined from the Dispatch Box in the House of Commons yesterday. I say that in the context in which we have a public services committee, the ministerial group, a health forum and an economic one, and at all points there have been representatives from devolved authorities involved in those.

All of the First and Deputy First Ministers were at the Cobra meetings which made these decisions. They were actually part of that decision-making process. Robin Swann on the health side has been involved in a great number of the health committee debates, discussions and meetings that we have had around this. They have been absolutely, intrinsically involved and, of course, represented through the territorial Departments, myself as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and my colleagues for Scotland and Wales. It has been a genuinely joined-up approach.

That does not change the fact—here I do agree with Mr Farry's opening remarks—that as we are coming out of the lockdown and we start to move to the pathway to exit, and eventually get into a form of normality at some stage in the not-too-distant future, there are different approaches in different devolved authorities. I think that is quite reasonable. They are all working within the wider UK framework. That science and data-led approach is absolutely right. We recognise not only what devolution means—this is devolution in action—but that there will be different stages in the curve of this virus. We need to allow the devolved authorities, with their local knowledge and expertise—health is devolved in Northern Ireland—to make the decisions that are right for their area.

- Q31 **Stephen Farry:** To come back on that, I certainly recognise that there has been close collaboration between all of the devolved regions and the Government on some of the ongoing detail, but there was a definite issue



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in relation to the messaging—the new document that was announced on Monday and the associated messaging with that—and I was on a call with the Prime Minister where those frustrations were outlined.

On the specifics of the co-operation, can I ask about the liaison between the UK Government and the Northern Ireland Office and the Government of Ireland? For example, how often are meetings taking place? Are those at ministerial level or primarily at official level? At times, there has been a certain disjoint in terms of response and—not pointing the figure in one direction or another—there have been complications on both sides and a lack of communication. How is that going, and do you think that can be improved in any way?

**Brandon Lewis:** As I say, the UK Government—whether it is the Foreign Office, the Cabinet Office or myself here at the Northern Ireland Office—have regular contact with the Irish Government. I speak to Simon Coveney on a regular basis and have done throughout this crisis. In fact, I think the last time I spoke to him—I will double check the date—was either Friday or Saturday. We are due to joint chair a quad meeting either tomorrow or very early next week—it might be early next week, because I think they have cabinet tomorrow—with First and Deputy First Ministers, so that has been ongoing.

Our Permanent Secretary has been very patient in listening to me, but I will let her comment on the official level. Yes, it was Saturday morning that I last spoke to Simon Coveney, and as I say, I expect to be joint chairing a quad meeting with him in the next few days. It will be the fourth one over the last few weeks, and that is aside from the direct conversations that he and I have had as we have gone through this virus. Madeleine?

**Madeleine Alessandri:** Thank you very much, and good afternoon, everybody. As the Secretary of State has said, there is lots of intensive contact both at ministerial level, but also at official level. There is virtually daily contact with the Taoiseach's office, and also with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade in Dublin. As you would imagine, our embassy in Dublin is very actively engaged as well. We from the Northern Ireland Office are in regular contact with our counterparts, too. So I would describe it as a continual conversation that we are having.

Each of the nations is finding our way through an unprecedented situation in a crisis that none of us have had to deal with before. I think we all recognised very early on that this was going to require even more intense communication than we would otherwise have had. Certainly from my point of view and that of officials in the NIO, we are every day engaging with, and engaging with our counterparts on, all these issues.

**Stephen Farry:** Finally, in closing, may I formally welcome Madeleine to her new role as Permanent Secretary? It is her first appearance before the Committee, and we look forward to seeing her frequently in the future.

**Chair:** Mr Farry, you shame me; I should have done that. Madeleine, please forgive me. You are very welcome, and what a time to be bumped



up to being a Permanent Secretary!

Karin Smyth, you wanted to come in.

**Q32 Karin Smyth:** Thank you, Chair. This relates to a couple of issues with the data. I am also a member of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, which yesterday met the ONS. Professor Diamond particularly talked about pandemics in hospitals, pandemics in the care homes sector and pandemics in the community, with the data very clearly showing that this is a disease in the community in large cities.

Obviously, Belfast has up to 20% of the Northern Ireland population—it is the centre—but most of Northern Ireland is more rural. In the data analysis that local authorities and people have, they really do need to have quality testing and tracing locally to understand the spread of the disease in more rural parts of Northern Ireland. The R number is an average across all of Northern Ireland, but that is not really people's lived experience in Northern Ireland and it is not terribly helpful for helping people come out of lockdown.

In looking at the data, it would be helpful to know, in relation to Northern Ireland, how much local devolution power and support it will have to look at that local data and perhaps have some more testing and tracing capability locally.

**Brandon Lewis:** As I said earlier, health is a devolved matter in Northern Ireland. In terms of what ability and what devolved power it has, health itself is devolved, so it has that power.

As the UK Government, we are working with the Northern Ireland Executive at the moment in looking at how we further develop testing and contact tracing strategies. That includes understanding how tools, such as the NHS covid-19 app, can support those strategies. We are also looking at a joint biosecurity centre, and talking to the Irish Government as well about how we can make sure that the data can be compatible with the work they are doing. I think it is important that the NHS app is interoperable with the one that the Irish Government are developing. That is why the teams are working on and talking about that at the moment. It is another thing that our officials are all working on, along with the Northern Ireland Executive.

There is a shared interest across not just the whole of the island of Ireland but the whole of the United Kingdom in how we take this forward, because the more people who use this app, the better and more powerful the app will be. I think that is a really important part of it, as is being able to roll out and see more testing being done. We have the capacity, and what we want to do now is see how we can get more and more people making use of that capacity in a good way, which then leads into all these other parts as we move forward, hopefully, to find a way through to the other side of this virus and go back to some form of normality in the not too distant future.



- Q33 **Karin Smyth:** The biosecurity unit is a welcome development, but it is not currently working with local authorities in England and that information is not shared. Obviously, lots of people do not have access to a smart phone and connectivity across Northern Ireland, so the need to do something else to inform the biosecurity unit, as well as the app, is really important. I guess the question is, although health is devolved, whether they will be supported if they feel that that is a better way to proceed, as is their right in devolution, and that the UK Government would support them in doing more of that local testing.

**Brandon Lewis:** The proof is absolutely in the pudding in the sense that, as I have just said, Northern Ireland and the Executive has outlined its pathway and route path to exiting—and I have said that this is a really good example of devolution in action. Having health devolved does mean that they have the power to make the decisions about what is right for them. We are working with them on that, and we will continue to work with them and support them in getting the solutions that are right for the people of Northern Ireland.

- Q34 **Chair:** Secretary of State, we talk often in Westminster about a four-nations approach and a four-nations solution. You will be aware that, in essence, as far as Northern Ireland is concerned, that is true: it is the UK and the Republic.

We talked earlier about data and the R rate. I think we were not entirely sure whether there was a more granular breakdown of the R rate across Northern Ireland and, in particular, whether there is a higher or lower R rate at a distance from the border. If that granularity of data analysis is not currently being done, I suggest it would be very worthwhile to get it underway—ditto from the Republic's point of view. That is because we need to have a conjoined, in-lockstep approach, if you like, to an exit strategy, and it would be helpful to look at that data to see whether there are pinch points at the border just due to geographical proximity. I do not know whether the Permanent Secretary has any thoughts on the ability to get that granularity of data, but I suggest it would be incredibly useful in plotting the exit strategies for the island of Ireland.

**Brandon Lewis:** I see Madeleine wants to come in, but this is one of the areas where getting more people on the app is so important, once we get it rolling out, because it will start to tell us the granularity. To come back to Karin's point, you then start to get a better understanding. We believe that the R rate across Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland is pretty similar, but, as she said, the average is across the whole of Northern Ireland. Once you get more and more data, if you have a flare up, wherever in the UK, you start to understand whether it is in a specific village, in a county or something more focused. That will mean that if you eventually get that data, you can then go much, much further. If we needed to step back from exit, or we needed to go back into some form of lockdown, you would not be looking at the whole of a city or the whole of a county; you might be able get down to very tight, small areas. You are absolutely right. That kind of data is important. It is where that testing



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and that app will become powerful for us as we go forward and out the other side. I will let Madeleine come in, because she was indicating.

**Madeleine Alessandri:** The Secretary of State has basically said it all. This does rely on data, and we need to get a bigger and richer picture around that data as we move through to see what is happening. We do not have the granularity yet, but that is exactly what the new joint biosecurity centre is going to be seeking to do, so that we can identify where those hotspots arise and then take the necessary action. That is really important for us all, as we are living in a world with covid and before we have got to the point where we have vaccines. I totally agree with you: it is going to be all around the data and making best use of that data and then having a response or plan according to what it shows us. That is the work that is going on at the moment at pace.

- Q35 **Chair:** I appreciate the importance of the app and, if successful, the very useful data trends that that will throw up, but there is fairly accessible data now in terms of the postcodes of people who are currently in hospital and data from GP surgeries as to who is making inquiries or presenting at surgery, either with the fear of symptoms or actually displaying symptoms. I am hoping that we are not just relying upon future data gathering, but—this may be a rather analogue way of doing it in a digital world—actually looking at postcodes, just to see at this stage whether there is any trend in terms of there being hotspots at the border and then it getting cooler as you move further to the north and the coast. Is that work being done?

**Madeleine Alessandri:** Yes, it is. It is worth looking across at all potential data sources—

- Q36 **Chair:** And what, if anything, is it indicating to you at the moment?

**Madeleine Alessandri:** At the moment, it is being pulled together. We do not have the granularity. We have the sense across the nations—across Northern Ireland and the UK as a whole. We do not have that granularity down to the nearest village or down to the nearest town. We are pulling that together, and that will give a much better and richer picture.

- Q37 **Chair:** I am afraid, Permanent Secretary, that I am rather confused. Either it is being done and it is being done in a vacuum and nobody is looking at it—data harvesting almost for the point of data harvesting—or the data is being harvested and is being analysed. Which is it?

**Madeleine Alessandri:** What I suggest we do—because the new joint biosecurity centre, which was announced by the Prime Minister when he spoke to the nation on Sunday, is a very new initiative—is write to the Committee with details of the work, what is going on there, what is being looked at and what the timelines look like for when we are going to be able to provide this more granular picture.

- Q38 **Chair:** I'm sorry to press on this, but is it that the data is there but you just have not painted the picture, or that you are going to start getting the data? I don't think it takes a geopolitical genius to consider right at





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the start of this process that the process would end and that a lockdown approach would need to be evolved and adopted. Looking at whether there are flashpoints or hotspots where there are greater numbers along the border, both north and south, would then surely be informing whether Northern Ireland could follow a more UK-centric lockdown exit strategy, or whether a more all-island approach would be needed. That data would have been informing what we are moving into now, surely.

**Madeleine Alessandri:** I think potentially we are talking at cross-purposes, because the R rate, which we have discussed, has been calculated and we have always had a science-led approach. The R rate has been calculated for Northern Ireland, and there are R rate calculations for the other nations as well, and indeed for the UK as a whole.

The phase we are now moving into—because of the measures we have had, and people have been complying so well and so brilliantly across the country with what we have asked them to do—means that, as we ease up on those measures, and England, as you know, has done a first step towards this, we need to understand what then happens in the community. What happens at each point of easement and what does that then tell us about the spread of this disease?

But I would add that I am not the specialist on this area, which is why I suggest that I write to you with further detail of what data is being collected. This is very much a science-led approach and I would very much defer to our statisticians and my scientific colleagues on this.

**Chair:** That would be helpful, if that could be done in a timely fashion. I have to say that my anxiety is that data is being gathered but it is, metaphorically, gathering dust somewhere, and it does, I fear—I hope I am wrong—appear that thought had not been given to trying to trace numbers to see where there were hotspots very early on. That worries me, so a timely and speedy response, please, to the Committee on those issues. We may, just to put down a marker, reserve the right to resume this session to further explore that, if colleagues on the Committee feel that that is appropriate.

I turn now to Claire Hanna, who has some questions with regard to track and trace.

**Brandon Lewis:** Chairman, I want to quickly come back on that last point. We will absolutely do everything, but it is also worth being very alert to the fact that the reality is that that kind of data, as the Permanent Secretary has outlined, is being put together and worked on by the scientists in the Cabinet Office, the Health Department and elsewhere—not within the NIO itself. More importantly, one of the things we have seen throughout with this virus is that as we start to collect data— We can certainly give the timely response you ask for, Chairman, but as for this kind of breakdown, if and when it comes forward, those scientists and data experts will not want to start giving assumptions of what they think might be happening, until they feel they have enough qualitative data to be able to give a proper picture. We have all seen over the last few weeks times



when certain individuals or experts have come out with what they think is data but actually, as it starts to get checked through, we find it is not necessarily correct. So the teams will want to be checking, double-checking and triple-checking this before we start going down to that kind of granularity. We will certainly come back to you on what they are doing and how they are doing it, but I also want to give a bit of caution around the speed with which the Health Department will be willing or able, with a proper scientific approach, to give that kind of data breakdown. But we will certainly come back to you with a kind of timeframe for this.

**Chair:** Thank you. I would hope that somebody would be able to produce a map of the island of Ireland with figures showing that X per cent. of the people in Northern Ireland who have contracted coronavirus live within 5 miles, 10 miles, 20 miles of the border—a ribboned approach—in order to have a statistical percentage breakdown, because that, by definition, is going to inform the integration between the Republic and Northern Ireland in terms of how it approaches and shapes the easing of lockdown. I now turn to Claire Hanna.

- Q39 **Claire Hanna:** Thanks, Chair, and thanks to the witnesses as well. Chair, you have outlined the different things we need the data to do: monitoring the macro trends that will help us chart the exit, but also, obviously, at a more granular level, the contact tracing that will allow people to know whether they have come in contact with an infected person. That will be very important in the coming months as well. Secretary of State, what challenges do you see around the fact that the UK and Ireland have taken different approaches to their apps for monitoring the spread?

**Brandon Lewis:** As we go forward, I would hope that we will find very little problem with that. Experts—both CMOs and the data experts—are talking to each other, and we have published the source code of our app. We would like to get to the point where they are complementary and there is no contradiction between them, or anything like that. That work is going on behind the scenes at the moment, between officials. The Irish Government and UK Government officials are talking on that very issue.

- Q40 **Claire Hanna:** I might not share all your confidence in that. What is the thinking behind the UK pursuing a more centralised approach to data gathering? As you may know, some rights groups have expressed concerns around the legalities and privacy, and people have concerns about data held centrally. I believe there are also compatibility concerns—that the UK's app might not work on older phone models or might have a data and battery draining effect. Are the Government open to developing a different model of app that is more in line with those being used in other countries?

**Brandon Lewis:** The Health Secretary himself outlined the reason why we published the source code of the app, which was to be very clear, so that people could see for themselves the positioning of the app—what it is, how it works—and that it does not have those kinds of issues. There is not a data issue; in fact, the data is stored locally, on the phone, for people.



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I am very happy to write to the Committee with some details about the app and how it works, but it is at a pilot stage, with a team continually looking at how to improve it, learning from the lessons of their work on the Isle of Wight and, as I said, talking to the Irish Government and others about making sure it is interoperable where we can.

From what I understand—the Health Secretary was himself talking about this just last week—there are some misconceptions out there about what the app is and isn't. That is why he was keen to publish that source code, so that people can see for themselves what it is and how it works.

**Q41 Claire Hanna:** Unfortunately, there are still those concerns. I understand that we are in the early stages of the trial, but the take-up on the Isle of Wight, for example, where it is being piloted, is I believe quite low, partly because of data concerns and, as I say, because of the rigours required in the phone. You will be aware that the Minister for Health here in Northern Ireland, Robin Swann, has urged that there is a consistent model. That highlights some data improvement that we will need in that regard.

That probably also underlines the issue of barriers and divergence generally around the jurisdiction. That is obviously very live in the context of confirmation overnight of checks that will be put in the Irish sea. Businesses are fighting for their lives, given the covid adaptations, so will you give us any information—I believe there will not be an extension on Brexit—on when businesses here will get the information they need on what checks they will experience across the Irish sea? As you are aware, they are very taken up with dealing with covid at the moment.

**Brandon Lewis:** One of the best ways to give confidence to people is to make it clear that there will be no extension. We will stick to the timetable that we are on. We will not have a border down the Irish sea. We are determined to ensure that we have unfettered access. Obviously, with live products and goods there have been some minimal checks since about the 19th century, but we are not looking to bring in any form of border, or anything like that, down the Irish sea. We are determined to ensure that there is unfettered access. It is important, as we go forward and as we all want, that we deliver on the spirit of the Belfast agreement, the Good Friday agreement, to ensure that we have that clear path so that Northern Ireland businesses know that they can have confidence about remaining—as we are determined that they will, and as they will—a fluid part of the UK economy and the UK market. That won't change.

On the app data, as I say, there are no legal issues to do with how the app works or how data is held, as the Health Secretary outlined, but I am happy to write to the Committee to give some confirmation on that as well. We are working with the Irish Government to do all we can to ensure that interoperability, particularly that proximity alerts work for the whole island.

**Q42 Karin Smyth:** We want to talk about support for business as part of the



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relief schemes announced by the Government, and particularly how it affects businesses in Northern Ireland. Secretary of State, can you tell us how many businesses in Northern Ireland have received support as part of the relief schemes announced by the UK Government and the Northern Ireland Executive?

**Brandon Lewis:** In terms of which scheme? If you are talking about the support measures announced by the Executive, there is the £10,000 covid small business grant and the £25,000 hospitality, tourism and retail sector grant scheme, which they are administering. We have the furlough scheme. As I said earlier, we do not yet have a detailed breakdown specifically for Northern Ireland, but we are determined to ensure that we continue to work. I have been talking consistently to businesses and business representative groups, as well as Executive members, to ensure that we have support for businesses and support for the Executive, so that they are able to support businesses with the schemes they have put in place. As I say, we have a range of schemes. The bounce-back loan scheme is one of the more recent ones that we have announced. On top of that, £1.2 billion more has gone to the Northern Ireland Executive through the Barnett consequential, showing the importance of join-up and the ability to support each other across the United Kingdom.

Q43 **Karin Smyth:** Thank you—it is sometimes hard to tell whether you have finished a sentence or the screen has frozen. Do we know how Northern Ireland businesses have been accessing these schemes compared with those in the rest of the United Kingdom? Is that being monitored by the Department?

**Brandon Lewis:** I am very keen to get a breakdown of Northern Ireland-specific figures within the wider UK figures. We are currently working across Government and with the delivery agencies to pull that data together. Once we do that, I am very happy to either come back and talk to the Committee or write to you to give you a breakdown of that. We will be very keen to put that out in the public domain.

In terms of the localised schemes, when I have been talking to businesses, they have been very positive about the support that has been there and very grateful for the way we have been able to bring that forward and fill gaps through things like the business bounce-back loan scheme—there is £8 billion within that across the UK. I know that just under 19,500 businesses have had payments through the Northern Ireland Executive's small business grant scheme, which is just shy of £195 million. They have had about 3,000 applications for the £25,000 hospitality grants that I talked about, with over 800 of those already having been paid. Those schemes are run specifically using the support we have put in place for the Executive, but they are the Northern Ireland Executive's own schemes that they are administering and running.

Q44 **Karin Smyth:** Has any assessment been made of the merits of tapering the withdrawal of some of that support?

**Brandon Lewis:** Do you mean in terms of whether we should taper it as we come out of lockdown?



**Karin Smyth:** As we come out, yes.

**Brandon Lewis:** As we have said all along, we will continue to assess these schemes to make sure we have the support that businesses need. I am not going to prejudge any decisions that we may take or that the Chancellor may need to take, but he has been clear, and he has stood by his word of doing whatever it takes to make sure that individuals and businesses have what they need as far as possible to get through this crisis.

Q45 **Karin Smyth:** Can I ask you particularly about hauliers? Some 98% of Northern Ireland's medicines come through the ports, and it is 70%-odd for retail and food. But hauliers have not benefited from the schemes that have been put in place—for example, for connectivity through ferries—and that does not seem to be forthcoming. I know that they are very worried. What is your thinking on support for hauliers, who are having a very difficult time at the moment?

**Brandon Lewis:** Obviously, that is something we keep under review. They have the ability to access the schemes being operated by the Northern Ireland Executive, which I just outlined, or the wider Government schemes that we have put in place for businesses more generally. It was important that we put in place protection for the connectivity of the ferries, so that hauliers have access across the United Kingdom to Northern Ireland, and from the island of Ireland to the UK. Protecting those five ferry routes was key, to make sure that hauliers have the routes they need to make those crossings, to keep supplies running. We have not yet seen the need to do anything specifically for hauliers, other than the connectivity itself, but it is something we keep under review, and we keep in contact with them to make sure we are doing what we can to give the support we can. As I say, though, they can access those wider schemes from the Northern Ireland Executive, and indeed the Government's wider schemes. Mark has been one of the key officials involved in the work we have been doing on this, along with the officials at the Northern Ireland Executive as well. Mark, do you want to add anything?

**Mark Larmour:** As you indicated, the work has gone on between the Executive and the UK Government around supporting the ferry routes and air travel and looking at supply lines and chains around food supplies, medicines and so on, to make sure they are supported. As part of that work, obviously, the Executive has taken a close interest in how hauliers are affected by this. That has been kept under review throughout the 10 or 12-week period and been regularly discussed. It has been a conversation between the Department for Transport in the UK Government alongside the Department for Infrastructure and the Department for the Economy in Northern Ireland as well. We try to keep that under review. At this time, there are no significant concerns about the impact, but again we keep it under review. As we have discussed throughout this conversation, all this comes back to how important data has been. Having accurate data around all this over the past 10 to 12 weeks has, certainly for me, been a



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critical learning point about how we approach these things and make sure we have strong data sources for our decision making.

- Q46 **Karin Smyth:** If they do not survive and thrive as businesses—I think that the larger companies are not passing on some of the schemes and savings to them—they are the missing piece in the jigsaw, in terms of making goods flow to and fro, aren't they?

**Mark Larmour:** They are a critical piece of the jigsaw, alongside, as we have said, the support that has been provided, for ferry routes in particular. We recognise that we are still reliant on those routes to get food and goods into Northern Ireland. That is why it has been kept under close and almost constant review over the past 10 or 12 weeks, and we hope to continue to do so.

**Karin Smyth:** Thank you. Secretary of State, you have been careful to talk about unfettered access without saying which way you mean. On concerns about people and goods going from GB into Northern Ireland, and Cabinet Office statements, it would be helpful for you to clarify your comments—

**Chair:** Karin, we are dealing with that in an inquiry and will hear at length from the Secretary of State and Ministers on those arrangements. Unless you want to come back on something else, I will turn to Mr Paisley, who has a question about hauliers, and then, so that colleagues are aware, I am going to take Mr Benton and then Claire.

- Q47 **Ian Paisley:** Thank you, Chair. I welcome our having this discussion on hauliers. I agree with Karin's points. I have a lot of haulage businesses in my constituency—it is the lifeblood of getting goods to and from the public and making the economy turn. The fact is that hauliers are taking good quantities of product—mainly food product—across to our British mainland, which, taking 60% or 70% of our goods, is our main market. But those hauliers are then coming back empty. That kills their trade and any notion of profitability and will kill that business. We really have to address a package that is specific to hauliers coming back into Northern Ireland. I would stress, Secretary of State, that it cannot be for smaller vehicles, excluding HGVs; it must be for all vehicles, because all these vehicles are utilised for different sectors of the market. I really appeal to you to get this done quickly, because it will result in a lot of our businesses being put in jeopardy if it is not. Then we will not have the means to get our food product, which we are excellent at producing, around the country and into our main market, which is GB.

**Brandon Lewis:** I will take that on board, particularly your point about it covering all vehicles, not just a particular part of this, in terms of what we are looking at and what we may or may not need to do or be able to do. We will certainly take that on board. We are consistently reviewing the situation with hauliers, and we are very alert to the fact that at the moment it is one way and that they would need that return route in order to make some routes viable or profitable. We have to make sure we do the right thing economically by people in Northern Ireland—*[Inaudible.]*—when we look at this, and how we look at it, encompasses all vehicles, not



just a particular section. That is a point very well made. I still stand by everything that I said at the Dispatch Box yesterday about unfettered access.

- Q48 **Chair:** Secretary of State, on this issue, given the fact that both Karin Smyth and Ian Paisley have raised it and it is clearly important to the Northern Ireland economy, you might like to write to the Committee on your plans and thinking, rather than just leaving it to the next set of oral questions in the Commons or your next appearance before us. That would be helpful, if that is okay.

**Brandon Lewis:** I am happy to do that. We will keep a note of a few things, and after this meeting, we will arrange to put them in writing, yes.

**Chair:** I am very grateful to you for that, thank you. Scott Benton, please?

- Q49 **Scott Benton:** Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon, Secretary of State. Just following on from the previous question, may I ask what assessment you have made of the impact of covid-19 on the Northern Irish economy and, in particular, which sectors you feel have been impacted most and whether any bespoke packages of support for those sectors may be coming forward?

**Brandon Lewis:** I think it is probably too early to take a view on which particular sector has been affected the most. I am sure that tourism and hospitality would make a very strong case for why they have been most affected for the longest period—and they probably will be affected for the longest period—but it will not be until we are on the other side of this that we will really be able to assess exactly which sectors have been affected in the most detrimental way.

The packages of support that the Chancellor has put in place have meant that many businesses have been able either to go into hibernation or to keep ticking over in a way that they simply would not otherwise have been able to do. That is why those packages were so important. It was also important for those individuals who work to have that confidence that they would have a salary through the furlough scheme, where relevant.

We are also seeing companies doing some really impressive things—whether it is Denman Hair Brushes converting its business to making hero shield visors, O’Neills producing PPE gowns, or gin suppliers turning to making hand sanitisers—although I know that some people would like it if they made some gin as well—and alcohol products for hands. We have seen some real ingenuity. We have also seen businesses work out and find ways to carry on producing and running their business within the guidelines. Both of those—those that have supported the work in the battle against this virus and those that have kept the economy going by keeping their businesses going in a proper, sensible and safe way—deserve a huge amount of credit.

You make a very fair point, Mr Benton. As we come out of this, it will be important that we are looking at the work that we can do—I know Minister Dodds in the Northern Ireland Executive is very focused on this—in terms



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of how we can give that opportunity for the economy not just to recover, but to turbocharge and go forward for the benefit of the people of Northern Ireland. That will go across a range of sectors.

- Q50 **Scott Benton:** Thank you, Secretary of State. Just on that last point about turbocharging the economy, Northern Ireland has traditionally had a lower GDP per capita and lower productivity than the rest of the UK. Do you think that there is an argument for higher economic development funding going forward, whatever the impact of covid-19 on Northern Ireland?

**Brandon Lewis:** I can see Mr Paisley agreeing with you wholeheartedly there. I think you will probably have before you, in the not-too-distant future, Minister Walker, who does a huge amount of work around the business community, with city deals and growth deals. One of the things that we have seen with those city and growth deals is, in fact, in Derry/Londonderry. The growth deal covering that area is pretty much the best financially supported growth deal in the whole of the United Kingdom. That will give a real opportunity, and, hopefully, we will see it deliver the medical college as well, with some final bits and pieces that we need to see through the Executive. Hopefully, that will get the go-ahead before the end of the month. There are some really good opportunities there, so, yes, absolutely. With those growth deals in place, we must make sure that we are looking at what else we can do. There is the Belfast city region deal, and, as I have said, things like the medical college. We must make sure that we keep on top of those things, that we drive them and that we see those opportunities grow. It is also true to say that a higher percentage of the population in Northern Ireland work for the public sector than anywhere else in the UK. It would be really good to have that opportunity to see the private sector grow and flourish to create more job opportunities.

- Q51 **Scott Benton:** Thank you, Secretary of State. Moving on from the economy to wider questions of funding, I am sure that the £900 million that the UK Treasury has provided already will be gratefully received, in conjunction, of course, with the development packages, such as the furlough scheme from the Chancellor. May I ask how the Government calculated levels of funding for Northern Ireland to help with the current crisis?

**Brandon Lewis:** It depends. Obviously, there are the Barnett consequential; £1.2 billion was part of the Barnett consequential. As you say, there are the wider UK national schemes that Northern Ireland benefits from; that is just done by how many people qualify and take furlough, or by how many businesses apply.

There are other things. For example, the package that we put in place for connectivity for the ferries—a £17 million package—was one that we worked out with the Northern Ireland Executive, in consultation with the operators there, to make sure we kept those routes viable enough to keep them open. It was the same with the airports and the connectivity there; it was a package of just under £6 million that we put in there. It



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was a similar process, working with the Executive. And the Executive have also been partners, in terms of the funding, for that as well, to make sure we kept that connectivity open. So, we look at those on a case-by-case basis; it depends on what the given issue has been as we have gone through this.

- Q52 **Scott Benton:** Okay. Do you think that the extra package of support has met the need in Northern Ireland across different sectors, whether it be local authorities, the NHS or businesses? Do you feel that it is a fair settlement at this stage?

**Brandon Lewis:** Well, I think it is unprecedented. I have no doubt that what the Chancellor has put in place has made a massive difference in terms of the people who have got the confidence that they have got a salary still, and that businesses will be able to keep going—even if they are in hibernation now, the ability to come out of it when we come through the virus. I dread to think what the figures of those businesses failing and for jobs would have been without that kind of a package.

I think it is one that has made a massive difference to people in Northern Ireland. Certainly, in terms of how we have focused it, I do think that it has been focused in the right areas. So, for example, I will go back again to the point about the ferries and the airports—keeping that connectivity is important, not just for key workers but for goods and the supply of food and medicines, and PPE. We have seen that benefit both ways. I mentioned O’Neills earlier producing gowns; a quarter of a million gowns came from Northern Ireland into mainland GB as well. Again, going back to the conversation I was having in the early stages of this session with Mr Paisley, this is a really good example of how the UK—the strength of the United Kingdom—has been able to give benefit to all parts of it.

- Q53 **Scott Benton:** I have just one final question, which is a bit more wide-ranging, really. Obviously, the current situation will have a significant impact, not just on the economy in Northern Ireland but across the whole of the UK, which will affect the money that the Exchequer can provide for public services going forward. Regarding the £2 billion package in the “New Decade, New Approach” deal, do you think there is an argument for revisiting that if we are looking at a sustained recession and difficulties in providing public services in Northern Ireland? Obviously, some people do not feel that it is enough to transform public services at the moment, so would you be open to revisiting that commitment?

**Brandon Lewis:** Look, I think it is important that we follow through, for the UK Government, the Irish Government and the Northern Ireland Executive. We have all agreed to that “New Decade, New Approach” deal. I appreciate that that deal was agreed before the virus was a policy in full format, but I think it is important that we do carry on. As I say, from a UK Government point of view, we have carried on delivering on some of our commitments within the NDNA. I was referencing the veterans commissioner and other things we have done over the last few weeks, and we will continue to do that.



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So, I am absolutely determined that we will deliver on our commitments within the NDNA; I am sure that the Executive and all others will share that view. I think it is important for the people of Northern Ireland to see all politicians delivering on what we signed just a short while ago.

I think that, if anything, I would go the other way and it would be about looking at what we need to do in a targeted way to give further support and boost to the economy as we come out of this. And I am sure that this will be one of the key areas that the Northern Ireland Executive will want to be looking at: how they allocate their budget, and the decisions that they have got to make around making sure they are giving all the support they can to the economy as we come to the other side of the virus.

**Chair:** Okay, Mr Benton?

**Scott Benton:** Yes. Thank you, Chair.

**Chair:** Got anything else—? Okay. Thank you. Claire next, and then I know Mr Paisley wants to come back very briefly. So, I will take Claire, Stephen and then you, Ian. So, Claire Hanna first.

Q54 **Claire Hanna:** Thank you, Chair. Yes, Secretary of State, the financial intervention schemes have been very welcome: the self-employed scheme, and the furlough scheme. I am very pleased, in particular, that the latter was extended this week, but I wanted to raise with you the issue of identity verification for people accessing the self-employed scheme. I have written to HMRC before, and this was raised by Members in the Chamber, because there is a problem here, as people using either a Northern Ireland driving licence or an Irish passport are unable to access that. Do you believe that is fair? When will it be rectified?

**Brandon Lewis:** Yes, this was raised—Jeffrey Donaldson raised it, I believe, as did a couple of others yesterday. I am aware that some individuals have been unable to complete their application online using an Irish passport and also driving licences. Just let me give a bit of context to this. The reason is that the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency does not hold licence data for Northern Ireland, where the Driver & Vehicle Agency is separate. Again, we come back to the data issue, which has been a real challenge there. Unfortunately, HMRC has not been able to integrate licence data for Northern Ireland at this time, due to constraints in getting things delivered. So, they are aware of this issue, and I want to reassure people in Northern Ireland that they will not be excluded from this scheme. Anyone can check their eligibility for the scheme using the eligibility checker online and if they meet the criteria, they can apply. So, people will not be unable to access scheme, and this is something where we are looking to get a permanent solution to that.

Q55 **Claire Hanna:** I want to come back on that. With respect, Secretary of State, I know that people are not excluded from this scheme, but this is making a difficult process much more stressful for people. I do not believe it is an acceptable response to say that we have been unable to merge those two databases. As an aside, we are told that HMRC is going to be able to recruit, train and install 50,000 operatives by the end of this



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year, despite the pandemic, so you can understand that people will not have a lot of confidence. If this had come out of nowhere, people would have been slightly more understanding of it, but I am aware that this has been the case for people trying to do self-assessment. I know there are logistical challenges to developing and delivering a scheme of this scale, but we need you to fight on this issue. You will be dealing with issues around Executive cohesion, Brexit and legacy. Despite the fact that this is about identity verification, it is not an identity issue—it is a logistical issue. It is one that affects people from across Northern Ireland—people who are most affected by the pandemic. Respectfully, let me say that we need our corner fought on this.

**Chair:** I am slightly conscious of time and I want to make sure that we can cover all the territory that we want to. Secretary of State, if you want to reply to that point—

**Claire Hanna:** Can I just clarify? People cannot even confirm their eligibility until their identity has been checked, which is proving very, very difficult.

**Chair:** I will let you come back, Claire, but let the Secretary of State answer those points first.

**Brandon Lewis:** Anybody who has been going to HMRC previously, to file their return for example—the kind of thing that has just been outlined—should be able to use their existing Government gateway credentials to claim online. I will just say that in terms of putting together, as HMRC, the Government and the Treasury have been doing, an unprecedented number of packages to make sure that support is there for people, I can see why there are certain areas where there is still work on to get the data to be able to talk together in the right way. Anybody who has registered for it before will be able to still access it. I will just say that anybody using that HMRC system online for the first time can use the multiple-choice questions to give some verification to their identity, but if they are still unable to verify their identity, they can phone the helpline. So, anybody who is already registered with HMRC will be in the system already, and there is a work-around that people can do. I am happy to give the Committee a bit more detail on that in a letter, but people can phone the HMRC helpline to make sure they get their identity clear so that they get this claim through. So, they are eligible, they will be able to claim, but because of the difference in databases, with a separate database for Northern Ireland from that of the DVLA, there has been a bit of a challenge in sharing this out, but it will not stop someone accessing and getting that support.

- Q56 **Claire Hanna:** I want to come back on that briefly. I am not minimising the logistical challenge of rolling out a scheme of this scale. I don't think that this failure to integrate two databases that are owned by the public sector is an acceptable excuse. In the interim, people can go through the multiple-choice system, but you will know that there are challenges with that system for people outside of Northern Ireland as well.



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You will also be aware that that helpline is not straightforward. People are facing long waits and an engaged tone. At a minimum, I ask that the line that is provided for people who are having verification issues from here in Northern Ireland can be appropriately staffed and that the staff manning that line are given information and training. I have spoken to people who have, indeed, sailed through the process—I am glad of that—either through the multiple-choice format or through the helpline, but I have spoken to many others who, as I said, faced an engaged tone or somebody on the line who perhaps was not familiar with the issue.

With the greatest respect, the issue of integrating the databases should not be beyond us, but in the interim, if that issue is not able to be resolved in the short term—obviously, the clock is ticking for people applying—can we have assurances that that helpline will be appropriately resourced, to ensure that people are not facing a waiting time? Even passing the initial check to find out if you are eligible—to find out whether you have the money coming in, never mind actually getting the money coming in—cannot be done until people have their identity verified.

**Chair:** Claire, you used the phrase “the clock is ticking”—indeed, it is.

**Claire Hanna:** For many people who have not had income for seven weeks, the clock is ticking.

Q57 **Chair:** Indeed. I was going to suggest that the Secretary of State kindly undertake to liaise with Jesse Norman, who, I think, is the Treasury Minister with responsibility for this. I think he did a conference call with some colleagues on this yesterday. Secretary of State, it might be helpful to have a joint written submission from you and Jesse Norman to the Committee on what the scale of the problem is, on how you plan to resolve it and on the—hopefully, short—timeframe. Would that be possible?

**Brandon Lewis:** Yes, we will sort something out and get some information on that. It is HMRC rather than NIO.

Q58 **Chair:** Yes, indeed. One would not be at all surprised if we suddenly find DCMS involved, because it will deal with data regulations, data protection and all the rest of it. We could have opened up a huge can of worms. Claire, you are right to point to the importance of getting this sorted out for individuals who are getting stuck in a mire of officialdom and then the engaged tone.

**Brandon Lewis:** I absolutely agree, Chair, with the points both you and Claire have made. We want to get this resolved. We want to make sure not only that people know that they are eligible, so they will get the money, but that we make it as smooth as possible for them.

Q59 **Ian Paisley:** I had a very good call yesterday with HMRC and Jesse, your colleague. I took from that that they are working expeditiously to solve the Swansea issue of the DVA information and to get that integrated as quickly as possible. They supplied us with an MP helpline. I think it might be useful to share that with all Members, so that they can access that. I





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think people holding Irish passports probably have a mission in getting on to that process because of the jurisdictional issue. I certainly believe that the Northern Ireland driving licence issue will be resolved. I took some hope from that call yesterday.

Could I turn to a slightly separate issue, following on from the earlier round of questions about taking the economy forward and the next steps? Secretary of State, you will know that people will start to come out now. They will want to start to access shopping and locations in Northern Ireland. We need places for people to see over the next six to 12 months and things for people to do, so that we can rebuild our economy, especially given that it is built on a huge tourism sector and a huge hospitality sector.

For a long time, have been an advocate that we need to do big events. The Open golf tournament was a wonderful outdoor event that attracted a lot of people. We have a number of homegrown events, like the North West 200 and the Ulster Grand Prix. Motorsport UK have been bidding to try to get the World Rally held in Northern Ireland this year or next year—it is not going to be possible this year. Elfyn Evans, one of the top British drivers, has advocated that he wants to see the race in Northern Ireland. That is like having a Formula 1 driver saying he wants to race in Northern Ireland. Will the Secretary of State do a joined-up bid to ensure that Motorsport UK and Northern Ireland can come together and have such an event operational in Northern Ireland over the next 12 months?

**Brandon Lewis:** It sounds like a hugely exciting opportunity for Northern Ireland. I am really keen, as we come through this, particularly in 2021 with the centenary year as well, that we are looking at what we can do to further promote how fantastic Northern Ireland is and to encourage more people to come to Northern Ireland, in a safe and healthy way, with guidelines and so on while they are required. I would be very interested to have a conversation about that. I would need to get a bit more understanding of the details and what is involved, but the principle of something like that sounds very exciting. I am happy to ask my officials to have a good look at that and, if we can support it, I will do all I can. It sounds exciting. I look forward to hearing a bit more about it.

**Q60 Stephen Farry:** I want to make a brief point on the HMRC issue first. It would be very good if, between the Northern Ireland Office and HMRC, some sort of information note could be published in the next 24 to 48 hours to signpost people, because, while some people may be coming to their MPs, other people are just suffering in silence and cannot get through. I appreciate that it is difficult. I stress as well that there are people in Northern Ireland, who are from Northern Ireland, who have only an Irish passport, which they are perfectly entitled to do under the Good Friday agreement, and their rights are also important in this regard.

I also wanted to reference the self-employed scheme and the job retention scheme. I agree that they are unprecedented and extremely welcome. The Chancellor has said that he does not want to leave people behind. There are some small tweaks that can be made to both those schemes that could address a lot of our constituents. All of us have



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received a lot of queries in relation to them.

Those would be taking into account, first, the dividends in relation to the job retention scheme for people who are essentially in personal service companies and, secondly, the eligibility around the self-employment scheme for people who were starters during 2019-2020. In particular, as you appreciate, we have very vibrant creative industries in Northern Ireland and a lot of young people who are building a future in that area to put Northern Ireland on the map. Those people are falling through the cracks at present. Could you use your good offices with the Chancellor to try to get those small tweaks done to satisfy our constituents?

**Brandon Lewis:** On the first part of what you were saying, I recognise that there is an issue in terms of the Irish passport. That is a data issue. The information around that Irish passport is obviously a completely different data system, but we are alert to that, and you are quite right that it is something we want to resolve. It is part of that wider issue on the DVLA side as well to make this a smooth experience for people, so that they know that they are eligible and can access their money as quickly as possible. I absolutely agree with you on that, and we are working on it.

In terms of the wider schemes, I am sure that you will have made your views known to the Chancellor of the Exchequer. I am very happy to pass them on. There are some issues around the wider schemes. It is difficult to see how you could extend the schemes to cover people who are paid through dividends rather than PAYE, but I am certainly happy to make your points well known to the Chancellor if you have not already.

**Stephen Farry:** Thank you.

- Q61 **Chair:** Secretary of State, may I ask, for businesses that would classify themselves as all-Ireland businesses with two lots of business support, north and south of the border, what discussions, safety nets and plans are in place to make sure that the integrity of the Republic schemes and the integrity of the UK schemes are maintained to avoid double claiming, fraud and so on?

**Brandon Lewis:** In a roundabout way, we had a conversation about that between ourselves and the Irish Government. For example, if you are looking at some of those national Government schemes, they are linked to where your business is based. For companies that have a head office and their core base in the Republic of Ireland, that is where they are based, but it depends on where their tax-registered office and base is, so that it links to that and avoids that problem.

- Q62 **Chair:** So it is under review, as it were?

**Brandon Lewis:** If a company's offices and their registered tax base address are in Northern Ireland, they would go for the UK and Northern Ireland schemes. If their base and their tax base address are in the Republic of Ireland, they would go through the Republic of Ireland schemes. Mark, do you want to add anything? Have I missed anything in that answer?



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**Mark Larmour:** That is correct; where the company's tax regime is based is how they make their application for support.

**Brandon Lewis:** Just to be clear, there is also a similar point in terms of staff. If the company is based in Northern Ireland and puts its staff on furlough, a member of staff who lives in the Republic of Ireland benefits from what that company is doing because their company is based in Northern Ireland, and vice versa.

- Q63 **Mr Goodwill:** As former Immigration Ministers both, I am sure the common travel area is very close to our hearts. There is some threat to that, potentially caused by the quarantine arrangements that have been announced by both the UK and the Republic of Ireland. We have announced some exceptions—France, truck drivers, key workers and, of course, the common travel area—but as far as I understand it, international arrivals to Ireland from GB will have to have the quarantine arrangement for 14 days. Is there anything we can do to try to ensure that we do not have an asymmetric common travel area, with rules applying one way but not the other?

**Brandon Lewis:** You are absolutely right; having both previously been Immigration Ministers, there are many things we share that are dear to our hearts. That issue is under review at the moment by the Irish Government. We have put in place an exemption for the common travel area. Our view is that we want to ensure that we fully respect the CTA, but, as I say, we are waiting for the Irish Government, who have this under review. For us it was important to fully respect and have that full exemption for the common travel area.

- Q64 **Mr Goodwill:** I hope you will keep the pressure up, because it is important—was it 1922 that that started?—that we maintain it as far as possible.

**Brandon Lewis:** I agree.

**Chair:** Mr Paisley, did you want to talk about ferry routes?

- Q65 **Ian Paisley:** I understood, Mr Chairman, that the same arrangements that Robert just referred to for people arriving at airports—I understand they are not in place yet— could apply at our ports. That might have a detrimental impact, because obviously we want to see unfettered, free-flowing people, services and goods coming across by our land and sea linkages. Obviously, the best way to solve all that is to build a bridge between Northern Ireland and the UK, which would solve it very easily, but what we ultimately want is to ensure that our ferry port and airport operators are not hindered in any way and are able to get people in and out without their being hindered.

**Brandon Lewis:** I agree. As Mr Paisley will know, the Prime Minister is also very keen to see a bridge that can be built, so I share his enthusiasm for that. But, as I say, for us it was important to respect the common travel area and therefore we have given it that full attention.

- Q66 **Ian Paisley:** What would be sad, Secretary of State, would be if, for



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example, people could use the Republic of Ireland's ports of entry to get around the problems that may or may not arise for them if they were to use other points of entry. We want to make sure there is complete fairness and transparency there. I always worry that, as the Dublin airport is partly owned by the Irish Government, it gets a constant advantage over our airports, which are privately owned. We want to make sure that that does not happen and that our airports are properly supported.

**Brandon Lewis:** I am sure, Mr Paisley, you will be as alert as anybody to keep an eye on what the outcome of the review of the Irish Government's position is. I am sure they will be outlining that very soon. Of course they have already effectively put in place a requirement for people to have some form of quarantine when they come into the Republic of Ireland as well, but let us wait and see what the outcome of their review is, and we can take things forward from there. I certainly would like to see that common travel area fully respected, fully endorsed and exempted so that actually makes everything simpler as well, in that sense.

Q67 **Karin Smyth:** I agree with the Secretary of State about not having an asymmetric common travel area. Can I just clarify what the Secretary of State just said? Is he saying that it is Government policy to support the building of the land bridge?

**Brandon Lewis:** If you look back, you will find that the Prime Minister himself said he would love to see a bridge built between Northern Ireland and the UK. I think it is a very exciting concept; but at the moment we are focused on dealing with coronavirus and, as we come out of that and go forward from that, making sure we do stay in a good, strong economic way.

Q68 **Karin Smyth:** So when you can afford it, then.

**Brandon Lewis:** Was that a question, or just your opinion?

Q69 **Karin Smyth:** No, are you saying it is Government policy when it can be afforded?

**Brandon Lewis:** I am saying, as you will have seen last year, the Prime Minister himself said he would love to see a bridge built between Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom. He is very enthusiastic for a strong build-up of infrastructure, and infrastructure between Great Britain and Northern Ireland, as part of the United Kingdom, is good; but we have not made any final decisions about some of the long-term infrastructure planning for the whole of the UK yet.

Q70 **Chair:** I suggest that probably we are better focused on airports and ferry terminals, and making sure that we maximise investment and usage in what we have, rather than drifting off into maybe the wider realms of transport infrastructure aspiration. I have no colleagues indicating that they wish to intervene further, and I am conscious of the time. Secretary of State, can I thank you and your team for finding the time to come to us this afternoon. It has been incredibly useful.



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

I am afraid I think your homework book is a bit full in terms of letters to write, etc., and we look forward. I chaired with a heavy hand, without wishing to get into the fettered or unfettered access element of the debate today. Secretary of State, you will have been more than alerted by the general feeling of the Committee of the importance of this issue. We are looking at it. Without wishing to tie your diary secretary down now, would you undertake to appear before us on that issue, as part of our ongoing work in that area, given the enormous importance it is to the economy of Northern Ireland, possibly alongside one of your colleagues from the Cabinet Office dealing with these important issues?

**Brandon Lewis:** Yes, I am very happy to. Indeed, I look forward to having that conversation. As I have said a few times, [inaudible] we want to make sure there is unfettered access. Northern Ireland is part of the UK's single market. It is important that it remains that way. It is important in trade both ways. We are determined there will not be a border down the Irish sea. The best way to achieve that is to have as close to unfettered access both ways as we can possibly get—and certainly unfettered access for Northern Ireland to GB is absolutely paramount and key for us. So I look forward to having that conversation.

**Chair:** Secretary of State, thank you. Can I wish you well in the weeks and months—certainly the weeks—ahead; and your team. There is a huge weight on your shoulders with so much going on in Northern Ireland, and our thoughts and prayers are with you and your team over that time. Colleagues, can I thank you for joining us: another virtual meeting where our tech team have held up, and rural broadband and urban broadband and suburban broadband all seem to have broadly held up; so thank you for all of that. Thank you for your time.