

Northern Ireland Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: New Decade, New Approach Agreement, HC 160

Wednesday 17 June 2020

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Members present: Simon Hoare (Chair); Scott Benton; Mr Gregory Campbell; Stephen Farry; Mary Kelly Foy; Mr Robert Goodwill; Claire Hanna; Ian Paisley.

Questions 45 - 92

Witnesses

I: Mr Robin Walker MP, Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office; Mark Larmour, Director, Northern Ireland Office.



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Robin Walker MP and Mark Larmour.

Q45 **Chair:** Good morning, colleagues. Good morning, Minister and Mark. Thank you very much indeed for joining us this morning for our ongoing inquiry into the New Decade, New Approach. It is very nice to see both of you this morning. Minister, would you like to make a few introductory remarks and introduce your team? I will then hand you over to the tender mercies of the Committee for gentle and probing questioning.

Mr Walker: Thank you very much, Chair. I am very grateful to the Committee for allowing me this opportunity to attend your session today on behalf of the Northern Ireland Office ministerial team. The Committee will be aware that I was not directly involved in the final negotiations of the New Decade, New Approach agreement in January, but I do have ministerial responsibility for the delivery of a number of the key UK Government commitments set out in the agreement, including economic recovery and support. The Secretary of State and I work as a team and we will work together to take forward the work of implementing the deal.

It is important to note—and I know you discussed this in your last evidence session—how New Decade, New Approach came to be published. Following several weeks of intensive negotiations, the UK and Irish Governments tabled the New Decade, New Approach deal, a document that set out our best assessment of where consensus lay between the parties based on all the discussions that took place last year. All the parties recognised the huge opportunity that this was and took the decision to return to the Executive and back the deal. They should be credited for that and for the leadership that they all showed.

We should also recognise the leadership that they have demonstrated since, particularly the manner in which the Executive have worked collaboratively to tackle Covid-19, including the way the First Minister and Deputy First Minister have demonstrated their leadership and ability to put their differences aside to work together to protect the public. What we have seen since the deal has very much justified some of the elements. I am sure we will talk through in more detail some of the individual elements of the deal and the delivery of it.

Mark, who joins me on the call today, is our director political and has also been in key roles in the Northern Ireland Office throughout the process, so he may well be able to provide more support and help on some of those issues relating to how the deal was reached and how the deal was negotiated. I know, having read your evidence session with Julian Smith, that you have also heard that very much from the horse's mouth in terms of my previous Secretary of State and the huge role he played in getting us here.

Q46 **Chair:** Minister, thank you for that. The BBC—and I am sure others—is reporting this morning that, as part of the new political agreement in the



Republic, a new unit is to be created within the Department of the Taoiseach working towards “consensus on a shared Ireland”, looking at “political, social, economic and cultural considerations underpinning a future in which all traditions are mutually respected”. There is also a pledge to “enhance, develop and deepen all aspects” of north/south co-operation with regards to the all-island economy and to seek to develop an all-island strategy on climate change and biodiversity. Do you see that as complementary to, ancillary to or potentially triggering a revisit to the agreed New Decade, New Approach?

Mr Walker: First, I have to pay tribute to the work that the previous Irish Government did on reaching the New Decade, New Approach deal. There was a huge joint effort on this front and Simon Coveney worked extremely hard alongside Julian Smith to get the deal to where it was. Clearly, we will work with whatever Irish Government are in place and we welcome the formation of a new Government, which means that we can work alongside them to deliver on the deal and all its aspects.

Clearly, there are elements in any coalition deal that are perhaps more about domestic politics than about the broader picture. We have to recognise, given the result of the Irish election, the need they have to manage the pressures coming from Sinn Féin. I suspect that is part of what has been set out in their approach there. Clearly, we will work with them. It is important that we can work with them to, where appropriate, drive forward the commitments that all parties and the British and Irish Governments have made as part of New Decade, New Approach.

I know that Brandon will be looking forward to establishing a good working relationship with whoever holds responsibility for taking forward this process, whether that is the Taoiseach or the Tánaiste. It is important that we have a good and effective relationship with them as we have continued to do throughout the process of delivery in both the run-up to and the implementation of this deal.

Q47 **Chair:** Some of the language within the quote that I had at the heart of my question clearly does tack, possibly in a less muscular way, more towards the narrative of Sinn Féin in some respects. You will be aware, if you have looked at the transcripts of previous sessions of this inquiry, that I have a residual concern given the upsurge in support for Sinn Féin in the Republic. The wind is clearly behind them and they have a spring in their step. Given that change of narrative and language coming from the Republic, how worried should one be about Sinn Féin feeling emboldened to bring down Stormont at some point in the not-too-distant future, to try to trigger fresh elections under the new rubric, while desperately trying to destabilise the new Government in the Republic?

Mr Walker: What we have seen to date from Ministers in the Executive is a willingness across all parties to work together, to recognise that there are huge differences but to put those aside in order to deal with the immediate challenges in front of them. We saw that when the Executive reformed and embraced the New Decade, New Approach deal in January.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

We have seen that in the response to Covid; some very difficult conversations have been needed at times but we have seen the Deputy First Minister working hand in hand with the First Minister very effectively on that front. I am encouraged that, so far, Sinn Féin seems to be engaging constructively and wanting to take the deal forward, and that is certainly something that people in Northern Ireland have expressed very clearly that they want to see.

While we should always be wary of external pressures on the parties, and clearly the debate on the constitutional question will continue, the key elements of this deal that we are talking about today of New Decade, New Approach have actually meant getting the parties to put aside those differences and to work together to deliver for the people of Northern Ireland. The funding that was provided, which has enabled us to resolve some of the immediate challenges like the nurses' pay crisis, has made a real difference in that respect.

I recognise the point, but I do not think that our approach should be one of living in fear of the worst happening. It should be one of asking how we can support a better outcome with all five parties working constructively together.

Q48 Chair: Do you welcome the creation of this new unit within the Department of the Taoiseach?

Mr Walker: This is obviously something that has been talked about for some time. I can understand the political pressures that led to it being created, but we have to be clear that institutions and arrangements already exist that recognise the separate strands and the correct roles, where the Irish Government have an interplay on north/south and east/west issues with the UK Government, but also where there are strand 1 issues that are purely domestic. We should not seek to change that; we should seek to continue to work with the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement, which have been supported by all.

Q49 Chair: Do you see the NIO having an opportunity to plug into this new department?

Mr Walker: It is a very important part of our responsibilities, working alongside our colleagues in the Foreign Office, to engage with the Irish Government. We recognise that but, at the end of the day, particularly in this deal that was proposed jointly by the British and Irish Governments to the parties, there will be a role for that interface to take place. Of course, we need to work with the machinery that is there with the Irish Government, but we also need to recognise that we are a UK Government Department and we are responsible for delivering for Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom.

Q50 Ian Paisley: Good morning, Minister. It is good to see you again. Thank you for the hard work you do for Northern Ireland in the job that you play. On a day-to-day basis, most people—certainly from my



community—do not really follow the ins and outs, and the machinations and moves, of every single Irish Government or indeed their formation, largely because the Irish Government have little relevance to the daily lives of people in Northern Ireland. However, with Covid-19, probably, their interest has been heightened to see how other countries and other parts of our island have dealt with this crisis.

The Chair is on to something when he mentions the impact of destabilising this agreement. He has mentioned the potential of Sinn Féin bringing down the Assembly in Northern Ireland. I would be more concerned at the fact that one party has been completely excluded from the Government in the Republic of Ireland—the party that won the election, namely Sinn Féin—and that probably the other parties are lining themselves up for an early election in the Republic within the next 12 to 18 months.

That must have an impact on the arrangements that we are making. I would not ask you to speculate on that, but I wonder if you think the relationship is working to its full potential or if there are holes in it that need to be fixed. Certainly this morning's announcements and pronouncements by the potential new Irish Government have raised eyebrows in terms of some of the things that they are now saying, especially about legacy.

Mr Walker: We have a good working relationship and we have had a good working relationship with successive Irish Governments. As you say, it is not for me to speculate on politics in the Republic of Ireland. It is important that we also respect the fact that we will sometimes disagree on issues, and indeed have done many times over the years. It is important that we invest in the working relationships, respect the areas where we will disagree, and always return to the well-established three-strand approach set out in the agreement. That will allow us to manage this process effectively.

With regard to New Decade, New Approach, we have seen the Irish Government play a constructive role in helping to bring the parties back together and helping sometimes to challenge some of the more difficult issues with the nationalist community, just as we have sometimes had to challenge some of the more difficult issues with the unionist community. That is welcome when it actually gets people to the table and gets people working together. That is the approach that we need to take going forward. It does not mean we will necessarily agree with them on every aspect of policy or on every aspect of the constitutional question, but of course we recognise that maintaining those relationships and keeping up a dialogue with the Irish Government is a very important part of the overall picture.

Q51 **Ian Paisley:** The Irish Government have made and have signed up to certain commitments, which you will have to hold them to, especially in relation to legacy issues. Today they have further announced that they are interested in setting up an international judicial figure to examine the



Dublin bombings of 1972 and 1971, the Kay's Tavern and the murder in County Louth of a man called Seamus Ludlow in 1976. They certainly have started to indicate that they want to address that legacy issue with you. Do you know who this international figure is? Has there been any work done around that as yet? Is it a surprise to you that this is the way they want to go?

Second, their interest in legacy appears to be very one-dimensional. They do not seem to mention the murder of British civilians and British soldiers that were taken to the Republic of Ireland, murdered and slaughtered there, and dumped on our border. I am wondering if there has been any work or any quiet prompting along the road to say to the Irish Government, "You have a job of work and a piece of work to do in terms of opening your files and letting us hear, say, about the murder of James Elliott in 1972, a UDR soldier. What happened to his body?" Are we able to get to that with the Irish Government through your work, Minister?

Mr Walker: Thank you for the question. We are stretching a little beyond the New Decade, New Approach deal here in the questioning, but these are hugely important issues. The Irish Government have made an announcement today. It is not necessarily something of which we had pre-sight, so I cannot comment on any specific figures being mooted for this. We all recognise that legacy issues are hugely sensitive and I do recognise, having met some of the victims' groups in border areas, the deep concern that there is about those cross-border cases.

It is absolutely right that the legacy process should seek to address those as well as issues that took place within Northern Ireland and the wider UK. These are matters that need ongoing, sensitive handling between the Governments, and that is something that we will absolutely continue to invest in. The straight answer to your question is that we were not sighted on this announcement before it had been made.

Q52 **Ian Paisley:** That does not augur well for the relationship if they are making these announcements about international investigations into issues that really affect a relationship that was signed up and agreed in December. It does not look good when that happens.

Mr Walker: We recognise that there is a political process within the Republic of Ireland that we need to respect, just as there are political processes in the UK that they need to respect. It is important that we establish effective working relationships with all Irish Governments, whatever their political make-up. This is very early days in the formation of a new Government and obviously we want to engage with them to follow up on these issues.

Ian Paisley: I wonder if the Minister is able to say anything about the comments by Mary Lou McDonald this week about the victims' pension.

Chair: Mr Paisley, that takes us away from this inquiry. It is an incredibly important issue that you raise, but I am very keen that we focus on New Decade, New Approach. Minister, you have effectively hit on the two



things that have potential new hurdles for the delivery of New Decade, New Approach: first, the outcome of the election in Dublin and, secondly, the coronavirus and the impact that that has had. I will turn to Mr Farry, who wishes to pick up on that as a probing set of questions.

Q53 Stephen Farry: Good morning, Minister. I want to place on record my thanks to Julian Smith, Robin and all the officials at the NIO for their work on New Decade, New Approach, as well as to the outgoing Tánaiste and his officials in the DFA in that regard. I am fairly relaxed about the new coalition agreement. It is probably beneficial that we have a government in the Republic of Ireland to take New Decade, New Approach forward.

I want to ask the Minister a double-headed question for a sense of perspective around New Decade, New Approach. It is hard to believe that we are only five months on from this being concluded. So much has happened in the intervening period with the Covid crisis. There is almost a sense that some of the issues that were major blockages then are now in a different sense of perspective or have just been parked to re-emerge in due course. Can I ask the Minister for his reflections on where we are in the sense of the tensions that were blocking devolution and the emerging proposals to address those blockages and where we stand with those?

Arising from that, there are a whole range of target dates and timetables associated with those. Understandably, that timetable has been considerably skewed over the intervening weeks. Is there a sense that that needs to be brought together at some stage over the next number of weeks and refocused in some way, with some of the commitments being reprioritised?

Mr Walker: Thank you for the question. There are a lot of elements to that. First, thank you for what you have said about the work on the deal. We obviously commend you for your role in the process as well. All the parties had to come up to the plate here. I definitely welcome the work that was done, particularly on some of the institutional reforms, by the Alliance and the way in which it has worked with other parties since.

As you say, there were some big challenges in bringing the parties back together and re-establishing the institutions of devolution. We all know that there were high-profile debates about language, and I know the Assembly is due to consider that fairly shortly. The New Decade, New Approach deal presented a balanced and reasonable package on that front, which addressed some of the key concerns that unionists had previously held about any Irish language legislation.

I am hopeful that the legislation, when it comes forward in the Assembly, will get cross-party and cross-community support so that we can get on with delivering both the British and Ulster Scots commissioner and the Irish Language commissioner in a sensitive way that does not undermine the importance of the role of the English language in Northern Ireland. That is one area where some progress can be made and we would



HOUSE OF COMMONS

welcome that. The NIO is ready to play our part in terms of any further amendments that are required to the Northern Ireland Act, which would be consequential on the legislation there.

As you say, we have to be honest about the fact that Covid has impacted some of the delivery plans for this. For instance, the board was due to meet, and indeed a meeting was set up for 26 March, which was going to focus on progress with the New Decade, New Approach deal. That meeting had to be cancelled because, understandably, the priority on all sides was to focus on the Covid response. We all want, as soon as possible, when it is safe to do so, to reconvene, to get those board meetings up and running and to move on with progress.

It is also important to recognise that there were some hugely pressing issues when this deal was done that have been resolved. We have moved forward on the nurses' pay issue. We have made sure that money has been made available through the deal to deal with that. Given the circumstances and given what has since happened with Covid, we can all recognise that it was vitally important—perhaps more important than anyone even recognised at the time—that this issue was addressed. There has also been progress on the work that we promised as the UK Government, in terms of the Home Office's work, on the nationality issue.

While it is absolutely true that Covid has had an impact, and has delayed some of the administrative processes and some of the meetings that would have taken place as envisaged originally under the deal, we should all recognise that a huge amount of progress has been made in other areas, which has made a big difference for Northern Ireland. We will probably talk about the money in a bit more detail later but, in the meantime, it is important to recognise that on something like the Magee Medical School, which has been a bone of contention over a long period of time, we have been able to see the money made available, both by the UK Government as part of the deal and, since then, by the Executive in taking that forward. That is a really welcome step forward that this deal has enabled.

Q54 Mr Goodwill: We have all been preoccupied in London, Belfast and Dublin not only with the Covid-19 pandemic but with the elections and the formation of Administrations. Minister, you talked about working with the machinery that is there. In that regard, what steps have been taken to establish the biannual cabinet delegation with the Northern Ireland Executive, which New Decade, New Approach states will aim to improve co-operation and collaboration between the two Governments?

Mr Walker: The biannual cabinet delegation is a continuation of the Prime Minister's commitment to take Cabinet outside London to all parts of the UK. This is something that was begun at the start of this year when the Cabinet travelled to the north of England. It does not have a formal role in NDNA implementation but, as you have set out, it can provide benefit by making sure that Cabinet Ministers are spending more time in Northern Ireland and more time with their counterparts in the



Executive. From that perspective, it is something that both Brandon and I are very keen to see taken forward. As you set out—and, I am afraid, as is only realistic in the circumstances—that has not happened yet, because of the Covid situation and because people have not been able to travel on that front.

We are working with the Cabinet Office on this. We are really keen to see something happen in the autumn and to try to get the first of those delegations sorted for the autumn. I know you will be hearing from the Cabinet Office and the Secretary of State on this shortly and I know that Brandon feels very strongly about it. We want to get a regular pattern of these delegations sorted. I have been quite impressed, speaking to colleagues, particularly in the Department for International Trade and Defra, by the good relationships they already have in many respects with their Northern Ireland counterparts. It can only be a good thing to get more people over to Northern Ireland, to get the Cabinet over there to show our keen commitment to Northern Ireland as a key part of the UK and to use that to deliver more meetings with the Executive.

Q55 Mr Goodwill: Do you have a date pencilled into the diary for the autumn? Could you confirm that the Prime Minister will indeed lead that delegation?

Mr Walker: As I say, the commitment in the first place came from the Prime Minister so I am sure he would be keen to, and it is certainly something that we will be talking to the Cabinet Office about on that basis. We do not yet have a date, because we all recognise that dates are a bit of a moveable feast in the current scenario, but it is certainly something that we will continue to work towards and work with the Cabinet Office on.

Q56 Mr Goodwill: In terms of the agenda for that meeting, will it review the implementation of the New Decade, New Approach agreement?

Mr Walker: The review of the implementation of the agreement is really a role for the oversight board. That board will consist of the Secretary of State, the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. As part of any Cabinet delegation, clearly, following up on the New Decade, New Approach deal will be a very important part of their responsibilities. It is not just for the UK Government to review implementation; these are joint commitments with a range of commitments on all parties. It is important that the oversight board should play its role in that when it is also able to meet.

Q57 Mr Goodwill: Can you confirm that the agenda for that meeting will have a very Ulster flavour to it?

Mr Walker: Absolutely, and part of the point of these delegations is to make sure that the Cabinet is coming out and looking at UK policy through a Northern Ireland lens. That is something that we, as the Northern Ireland Office, would always be keen to support. Of course, the



agenda for the Cabinet is, at the end of the day, for the Prime Minister to set.

Q58 Chair: Can I just clarify, Minister, that this is not envisaged just to be a meeting of Cabinet taking place in Northern Ireland, though that may very well happen as part of the Prime Minister's commitment for a Cabinet roadshow, for want of a better phrase? There would be a formal session between the Executive and the Cabinet as part of a review and monitoring of the delivery of New Decade, New Approach. There would effectively be two Cabinet meetings, the second one not actually being a meeting of Cabinet but a meeting attended by members of the Cabinet. That is my understanding rather than just Northern Ireland hosting a Cabinet meeting and then they all get on a plane and go back to Westminster.

Mr Walker: The responsibility for oversight of New Decade, New Approach does sit with the board in that respect rather than any joint meeting in that respect. What is set out in the deal is that the Cabinet delegation is an opportunity to improve working between the UK Government and the Executive. We have seen that working extremely effectively during the current crisis with Executive Ministers regularly attending meetings at all levels to deal with the Covid response.

There may be a little confusion here about the role of the joint delegation in that respect. Fundamentally, the role of oversight of the deal as a whole is a responsibility for the board rather than for any joint working. Mark may be able to add to that.

Mark Larmour: As the Minister indicates, the thought process was that the joint board that would be established would meet regularly with the Secretary of State, the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, and provide a framework that would allow us to consider how the commitments are being delivered. Turning back to an earlier question, as officials, we had scoped out the commitments that were made in New Decade, New Approach and we had thought through a broad timetable for that delivery but, as the Minister indicated, that has been challenged by the impact of Covid and it is something that we will return to very shortly in terms of understanding the around 40 commitments that the UK Government have to deliver in respect of New Decade, New Approach.

The joint board would be seen as the primary mechanism through which the conversation would take place between the UK Government and the Executive to understand and support the delivery of the commitments in New Decade, New Approach.

Q59 Mr Campbell: What would the decision-making mechanism within the board be, in the joint meetings that you have outlined, with regard to clarification of the priorities within New Decade, New Approach, how they would be implemented, and where there was any division or non-agreement on how moneys might be deployed to carry out New Decade, New Approach?



Mr Walker: Those are all good questions. The establishment of the joint board is very much there to review the funding provided under the agreement. It will be convened by the Secretary of State, including the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, and it is aiming to meet quarterly. Clearly, that first meeting for March has been postponed and we want to make sure that that can be reconvened as soon as possible.

The terms of reference will cover the oversight of the funding arrangements and the transformation of health, education and justice. The UK Government will have a role in overseeing the implementation of the agreements reached with the Executive through the joint board composed of Northern Ireland party leaders and UK Government Ministers. These should ensure that we can support the Executive but, of course, matters of prioritisation are a question for the Executive in the areas of their responsibility.

You will recognise that many of the commitments made in New Decade, New Approach were commitments for the Executive to take forward. For our part, we have provided the £2 billion funding to ensure that they have the resources to do so but, of course, it is not for the UK Government to tell the Executive in what order things have to be done or what has to be given priority. Those are things that need to be thrashed out and agreed between the parties on the Executive.

Q60 **Mr Campbell:** If the money has been agreed by the UK Government and the priorities are decided by the Executive, what would the actual function of the board be? If you are simply saying, "We have divvied up the money and you decide how it is allocated", what would the functionality of the board be then?

Mr Walker: The board is there to oversee that process, to help co-ordinate, to ensure that progress is being made, to measure that progress, and to ensure there is high-level input from both the Government in Westminster and the Executive. It is not there to direct funding. That is probably the crucial distinction. The deal itself provided the £2 billion funding package. Then the decisions over funding are decisions for the Executive when it comes to the priorities set out within the deal, which were embraced by the parties.

Clearly, there are separate UK Government funding arrangements such as the city deals and growth deals, which we are delighted that the Executive have now been able to match fund, but these are points that the board would be overseeing and looking at progress on rather than necessarily directing.

Q61 **Mr Campbell:** Let us hope this does not happen, but let us say there was a lack of progress on a number of projects that the Executive were seeking to deliver for whatever reason. For example, I can think of two that are in my patch: the medical school at Magee and the veterinary school at Coleraine. Those are two projects that we hope will move on quite quickly. If they or any other number of projects, for reasons as yet



undefined, had not made the progress that most people had expected, what would the board's function be in trying to ensure that they did?

Mr Walker: Those are good examples of where the board could then be very clear and reach an agreement that those should be prioritised. Obviously, this is a five-year process—the full package of funding is designed to cover five years—but we see really welcome progress in the examples you give, particularly with the Magee Medical School. Part of that has been unlocked by the fact that the UK Government have been able to provide resource to the Executive through the deal, some of which they have decided to use and agreed to use across all parties to fund that project.

That, in turn, has added to the value of what the UK Government were already providing to that project through the inclusive future fund. That was an area where we were asking the Executive to take a decision, which I appreciate has been politically contentious at times, and where that decision has now been taken. That has unlocked funding from both parties—from the UK Government and from the Executive. There is really welcome progress being made on that front.

The board will be there to challenge, to oversee and, if there were other areas where progress was not being made, to make sure that those are taken back to the Executive and/or the UK Government at the highest level. It is important that it can get on and provide that challenge.

Q62 **Chair:** Following on from Mr Campbell's question, with the caveat of the sensitivities imposed upon you, the Secretary of State and others, given the traditions and the tensions that we know about in Northern Ireland, does the board not run the risk of being a slightly bossy schoolmaster chastising and chivvying where delivery is perceived to be slow or whatever? What comfort can you give us in terms of mindset? The devolution plant in Northern Ireland is still a very fragile one. It does not have the deep taproots of Cardiff and Edinburgh, and we pray that it does and it will.

In terms of the fostering, nurturing and encouraging role of the board and others, is that seen as something that is important to keep at the forefront of our minds, to ensure we can have a long-term, stable commitment to devolved government in Northern Ireland that benefits all of the communities?

Mr Walker: The short answer to your question is yes. That is a very good way of summing it up and it is something we want to engage constructively on with the board. This should not be a process of nagging. This should be a process of recognising where progress has been made and encouraging, if blockages arise, practical solutions to unblock those blockages. You are absolutely right that we need to nurture devolution in Northern Ireland, which, although it has had challenges and periods of absence over recent years, has deep roots going back a long way into the further past. We need to nurture it on a power-sharing basis.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

One of the really welcome things about what happened with New Decade, New Approach, which was not a certainty until the very last minute of the deal, was the fact that it was signed up to by the five main parties who were all prepared to come in and work on it. Clearly, some of the structural reforms that have been suggested under it also make it easier and more effective for parties to go into opposition. It is very important that we maintain power-sharing as part of it.

In that context, we should actually celebrate some of the progress that has been made on the graduate-entry medical school in Derry and on getting the Executive sub-committee on EU exit, which I know is a contentious issue and one on which the parties have strong views. Really welcome steps have been taken there, in terms of getting that up and running, having it meeting a number of times, and publishing a legislative agenda, which sets out their clear commitment to take forward legislation under the deal.

As I say, on city deals and growth deals, which I have been very involved in and looking to take forward as a Minister, the announcement from the Executive that they would be able to match fund us, as we had always hoped and expected, was extremely welcome. Going further than that and match funding the inclusive future fund, which was perhaps a more challenging ask but one that they delivered on in full, will make a real difference and create some real opportunities for investment.

Q63 Mary Kelly Foy: Good morning, Minister. Following on with the UK Government commitments, can you tell us if the Government have begun the work on establishing a Northern Ireland hub in London and a complementary UK Government hub in Northern Ireland in order to promote Northern Ireland trade?

Mr Walker: This is a really good point. Our previous Secretary of State, Julian Smith, attended the opening of an Invest NI hub in the City of London in September last year. That is up and running and, right up until lockdown, has done good work in promoting Northern Ireland, bringing in businesses and enabling them to having meetings. Looking at their website, that is open to Government to use. I have to say that, when the Executive Ministers have come over, we have sometimes hosted them in the Northern Ireland Office as well and we are very happy to continue to do that.

Further discussions with the Executive will be needed to inform the scoping of any further Northern Ireland hub in London that will complement Invest NI and the work the Northern Ireland Office does. Of course, we being at the centre of Whitehall, it is quite a good location for visiting Northern Ireland Ministers, in between meetings that they may have at COBRA, at XO or in other formats. The work is ongoing.

With regard to the complementary hub in Belfast, this is a really big opportunity and something we have been working on with the Cabinet Office and the other territorial Departments. Work is going on in



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Government to look at how we can have more substantial Government hubs in each part of the UK. One of the things I am very keen to see out of that is more senior civil servants being based in Northern Ireland. We already have a UK Government hub in Belfast. It is dominated by HMRC and not necessarily the most senior grades. I would like to see more decision-making and stakeholder engagement type roles coming to Northern Ireland.

That has a slightly longer timeline, but it is certainly within the scope of the deal. We are working to do that over a number of years in conjunction with the Cabinet Office. It is a process in which all the territorial offices are making their bids, but the commitment in New Decade, New Approach gives us a particular opportunity to take that forward.

Chair: Minister, you may want to reflect upon the positive glow for Her Majesty's Government by having the most representatives of the hub from members of HMRC. Tax authorities are not usually greeted with what was described as unalloyed pleasure.

Q64 **Claire Hanna:** I want to look quickly at some of the institutional reforms that the Assembly clearly required, some of which are addressed in New Decade, New Approach. Specifically, I want to look at the reform of the petition of concern. Who in the UK Government is responsible for that reform and what is it going to look at specifically?

Mr Walker: The first thing we should all say on the petition of concern is to welcome the fact that it has not had to be used since this deal was reached. That is welcome.

Chair: It is early days.

Mr Walker: We are due to produce our first report on that shortly. The main substance of that should be to welcome the fact that it has not been used since the Assembly and the Executive have reconvened. We have committed to review this, and that responsibility sits with the Secretary of State. We work as a team, so I would absolutely work alongside him in that regard and look at those reforms.

There are some sensible and substantial reforms set out in the deal that affect the availability of the petition of concern. Some of those elements are voluntary areas that the Executive can sort out for themselves and some of them will require legal changes. We will work with the Executive to make sure we can deliver on the legal changes necessary. It is a process where the Executive have some responsibilities in this regard, and we have others. We want to work together constructively to deliver those reforms as a package.

Q65 **Claire Hanna:** I would not want to be quite so cynical as the Chair to say that it is early days, but it really is. I suppose we have been dealing primarily with Covid, but that is not to say that some of the issues that have been in the "too difficult" pile over the years have all been resolved.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

The agreement also made provision for a leaders' forum to deal with precisely those issues. Has that been operating well and do you have a particular vision for that as a way to clear some of the issues that previously just did not get dealt with?

Mr Walker: The leaders' forum is a really interesting part of the deal. It is very much driven by the context of how we got to this situation and this deal, in which the leaders were not meeting regularly and were not engaging with one another, and where there was real serious difficulty sometimes in getting people into the same room and having those conversations.

The good news is that, in the interim and through the period in which the Executive has been up and running, we have seen much more effective, regular engagement by the leaders with one another in a range of forums. That has enabled the Executive to make the progress that it has. I know your party colleague recently called for a meeting of the leaders' forum, which is welcome. It would make sense to get this forum up and running, and to make sure that it is having regular meetings so it can complement the work that is going on through the Executive.

The leaders' forum can play a key part in supporting the sustainability of the institutions, particularly at moments of high tension. Getting people into that forum at moments of high tension is going to be useful. My understanding is that it has not had to meet to date, partly because the leaders have been meeting so regularly in other contexts.

Q66 **Claire Hanna:** The issue, for example, of the victims' pension is exactly the sort of issue that is urgent and that cannot just be shelved away until an agreement magically appears. It should be dealt with in the leaders' forum. What role do you see for the Bill of Rights, given the commitment to it in the Good Friday agreement, and because we know that so many of the issues that led up to the last collapse and the one before that are rooted in rights-based issues? Do you see or anticipate, or are you working on, progress towards that?

Mr Walker: The Bill of Rights is certainly something that we are committed to through the deals that have been reached previously, as you say. It is really important that these issues are taken forward in the Assembly and that consensus is built wherever possible on these issues. Part of the point of having that leaders' forum is to provide an outlet for leaders to discuss these issues where consensus has not been reached and to recognise the importance of building that.

Over recent months, we have seen the Assembly and the Executive working on some very difficult issues and agreeing to put aside differences, to come forward and to reach practical solutions. That is something that we need to see more generally. We all recognise that the current legislative agenda is very crowded with regards to steps that need to be taken to deal with the immediate Covid situation. This deal



gives time for some of the legislation to come through and, wherever possible, we want to make sure we are delivering on that part.

With regards to the structural reforms, the main responsibilities of the forum and the Northern Ireland Office are on changes to the Northern Ireland Act that may need to be delivered. A lot of those will be consequential on changes that are made in the Assembly to standing orders and approaches there. We want to deliver those as soon as possible, but we need to engage with the usual channels to find a slot to be able to do that, and we will want to build on the progress that has been made by the Assembly and the Executive.

Q67 Claire Hanna: We travel in hope on that and, as I say, on the Assembly's and the Executive's ability to resolve those contentious issues. Of course, the Bill of Rights and the civic forum were envisaged in the Good Friday Agreement precisely to prevent these sorts of blockages and to widen out the voices, the opinions, the roles and the potential pools for solutions.

Minister, do you think that the code of conduct currently for both special advisers and Ministers is sufficiently strong? We know, of course, that we have had problems around special advisers in the past, many of whom outlast the Ministers and the civil servants. Are there changes you would like to see in that regard?

Mr Walker: This is an area that the Executive agreed in the deal to revise. I understand that actions have been taken in terms of providing a revised code of conduct. I am probably not the best person to quiz on the details of this, but I know that you got some evidence from the former Secretary of State's spad on the relevance of the changes made last week. That is an area where she is probably better qualified to comment than me. Mark may also want to come in from a UK Civil Service perspective on this issue of the scenario where you are working alongside special advisers and have a code of conduct.

Mark Larmour: As part of the talks that led to the New Decade, New Approach agreement, there was a strong line of discussion and much work done around transparency. Part of that came out of the context of the renewable heat incentive, which was one of the factors in the background to the instability at the time the Executive collapsed. Much work has been done by the parties, which then fed into the final text that was agreed in New Decade, New Approach.

Proposals to change the Ministerial code and the code under which spads work have been implemented by the Department of Finance as part of that. They have been brought forward for the Assembly to take forward as well. We are able to share our experience in the UK Government of how civil servants work alongside special advisers with Ministers, et cetera, as part of that process. That was a very in-depth and effective strand of conversation as part of the talks that fed into the final text that



was created for New Decade, New Approach, as set out in the chapter in annexe A on transparency and the accountability of the Executive.

Q68 Claire Hanna: I know we have a lot of ground to cover, so I just want to finish on this. Are there other reforms that you think are required and how will you measure success with the reforms that have been brought in?

Mr Walker: The key measure of success for all of this is going to be the sustainability of the Executive and the Assembly. It also very much comes back to the context in which the New Decade, New Approach deal was reached, and the fact that it is delivering on the priorities of the people in Northern Ireland. We have seen some real progress made on the health front and on addressing some of those upfront challenges that we were facing back in January, but clearly there are other areas. There are some aspects of the institutional changes that clearly have not been tested yet, like the workings of an Opposition, something that was strengthened from the previous agreements on that.

We need to keep monitoring it. There is a role for the Secretary of State and indeed for the party leaders' forum in monitoring how these institutional changes are working and making sure that they are working effectively. In that respect, we think there will be benefit from the introduction of an independent fiscal council. The work that the OBR does in the UK context is important. There are equivalent organisations in Scotland and the Republic of Ireland, and having an institution of that nature would be beneficial. That is an issue fundamentally for the Executive to take forward, but we are keen to see that established because we think it could also help in supporting the Assembly and the Executive to do things more effectively.

Claire Hanna: That is an issue I would want to get on to, but I am aware that others want in, so that is it from me for now.

Q69 Chair: Minister, you have noted in your answers the distorting effect of the election in Dublin and then Covid as well. When we return to normality, it is very important that we do not fall into the trap of saying, "Hang on, this New Decade, New Approach thing has been going for 10, 11 or 12 months and everything must be fine and dandy", when in actual fact there is likely to be a build-up of tensions, problems and arguments that have been put aside while the focus has been on Covid. We just need to be alert to that. Can you just give us any comfort that Dublin, your office, and the offices of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister have that pencilled into your thinking?

Mr Walker: Again, Chair, you make a very good point. We all recognise that there have been political events: we only had our election in December; we have had the long period of formation of an Irish Government, as you say; we have had the extremely welcome coming together of the Executive; and then we have had the impact of Covid on all this. Legislative timetables, in particular, have been affected by that.



We need to lean into delivery of the package. It is important in that context, as the deal was very clear in its preamble, that this was not just about getting the devolved institutions back up and running; it was about making sure that they delivered for the people of Northern Ireland. In that respect, the progress that has been made on the health front is very welcome. In other areas, such as integrating education, there is a lot more work to be done. On the economy, we were off to quite a good start with the work on city deals, growth deals and that side of things but, clearly, there is a massive challenge now for the economy to support the recovery post-Covid in Northern Ireland. It will require all parties and all the Governments to be at the top of their game to address that.

Yes, there will need to be a renewed sense of urgency, as you say, when things get back to normal. None of us knows exactly when that will be just yet, but our priorities as a Department are to keep driving this process forward and to use the machinery that the deal has set up to ensure that is delivered across the whole piece.

Q70 Chair: Can I suggest a management of expectations among the communities not to lose faith in this document because Covid has been a distorter? We will price it into our thinking. It is important that everybody else does as well. I am sure you would agree.

Mr Walker: I very much agree with that. I would just observe on that front that one area where I have already seen that in action is in the conversations we have been having about legacy and the legislation, which was originally envisaged to be in place within 100 days. We have seen recognition across victims' groups and across communities that it is more important to get the detail right than it is to do this quickly. That is absolutely right. It is still a priority on which we want to move forward, but it is really important to get it right and to do it properly.

Q71 Scott Benton: Good morning, Minister. Thank you for joining us. The agreement stated that the UK Government would work in conjunction with parties in the Executive to thrash out the precise details of the financial support package. How many discussions have you had with the parties in the Executive since January on these issues? Assuming you have spoken with those parties since March, has Covid-19 influenced the longer-term approach to finances in Northern Ireland?

Mr Walker: Thank you for the question. As I mentioned earlier, I was not in the room for the negotiations leading up to the deal. Julian is probably the best-placed person to tell you about the detail of that, as I know he already has. I have met with Ministers from all the parties in the Executive over the last few months. Indeed, I have been in touch with some of them very regularly, partly as part of the Covid response.

There are some things that the funding we provided through the deal has already unblocked and allowed to move forward, such as the funding for health and addressing the nurses' pay dispute, which are really crucial and very welcome. There are others where it has perhaps had that



indirect effect. I mentioned earlier the match funding for the inclusive future fund, where the UK Government made a significant commitment but the match funding from the Executive will make a real difference to the ability of that to deliver.

As Julian said, the £2 billion package we put forward is the biggest deal for a Northern Ireland talks process of its kind. It adds on to the over £1 billion a month that was already due to be spent in Northern Ireland. It provides substantial resource and capital funding to get things moving forward. It would not surprise you to hear that many of the Ministers I speak to would always want more. We recognise that that is part of the mature relationship that exists between a Government and a devolved Government, and part of the discussions that we will always have.

It is important to recognise that there have been separate Barnett consequentials as a result of Covid, in the region of £1.3 billion for Northern Ireland. That, of course, is welcome and necessary, and I would not suggest that that was anything other than necessary. It is also really important that, as we look at the opportunities for recovery, there are areas where the UK Government can help on this front. The Northern Ireland Office will always be making the case for them to do as much as they can. We need to recognise the substantial nature of the financial package that was agreed as part of this deal and the fact that that has been able to kick-start a good deal of change.

Q72 **Scott Benton:** I am conscious that you were not in the room when the agreement was thrashed out. I appreciate that is the case but, out of interest, the exact level of funding and the calculations that underpin the £2 billion funding package were not discussed with the parties before the deal was published. Do you think that process has caused any friction in your subsequent discussions with the parties in the Executive, or any friction with the UK Government, because that was the approach taken when the deal was published?

Mr Walker: The allocation of the £2 billion was announced days after the deal was reached. I remember at the time, when we established within the Department that that was likely to be the figure, there was a degree of optimism within the Department that it would be very well received, which was immediately pushed back on when some Northern Irish politicians began to speak about substantially larger figures that they might have wanted. That is somewhat in the nature of the relationship between the Government and the devolved Government, and will always be part of the challenge.

We need to look at what the money was for and how those figures were reached. If I break down the figure of the £2 billion, there was a £1 billion Barnett-based investment guarantee from the UK Government to include significant new funding to turbocharge infrastructure investment. That was guaranteed to apply in all circumstances—so not just money that might have been coming anyway, but a clear guarantee over five



HOUSE OF COMMONS

years that that money would come through so that the Executive could plan investment over a five-year period.

There is then around £245 million for the support of the transformation of public services, including across health, education and justice. Of that £245 million, £44 million has already been made available with the rest allocated over the next four years. There was a rapid injection of £550 million to put the Executive's finances on a sustainable footing. That included £200 million over three years to resolve the nurses' pay dispute, something that everyone would welcome, particularly in the context of Covid.

Alongside this, there was the offer from the UK Government of £60 million of capital and resource funding to deliver the Northern Ireland graduate-entry medical school in Derry/Londonderry, which has since been approved by the Executive and should now be able to go ahead. There was £50 million for the rollout of ultra-low emission public transport and half of that is available in the current year. Then there was £140 million to address Northern Ireland's unique circumstances.

These are substantial commitments that we were able to make. That breakdown reflects the fact that we had robust discussions with the Treasury in getting to them.

Q73 **Scott Benton:** As well as the British Government's investment, as part of the deal, the Irish Government also pledged infrastructure support for cross-border transport projects. Clearly, a lot has happened since January in terms of Covid-19 and the political nuances around the formation of a new Government. Do you have any reason to doubt that the Irish Government will be able to fulfil those pledges because of what has happened since?

Mr Walker: No. Coming back to the Chair's opening remarks about the statements they have made, the fact that they have put New Decade, New Approach at the centre of those statements and committed to it shows that they want to come up to the plate with regard to these. One interesting area to explore is connectivity, which, both within the UK but also north-south, may be one of the opportunities to support Northern Ireland in the Covid recovery. We would welcome them potentially going further than some of the commitments that have been made to date. We are comfortable that these are commitments that they can meet and, as far as we can see, fully intend to meet.

Q74 **Scott Benton:** To go back to the issue we have just spoken about, the finances of the Executive, there seems to be a clear political consensus in Northern Ireland, potentially espoused best by the Finance Minister in his comments on the funding that is or is not available, as he may well put it. In relation to Covid-19, which we have just touched on, and the wider questions on UK public finances, when do you think there may be a time to revisit the £2 billion package and how likely do you think that will be as part of those broader discussions with the Treasury going forward?



Mr Walker: The package related to New Decade, New Approach is the package. It is what was agreed as a five-year package with that upfront element of addressing immediate challenges for public services. The Executive is being adequately funded to support its commitments. Under the deal, we provided a £2 billion financial package, which is the biggest single package to support a talks deal in well over a decade. It addresses the key priorities identified by the parties during talks: supporting sustainable budgeting, helping to transform public services, turbocharging infrastructure investment and addressing Northern Ireland's unique circumstances.

When something like Covid comes along, you have to be able to provide extra funding and support. We have done that through £1.3 billion so far in Barnett consequentials on that front, which is of course additional to the £2 billion provided through this support.

It is part of the Northern Ireland Office's role to look at where we can add value, including with the Covid recovery process, and ensure that that is properly funded. It is something we will always engage in, but that is not to say that we want to reopen the package that was agreed for New Decade, New Approach. That is the package that is there. That is what is being delivered and a substantial part of it has already been delivered. We are seeing real changes as a result of that and I welcome that.

Q75 **Chair:** Minister, are you able to confirm whether there will be consequentials to Northern Ireland as a result of the announcement with regards to free school meals yesterday?

Mr Walker: I have asked our officials about this. I see that a number of the industrious members of your Committee have already been tweeting about that. I have not had the answer yet, but logically I would have thought that there would be.

Q76 **Chair:** You would be making the case to Treasury that that should be the case.

Mr Walker: Of course, but I am awaiting further information on that front. I cannot absolutely 100% confirm that that is the decision we make, but it seems to me that that would make sense.

Q77 **Ian Paisley:** Would HMG be paying for it instead of the Executive? Is that what the Minister is telling us?

Mr Walker: No, I am saying that there would be Barnett consequentials of a decision reached about this in England.

Q78 **Chair:** There will be a Barnett consequential through to the Executive following the decision of the Government yesterday.

Mr Walker: That is my assumption but, as I say, I have asked for more detail and I have yet to hear back. I will write to you if there is any change to that.



Chair: Minister, we are grateful to you for that. If there is anything this Committee can do to strengthen your elbow, just shout, as they say. I turn to Mr Farry, who is not going to shout. He is going to ask his question in sweet and dulcet tones.

Stephen Farry: Still on the issue of finances, I welcome the financial package and acknowledge what the Minister has said, that that is the package in relation to New Decade, New Approach. I just want to make a couple of points and ask a question on this.

Chair: In the interest of time, can we have a question rather than a point?

Q79 **Stephen Farry:** Bearing in mind that the Northern Ireland public finances were unsustainable prior to New Decade, New Approach—it is important to recognise and acknowledge that—that Covid has knocked the budget in Northern Ireland significantly off course and that the New Decade, New Approach moneys of themselves were not going to address all the aspirations the Executive had, to what extent can the Northern Ireland Office work with the Executive to re-profile some of the commitments and to support the reform package in particular?

The difficulty we have, Minister, is that, unless we are able to reform health and education, Northern Ireland public finances are not going to be sustainable in the long term. The difficulty is that the amount of money for transformation to get to a sustainable point will require some additional funding. We are caught in this dilemma where we cannot go forward and we cannot go backwards; we are still treading water and New Decade, New Approach does not really enable us to break out of that cycle. To what extent do you see a more difficult financial situation facing the Executive? Is there scope to work in partnership, by giving challenges and requiring commitments from the Executive, to make our finances more sustainable, particularly around health and education?

Mr Walker: You are right to refer to the importance of working in partnership on these issues. The deal itself did provide that rapid injection, which recognised the challenges that the Executive had faced with sustainability, and £550 million in that respect is not a small amount of money.

We also have to recognise that public spending per head in Northern Ireland is the highest of any UK region. Last year, before this additional funding, it was around 20% above the UK average. That needs to be put on a more sustainable footing. There is a role for the UK Government in supporting that process and we will continue to work with the Executive as the Northern Ireland Office to make the case for investment that can save wherever necessary. There is also a real role for the Assembly and the Executive to take responsibility on some of these issues.

That is why we think having an independent fiscal council to advise them with credibility could really help. In the UK context, all parties recognise that the OBR provides a useful function in that respect. Something along



those lines in Northern Ireland to provide the information and some of the challenge could be really helpful to that process.

Q80 Stephen Farry: To come back on that, Chair, you will notice I worked it all into my question. Would the Minister think that there is a case to be made to Treasury, for example, for some additional borrowing powers for the Executive? In terms of direct cash resource transfers, the situation is more limited. To what extent is there scope for creativity to give that greater degree of latitude for reforms, albeit with strict conditions given from Treasury around delivery, in terms of actually delivering reforms in Northern Ireland for once?

Mr Walker: I am always happy to engage with Treasury colleagues on these issues. As you say, they are always inclined to put on pretty strict conditions when it comes to these things. Having the extra support and the credibility provided by an independent fiscal council could be helpful to the Executive in supporting those conversations.

We also need to recognise that there are already revenue-raising powers available to the Executive that, in many cases, for political reasons, they have chosen not to use. There needs to be a long-term conversation about how to put the Executive on a financially sustainable footing. We will absolutely support that and will do any engagement with the Treasury that is required on that front.

It is also important to recognise that the Northern Ireland Office itself is a relatively small organisation without a huge budget to disburse. It is not like we necessarily have resources of our own that we can put into this process.

Q81 Stephen Farry: We always welcome NIO Ministers batting for Northern Ireland and standing up for us. As a party that has always been open to considering revenue raising, I would make the qualification that, in the current Covid recovery situation, increasing any revenue on households is incredibly difficult. While, in theory, that may well be a route, the borrowing route, given that the Chancellor is a little more open to increasing borrowing, may be the route to go and part of any viable pathway for the Executive.

Mr Walker: I am sure your Chair would not object to me noting that this current coronavirus crisis is making good Keynesians out of us all. In that respect, I have no problem with that personally and I suspect the Chair does not either.

Chair: Minister, as always, you are prescient in your assessment.

Q82 Claire Hanna: The old line that everyone is a Keynesian in a foxhole has never felt more real. Some of us already were Keynesians and, like Stephen Farry said, there would be real opportunities. Some may say that we have not dealt particularly well with the fiscal powers that we currently have but certainly there would be opportunities for the Executive.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

You spoke about the independent fiscal council and about opportunities to improve the long-term sustainability. Would you propose that the UK Government would be responsible for appointing members to that?

Mr Walker: First and foremost, the composition of the independent fiscal council is for the Executive to decide on. If they were to ask us to provide support and to potentially put people on to it, of course we would look at that. It is pretty clear, certainly on my reading of the agreement, that it is in the hands of the Executive to decide on that. The crucial thing is its independence. It needs to demonstrate independence from the UK Government and Her Majesty's Treasury as well as from the Department of Finance.

In that respect, some important work has been done by the OECD as to what makes for effective independent fiscal councils that contribute to better fiscal outcomes. To work effectively, they need to be genuinely independent and have timely access to all the information required to make their assessments. The joint board will want to ensure that it agrees on the terms of reference for a new institution. It will also want to make sure that the appointment of a director is done on the basis of merit and technical competence through a transparent process. Consideration also needs to be given to safeguards. With regards to OBR appointments, for instance, there is actually a role for the Treasury Select Committee.

First and foremost, we would like to see proposals from the Executive as to how they see this running. If there is a role for us where we can help, we are not insisting on a nomination right, but we would be happy to support the process.

Q83 **Ian Paisley:** The Government commissioned a report into the union by a peer and it was to be published last year. I am wondering if there are any relevant findings in that document that play into the responsibilities in making this new agreement actually work. With the Minister's responsibilities with regards to making devolution work and with his interests in the union, is he prepared to share any of those findings with us or indeed even publish the document?

Mr Walker: Sorry, I may have missed part of your question, Ian. I was not clear what report you were referring to.

Ian Paisley: It was a peer from the House of Lords. I cannot quite remember his name.

Chair: Was it Lord Bew?

Ian Paisley: No, it was not Lord Bew. There was a report commissioned on the union.

Mr Walker: It was Lord Dunlop.

Q84 **Ian Paisley:** That is the report. I wonder if any of the findings contained in that report are relevant to New Decade, New Approach and to its



implementation. Do the Government ever intend to publish that report or share its findings with us?

Mr Walker: I am happy to take that away and look at it because I remember talking to Lord Dunlop as part of his report. At the time I was sitting in both the Northern Ireland Office and the Scotland Office. I helped to provide evidence and support to him on that. That review was commissioned by and to the Cabinet Office, so it would have responsibility for any details around the publication. I am very happy to go away and ask those questions and to come back to you with a response on that.

Ian Paisley: That would be very helpful and very useful. I am sure there are implications, potentially, for the agreement and the future relationships.

Chair: Mr Paisley, I think I heard you say that that Dunlop review has not been put into the public domain. I do not recall seeing it. Do you?

Ian Paisley: It has not been published yet, Chair, and the Minister has told us that it is a Cabinet Office responsibility. We would be asking to have it published.

Chair: We are seeing the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster tomorrow. We will certainly write to the Cabinet Office as well but perhaps, Minister, you could undertake to do anything that you can to aid that. Likewise, at some point, we will need a little extra information with regards to the operation of the new unit of the union operating within No. 10. I would guess that that draws quite significantly on the Dunlop review. That is all fine and dandy but, if we do not know what the Dunlop review says, we cannot really assess whether it is being successful. Thank you.

Did you have any other questions, Mr Paisley, with regards to the joint board?

Q85 **Ian Paisley:** Unless the Minister has anything to tell us about the intention for when it meets or its agenda, I imagine it has probably been overtaken by Covid and will be kick-started later on. The Minister may want to update us on the joint board proposal.

Mr Walker: To be honest, you are spot on. There was a scheduled meeting of the joint board on 26 March 2020. It was hoped that that would be the first formal meeting but, understandably, a decision was taken to postpone that discussion to enable the Executive to focus on the vital work of responding to Covid-19. The Secretary of State agreed with the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister that structured work to implement the deal would be paused to allow us to focus completely on tackling the virus.

We have kept that position under review. We are very keen to get on with implementation now and will, as soon as possible, restart discussions with the Executive about a joint board and implementation. While present circumstances have made progress difficult, we absolutely



recognise that people want to see movement. As we head into the recovery phase, working together on Covid-19 will hopefully be a real opportunity to take some of these issues forward. It is a priority to get that next meeting of the joint board scheduled but it has not been done yet.

Q86 Ian Paisley: I assume it is similar for the North South Ministerial Council and for the east west ministerial council: that all of this has really been put on hold. It is potentially an opportunity to look with fresh eyes at what is actually relevant to making the lives of people different, especially if the Dunlop review has anything in it.

Mr Walker: Yes, that is right. It is very important that, in that respect, we deliver on the broader union strategy for involving all parts of the UK most effectively. That is certainly a priority for both me and Brandon. I know that you will be able to quiz him on that tomorrow.

With regard to the North South Ministerial Council—and this was mentioned in the Irish Government’s announcement that the Chair referred to at the beginning of his comments—I recognise that that is a matter for the Executive to take forward with the Irish Government and not a matter for us.

Ian Paisley: Yes, it is important, Minister, that the lines are not blurred going forward—I think you made this point in your opening comments—in the three-stranded approach, which has served the demarcation lines quite well.

Mr Walker: Yes, absolutely.

Q87 Chair: Minister, is the joint board merely advisory or is it going to have decision-making powers?

Mr Walker: The joint board is there to oversee. To some extent, it depends on exactly what you mean by decision-making powers. If the board reaches a decision, it is likely to then feed that decision back to the UK Government or the Executive in saying, “This needs to be got on with and this needs to be prioritised as an issue”, or, “This is a matter of concern”. It is not, however, there to direct spending decisions of the Government or the Executive. It is there to oversee the process and ensure that we are working together to deliver progress on the whole five-year package of New Decade, New Approach.

The answer to the distinction between advisory and decision-making is perhaps a little more complicated than that but it is a board that is there to oversee the process. Obviously, it allows for co-ordination at the highest level between the Secretary of State, the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister.

Q88 Chair: Sorry, let me just explore that very briefly. It will obviously meet. It will discuss, review and monitor. It can urge and it can exhort. It cannot take any decisions. If its urgings and exhortations are listened to



but ignored, de facto it is toothless. Its efficacy is based on mutual good will.

Mr Walker: When we think about who is on that board, it is representing the chief figures: the Secretary of State, in the case of my Department, and the First Minister and Deputy First Minister on the Executive. I do not see any prospect of it being ignored. Decisions that they reach together or views that they take together are likely to become priorities for their respective organisations. In that respect, this is an important board to get up and running, and to have its input into the review.

I would not want to imply that this is in some way a mechanism by which the UK was taking responsibility over Executive decisions or vice versa. Responsibilities of the Governments are what they are and, within this, the board is there to encourage co-ordination between them and delivery on the aims of the deal.

Having very regular conversations and engagement is important to assess progress. Of course, those regular conversations and engagement between the people on this board are taking place in the context of the current crisis. I know Brandon has been engaging very regularly on this with his counterparts in the Executive through Covid forums and through the quad, involving the Irish Government in terms of the Covid response.

Q89 **Chair:** Are we in danger of having such a multiplicity of quads and boards, and this, that and the other, that it creates opportunities to kick the difficult into the long grass, to pass the buck and to say, "The meeting to discuss this convenes in three months' time and we cannot move forward until then"? This strikes to the heart of a question I asked earlier. The people of Northern Ireland are utterly fed up to the back teeth of political process. They want to see the products of politics: better education, better health, better housing, a buoyant economy, et cetera. Are you confident that, as welcome as the New Decade, New Approach documentation is, et cetera, everybody is seized of the need to deliver that?

Mr Walker: That comes back to the core of what this deal is about. You hit the nail on the head. It was about getting devolution back up and running, but also getting the focus on the priorities of people in Northern Ireland. That is much more than just a process; that is about ensuring that the real priorities are taken forward and delivered on. A lot of progress has been made on that front as a result of the deal. We have seen the ending of the nurses' dispute. We have seen extra money flowing into health and education in Northern Ireland. We see a huge opportunity, with the abilities of the UK Government and the Executive to work together in delivering growth deals and city deals to support the economy. That is even more important in the current Covid recovery context.

I absolutely agree that this is about focusing on the issues that matter to people, which are between multiple different parties and more than one



Government. You need some degree of process to manage that and, in that respect, what has been set out in terms of the joint board is entirely reasonable, given the situation that was envisaged when this deal was reached. The fact that other circumstances have intervened in the meantime does not mean in any way that the delivery of the objectives of the deal are any less urgent, but it puts up obstacles to the practical working of the processes.

Q90 **Chair:** Do you see the agreement as static or organic?

Mr Walker: The agreement itself, of course, is static. It was formed at a moment in time, but it focuses on issues, challenges and things that we need to continue to work together effectively on. Those are issues that are key priorities for the Northern Ireland Office and, from everything I have seen, are also key priorities for the parties in the Executive. Some difficult political decisions have to be taken along the way. This agreement provides a structural framework for allowing those to be taken and for reinforcing the stability of the Executive, but it is still the responsibility of the politicians, both in the UK and in Northern Ireland, to take those decisions and to get on with delivering.

Q91 **Stephen Farry:** To pick up on the most recent discussion, there was an expectation that a quarterly implementation report would be issued and I do not think we have had that, for understandable reasons. Are we likely to see an implementation report and a reprogrammed timetable in the near future, for New Decade, New Approach?

Mr Walker: You are right, of course. The original deal suggested that the first implementation meeting would have to take place at the end of January. For various reasons, that did not take place at the end of January and, as we said, the meetings of the board had to be postponed from March. Getting that report commissioned and properly progressed is a priority. It will require the implementation of a review meeting to take place with the respective representatives of the UK Government and the Executive. That is a priority for us as soon as such meetings can take place. I cannot promise a date for publication as yet, but we recognise that this is an important part of the deal and something that needs to be brought forward at the earliest opportunity. Mark, do you have anything more to add on that front?

Mark Larmour: I will just reinforce what the Minister has said. We want to have regular implementation meetings, looking at all the progress that has been made against each of the objectives in the New Decade, New Approach deal. We hope to have those every six months. As was said throughout this conversation, frankly, the timetable has been thrown out of kilter by Covid. One of the earliest things that I want to do with the team in the NIO is to agree a timescale for those regular meetings along with supporting Ministers in setting up the joint board and other oversight matters.



A more general point is that we can never have enough contact between the various parties, the Executive and the UK Government around the delivery of these agreements. That has been a barrier to progress in the past, frankly. We are very keen to have the frameworks that we have set out during the course of this meeting in place and working to allow us to secure the commitments that have been made in this agreement as soon as possible.

Q92 Stephen Farry: If we turn our minds back to Stormont House, Mark has been here long enough to remember that. There was an implementation group that met after Stormont House almost on a weekly basis but then it very quickly petered out, and I think that contributed to Stormont House just going off the rails. There is a key lesson there that Mark has highlighted.

Mark Larmour: Yes, we did get into a pattern of six-monthly implementation review meetings involving all the parties, the UK Government and the Irish Government to look at progress across the board after Stormont House. We built fresh start commitments into that process. The last meeting of that particular process was in December 2016, just prior to the collapse of the Executive. We very much want to restart that process where we look at all the commitments that have been made in the various agreements within Stormont House, fresh start and now in New Decade, New Approach, and make sure that we are collectively reminding ourselves of the progress that needs to be made and marking achievements that have been made in the previous period.

As the Minister indicated, we want to get to a position where we can have those meetings as soon as possible. We just need to work out what the timetable is, given the impact of Covid and certain other moving parts around that.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed. Minister and Mr Larmour, on behalf of the Committee, can I thank you for appearing before us today? We have had a few more technical issues than we have had on previous occasions, so apologies for that, but it has been a very useful session.

I would just close, Minister, if I may, by drawing the key thing. You are clearly focused, as is the Committee and, as we understand, all members of Stormont, on the need to nurture this process and support it where and how we can. We must all remain resolutely focused on delivery to improve the lives of those who live in Northern Ireland, and to not get so hogtied by process, review and all the rest of it where people lose faith in the process. By golly, their faith in the process of devolved governance has taken a very significant knock over the last three years.

I am certainly encouraged, and I hope colleagues on the Committee are as well, by the fact that you appear to be very seized of that challenge to do all you can to ensure that things move forward and that we see proper delivery, of course with the support of Her Majesty's Treasury, which is always useful. Thank you again for attending. Can I thank colleagues for



HOUSE OF COMMONS

their input and contribution?