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Lord Kinnoull
European Union Select Committee
House of Lords
London SW1A 0PW

20 July 2020

Dear Lord Kinnoull,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide evidence to the European Union Select Committee on 28 July. The Government takes seriously the work of the Committee and the importance of Parliamentary scrutiny as we approach the end of the Transition Period.

Ahead of the evidence session, I am writing to provide further detail on the topics you have signalled you intend to raise.

The work of the NIO in relation to business engagement in relation to the Protocol, including the Business Engagement Forum

We know that there is much to do to ensure that businesses and people across Northern Ireland are ready for the end of the year. In recognition of this, we committed to establishing a Business Engagement Forum for Northern Ireland's business representatives to put forward proposals and provide feedback on how to maximise the free flow of trade. This builds upon the extensive and positive engagement with businesses we conducted before and up to the publication of the Command Paper.

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland chaired the first meeting of the Business Engagement Forum on 10 June. This was a welcome opportunity to speak to a range of representative bodies and individual businesses. We have heard loud and

clear the calls from businesses in Northern Ireland for certainty and clarity to be provided as early as possible, and for more technical detail to be set out.

There have been seven meetings of the Business Engagement Forum at official and Ministerial level since we launched the Forum in June, involving attendees representing over 40 businesses and business representative organisations. I provide an overview of these meetings below:

Date	Topic(s)	Lead Government Department(s)	NIO Chair	Stakeholders
10 June	Unfettered Access	HMT/HMRC	Secretary of State	All sectors
10 June	Unfettered Access	HMT/HMRC	Secretary of State	All sectors
17 June	Unfettered Access	HMT/HMRC	Officials	Agrifood
18 June	Unfettered Access	HMT/HMRC	Officials	Manufactured goods
1 July	Unfettered Access	HMT/HMRC	Minister of State Robin Walker	All sectors - SME focus
2 July	Tariffs & 'At Risk' Goods	HMT/HMRC	Secretary of State	All sectors
9 July	Agrifood Controls and Facilitations	Defra	Minister of State Robin Walker	Agrifood

Further meetings of the Business Engagement Forum are planned as we intensify our preparations for the end of the Transition Period, including on topics such as guidance for businesses, the US Free Trade Agreement, common frameworks, immigration, customs and sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) processes, and trader readiness.

Of course, the Business Engagement Forum complements our wider programme of engagement with businesses that encompasses other issues such as economic growth and recovery in light of Covid-19. Supporting Northern Ireland businesses through this unprecedented period of change has been a key priority of the Secretary of State since his appointment. He established a series of working groups across sectors involving local Business Representative Organisations and company CEOs and undertook a programme of engagement during lockdown via Zoom conference

calls with individual company management. This has been hugely beneficial in improving understanding of the direct impact recent events have had and in signposting local companies to the many UKG government initiatives and financial packages aimed at the business sector. Both before and during the period of lockdown, the Secretary of State and I held regular digital meetings with businesses and business representative organisations to discuss the March budget, the Covid response and more recently support for the economic recovery. In recent weeks we have both taken part in a number of visits across different sectors and areas of Northern Ireland and engaged with a wide range of businesses in person.

I have also been working closely with the Northern Ireland Executive, local councils and partners to drive progress on the delivery of City and Growth Deals in Northern Ireland. Prior to the lockdown, I convened a roundtable to bring together representatives from all of Northern Ireland's Deals to establish links, share learning and build momentum in the programme. The Northern Ireland Executive has subsequently match-funded the UK Government's £562m investment in the Deals and I will be re-engaging NI Ministers and stakeholders in the coming weeks to accelerate these projects, and deliver real change for the people of Northern Ireland.

An explanation of the NIO's other work and responsibilities (whether formal or informal) in relation to the Protocol and how the NIO's work on the Protocol interacts with the Cabinet Office and other Government departments with an interest (such as DEFRA and HMRC)

In addition to our extensive programme of stakeholder engagement, the NIO contributes to a cross-Government effort to implement the Protocol, promote the long-term future of Northern Ireland within the UK, and achieve FTAs with the EU and the rest of the world.

We also have a central role in overseeing implementation of Article 2 of the Protocol, which commits the UK Government to ensuring that there will be no diminution of certain rights and equalities protections in Northern Ireland as a result of the UK's withdrawal from the EU.

NIO's interaction with other stakeholders in Northern Ireland in relation to the Protocol, including the Northern Ireland Executive, as well as with the Irish Government.

As well as engaging with the business community and other stakeholders in Northern Ireland, we continue to engage regularly with ministers from the Northern Ireland Executive on a range of matters pertaining to the Protocol and the wider economic recovery. The Secretary of State has, for example, discussed such

matters with the leaders of the five largest political parties in Northern Ireland as recently as last week, in connection to the Government white paper on the UK Internal Market.

We have good relationships with Executive Ministers and we are working constructively, including through the Business Engagement Forum, to which the Executive has a standing invitation.

As well as regular informal contact, the Executive attends meetings of the UK-EU Joint and Specialised Committees when Northern Ireland matters are being discussed and when these are attended by the Irish Government, as well as meetings of the Joint Ministerial Committee (EU Negotiations). This of course complements the ongoing engagement between other UK Government departments and their Northern Ireland Civil Service counterparts.

The role of the Irish Government, our nearest neighbours, is important for political stability in Northern Ireland and we look forward to continuing to work with the new coalition Government. Their part in working with the political parties in Northern Ireland will continue to be invaluable. An approach based on partnership was central to the New Decade, New Approach deal and the restoration of the devolved institutions in January.

I look forward to discussing these matters with you in further detail next week.

Yours ever,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Robin Walker', with a stylized, cursive script.

ROBIN WALKER MP
MINISTER OF STATE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND