



Science and Technology Committee

Rt Hon Shailesh Vara MP
Secretary of State for Northern Ireland
By email only

19 July 2022

Dear Secretary of State,

Earlier this month our Committee visited Belfast, where we met with eminent professors and industry leaders to discuss the roles of technology, research and innovation in driving Northern Ireland's recovery post-covid-19. The visit was chaired by Greg Clark MP, but due to his recent return to Government, we are jointly writing as the other attendees, on behalf of the Committee.

We learnt about many innovation success stories and gained an appreciation of the significant future economic potential which science and technology will help to unlock in Northern Ireland. However, over the duration of our two-day visit, we heard from experts that certain conditions were limiting Northern Ireland from realising this potential. As such, we are writing to seek your reassurances that the following matters are being addressed by the Northern Ireland Office to the extent of your capabilities. Further matters were raised in our [oral evidence session](#) that we do not go into detail on in this letter but which might be of interest to you and your officials.

The Belfast Region City Deal

We heard that the Belfast Region City Deal offers valuable investment in key areas and is an exciting package for stimulating research and development in Northern Ireland. However, the Deal is currently progressing slowly, and is at risk of petering out, due to both bureaucracy and the political deadlock in Northern Ireland's Executive.

1. What reassurances can you offer that the Northern Ireland Office is aware of the risks of this Deal stagnating?
2. What action is your department taking to encourage responsible bodies to maintain momentum on the Deal?



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Levelling-up

Experts we spoke to in Northern Ireland were encouraged by the level of ambition captured in the Levelling Up White Paper, [but shared some concerns](#) about the centralisation of many of the mechanisms designed to deliver on this ambition, such as ARIA. We heard that Northern Ireland has not been included in the R&D Infrastructure Roadmap and that it does not have a catapult.

3. Please could you set out how the Northern Ireland Office was and continues to be consulted in the design of these policy proposals? How will you advocate for the role of Northern Ireland in ongoing discussions?

Skills

[We heard that Northern Ireland loses around 17,000 domestic students each year](#) to universities in Great Britain and many of those individuals do not return to work in Northern Ireland, resulting in a loss of talent in Northern Ireland. In large part, it appeared that this problem was perpetuated by caps on fees and undergraduate university places in Northern Ireland, which has the additional negative effect of underfunding Northern Irish universities relative to their counterparts in other parts of the UK.

The cultivation and growth of Northern Ireland's skill base was repeatedly raised as a priority action by the experts we spoke with. Without such growth in supply, the efforts of Invest NI to bring in Foreign Direct Investment will be stunted by a lack of available skilled workers.

4. How is the Northern Ireland Office addressing the issue of skills supply in Northern Ireland?
5. How are you encouraging Invest NI to further prioritise skills supply in its work?

A key theme running across these concerns was the political deadlock in Northern Ireland. We heard repeatedly that science and technology innovation is being compromised by indecision, and a lack of routes to Ministerial sign-off, especially for



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funding. We know that restoring power sharing in Northern Ireland will be a priority for you and your department.

We would be grateful for your response to these questions by Friday 26 August 2022. As is usual with the Committees' correspondence, we will place this letter and your response in the public domain.

We are copying this letter to Simon Hoare MP, Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee.

With best wishes,

Aaron Bell MP

Members of the Science and Technology participating in the visit

Tracey Crouch MP

Rebecca Long-Bailey MP