

Government Response to the House of Lords Select Committee on the Constitution report *Respect and Cooperation: Building a Stronger Union for the 21st Century*

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Introduction

The UK Government welcomes the Constitution Committee's report published on 20 January 2022, following its inquiry into the future governance of the UK. We are grateful to the Committee for its work, and to all those who provided evidence to it. We share the spirit of optimism written into the Committee's report. This is a time for building for the future, as we emerge from the worst public health emergency in over a century, recognising that recovering from it is not going to be quick or easy. We should, more than ever, be working together and learning from one another to try and achieve the best outcomes for citizens in every part of the UK.

As we have seen throughout the pandemic, through the strength of the United Kingdom we have been able to achieve much more than we could have separately. The Committee recognised this in particular in relation to the UK-wide furlough scheme, financial support to businesses and procurement of vaccines, and we welcome this conclusion. As the Committee noted, the pandemic has exemplified the significance of interactions between devolved and reserved areas of competence. Further to this, there has been significant cooperation at all levels of UK Government and the devolved governments on our response to the situation in Ukraine. This includes extensive collaboration on the design and implementation of the bespoke, uncapped 'Homes for Ukraine' scheme, helping those affected by the conflict to find safe haven in the UK.

We particularly welcome the emphasis the Committee placed on positive intergovernmental working. This spirit of cooperation is at the foundation of the agreed arrangements in the joint review of intergovernmental relations (IGR), published in January of this year, setting out how the UK and devolved administrations will work closely together to deliver for people across the whole of the United Kingdom. As the Committee notes, now is an ideal time to build on a renewed sense of respect and partnership, and we look forward to continuing to implement the agreed IGR arrangements.

As the Committee recognised, the diversity and multiple identities that form the United Kingdom are a clear strength. Devolution in the United Kingdom enables us to make the most of the multitude of talents and identities that make up our country. It means that a wide range of decisions, including those relating to a number of public services, can be taken closer to the communities they affect, while citizens and communities continue to experience the numerous benefits that come with being part of the UK. These include the skills of our great shared institutions like the NHS, the armed forces and civil service, and our ability to tackle the big problems, from defending our borders and fighting the national cyber security threat, to being a world leader in offering the vaccine to all our citizens. We share much common ground in our values and interests, in the institutions we love and rely on, and in the economic and family ties we have.

The UK Government would like to thank the Committee for its observations. Over the course of this publication, we will set out how we are responding to the specific recommendations put forward by the Committee.

Parliamentary Sovereignty

In relation to the Committee's consideration of the concept of parliamentary sovereignty, we agree that this is a fundamental constitutional doctrine. This is reflected in the relationship between Parliament and Government which draws its authority by virtue of its ability to command the confidence of the House of Commons. The view of the electorate on a wide range of areas, including matters relating to the constitution, is expressed at the polling booth and it is for voters to judge the record of their elected representatives. Parliament is the supreme legal authority in the UK responsible for legislating, and within this, it is a recognised principle that no Parliament can legislate to bind the hands of its successor.

Sewel Convention

Recommendation: *We recommend that to increase confidence in the Sewel convention, as well as strengthening interparliamentary scrutiny of intergovernmental relations more generally, the House of Lords should strengthen its scrutiny of bills that engage the Sewel convention as follows:*

(a) On introduction of a bill to the House of Lords which engages the Sewel convention, the Government should submit a memorandum to the House about the devolution implications, explain what engagement has taken place with the relevant devolved administrations.

(b) In our scrutiny of the bill, the Committee will take into account the Government's memorandum, progress in securing legislative consent and any further evidence or materials, including the view of a committee of a relevant devolved legislature, we consider necessary. As the Committee has done previously, we may occasionally advise the House on the wisdom of proceeding with a bill in the absence of legislative consent. Depending on the timing of each devolved legislature's consideration of a legislative consent memorandum and motion, including the possibility of amendments requiring the consideration of supplementary memorandums and motions, we might have to issue a report at a later stage.

(c) The Procedure and Privileges Committee should consider if a devolved legislature's consent, or lack of consent, should receive greater prominence in House of Lords Business by tagging this, once notified to the House, against each stage of the Bill's consideration by the House.

At present when the Government considers consent is not required from a devolved legislature and proceed to give effect to that view, there is no parliamentary scrutiny of this determination. In future we recommend that the Government should justify its approach to the House at the beginning of a Bill's consideration. This could form part of the statement we have recommended above.

Government Response

The Sewel Convention continues to deliver positive outcomes for both the UK and devolved governments. In the legislative session of Parliament that has recently concluded, 28 Legislative Consent Motions (LCMs) were collectively passed by the devolved legislatures across 18 Acts, all on the recommendations of their respective administrations. This includes LCMs for key bills including the Advanced Research and Invention Agency (ARIA) Act 2022, the Environment Act 2021, the Health and Care Act 2022, the Public Services Pensions and Judicial Offices Act 2022, and the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts (PCSC) Act 2022. These positive outcomes have been underpinned by strong working relationships between UK government and devolved government counterparts.

The Government sets out its understanding of the territorial extent of a bill when it is introduced to Parliament, as part of the bill's explanatory notes. This generally includes a dedicated chapter explaining our reasoning on the bill's territorial extent, as well as a clause-by-clause summary of where we consider the legislative consent process is engaged.

We are engaging in discussions with devolved counterparts on principles for future working on legislation, including our approach to engagement on legislative consent. We will carefully consider the Committee's recommendations in the context of this work.

Recommendation: We recommend that the changes we propose to the operation of the Sewel convention should be reflected in an updated version of the Cabinet Manual and the Guide to Making Legislation. In the meantime, as the Devolution Guidance Notes do not reflect the current devolution arrangements, they should be updated as a priority.

Government Response

The Government is currently updating the Cabinet Manual and the intention is to publish a revised draft of the Cabinet Manual within this Parliament and we will keep Parliament updated as this work progresses. We will also consider the Devolution Guidance Notes alongside this. The process regarding legislative consent is set out in the Guide to Making Legislation, which will also be updated accordingly.

Intergovernmental Relations

Recommendation: *We believe the Prime Minister has a critical role to play in making the new intergovernmental structures a success and maintaining strong relationships between the four administrations. Given its importance to the working of the Union, we recommend the Prime Minister and Heads of Devolved Governments Council should meet at least twice each year.*

Government Response

The UK Government agrees with the Committee's comments that the Prime Minister's role is critical to the success of the new structures. As Minister for the Union, the Prime Minister works to ensure that all of government is working on behalf of the United Kingdom. In response to their recommendation, we note that the Intergovernmental Relations Review assures a meeting of the Prime Minister and Heads of Devolved Governments Council at least annually, but does not preclude the Prime Minister-led Council meeting more often, nor the Prime Minister and First Ministers meeting outside the formal IGR system as they did four times in 2021.

Recommendation: *Facilitating better and more joined-up data sets from the nations and regions of the United Kingdom will facilitate shared learning and properly informed and more effective decision making, building on the strength of existing data in Scotland and Wales. To this end we welcome the agreement in the Concordat on Statistics between the UK Government and devolved administrations. We recommend, however, that the Government prioritise the development of more robust data for the English regions. Such data is central to achieving the Government's Levelling Up agenda.*

Government Response

The UK Government agrees with the importance the Committee places on coherent data from across the UK. Collecting and analysing data that is comparable UK-wide allows us to share evidence and learning with each other, to support better outcomes for citizens across the whole of the UK. Like the Committee, we welcome the new Concordat on Statistics and the commitment of each administration to work together towards a more coherent statistical picture across the UK (while recognising that the policy context will not always be identical).

The UK Government also recognises the importance of robust subnational data. In December 2021 the Government Statistical Service published its subnational data strategy, which sets out how the Office for National Statistics, the UK Government, public bodies and the devolved governments can develop and publish the important local area statistics that all levels of government need to measure the progress of their policies. Local-level data is particularly useful to identify disparities and differences within wider geographical areas, not just in England, but across the United Kingdom.

In addition, the Levelling Up White Paper set out plans for the UK Government to establish a new Spatial Data Unit within the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, to drive forward the data transformation required in central government. The Spatial Data Unit will support the delivery of levelling up by transforming the way the UK Government gathers, stores and uses both regional, national and UK-wide data so that it underpins transparent and open policy making, and delivery decisions. This will include improving how we collate and

report on UK Government spend and outcomes, including building strong capabilities on data visualisation and insights.

The National Statistician and the UK Statistics Authority will work with National Records Scotland and the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency on the census in future years. Work will also continue to ensure robust population estimates for the UK to account for the difference in timings between when census was held in England, Wales and Northern Ireland in 2021 and Scotland in 2022.

Recommendation: *While we welcome the Government's commitment to publish quarterly and annual reports on intergovernmental engagement, we recommend that these documents should provide greater detail about (a) the work commissioned, (b) actions agreed or decisions taken, and (c) outcomes. Without such information, it will be difficult for Parliament adequately to assess the effectiveness of the Government's engagement.*

Government Response

The UK Government shares the Committee's desire for ever-better transparency. The 2021 Annual Report highlights that there were over 440 intergovernmental ministerial meetings last year. In the first two quarters of this year there have been 167 meetings between UK Government and the devolved ministers from January to June 2022, as published in our Quarter 1 and Quarter 2 2022 Transparency Reports. As part of this, the Secretaries of State for Levelling Up, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales maintain regular engagement with First Ministers and the devolved governments. This combined activity demonstrates the UK Government's clear and enduring commitment to delivering for all parts of the United Kingdom.

We share the Committee's ambition for informative and detailed reports, and we will continue to evolve the regular transparency reports to allow more pertinent scrutiny and public engagement; and look forward to these documents being supplemented by regular communiques from the new Interministerial Groups.

Recommendation: *Similarly, while the more regular meetings between the Prime Minister and other UK ministers with the First Ministers and Deputy First Minister of the devolved administrations is welcome, we recommend that the communiques issued following those meetings be more detailed and informative than at present.*

Government Response

The UK Government is keen to enhance the transparency of intergovernmental engagement, including through the publication of communiques that are jointly agreed by all four governments. The UK government will continue seeking to agree informative communiques across all tiers of the new system.

Recommendation: *We recommend the Government enters into a formal agreement with the House of Lords on the information it will provide about its intergovernmental engagements, to enhance the current scrutiny arrangements. This agreement should formalise the information already provided by the Government and, in the same manner as the agreements between the Scottish and Welsh administrations and legislatures, should include the advance notification of formal intergovernmental meetings to the House, as well as greater detail about those meetings as we have recommended. The agreement should also include a commitment to provide the proposed memorandum we recommended to strengthen the House's consideration of legislative consent issues.*

Government Response

The UK Government is keen to enhance the transparency of intergovernmental working and welcomes scrutiny from both Houses and the public. The UK Government will continue to reflect on the arrangements as proposed by the Committee

***Recommendation:** The House of Lords takes a keen interest in the United Kingdom's devolution arrangements. We therefore recommend the Government should make time available in the House to hold a debate on its annual report on intergovernmental relations.*

Government Response

The UK Government published its annual report in March and warmly welcomes constructive discussion regarding intergovernmental relations.

Interparliamentary Relations

Recommendation: *We note that UK Government ministers have been willing to appear before committees of the devolved legislatures, which is welcome, but we recommend this should become formalised in the UK Ministerial Code by including in it an expectation that this will occur, where appropriate.*

Government Response

The Government will consider this recommendation for the next version of the Ministerial Code but as the Committee has recognised, Ministers of the UK Government have readily appeared before committees of the devolved legislatures and will continue to do so, recognising the importance of those legislatures and their legitimate interest in the views of the UK Government. Given this existing practice, we do not think that it is necessary to revise the Ministerial Code. Ministers of the UK Government are accountable to the UK Parliament.

Recommendation: *We recommend that the UK Government and devolved administrations should undertake to engage with the new inter parliamentary forum.*

As the Committee notes, in recent years inter parliamentary dialogue across the United Kingdom has been strengthened through the workings of new structures such as the Interparliamentary Forum on Brexit. Since the Forum was established in 2017, bringing together Committee Chairs, and Convenors from a range of Committees in both Houses of the UK Parliament (building on the strong tradition of bicameral working) and from the Scottish Parliament and the then National Assembly for Wales, UK Government has engaged in constructive dialogue with the Forum which has led to enhanced scrutiny of cross-cutting issues.

The UK Government shall observe with interest the work of the relevant Committees from each of the legislative bodies. The first meeting of the Interparliamentary Forum, the successor to the Interparliamentary Forum on Brexit, was held in February 2022. This meeting was attended by the then Minister for Levelling Up, The Union and Constitution who held discussions with its attendees.

The Governance of England

Recommendation: *Effective joint working between Government departments, particularly the Treasury, and local government will be key to the effective delivery of the Levelling Up agenda, including the expansion of devolution across England. To this end, we believe the Local Government Association’s proposal to establish an English devolution task force to facilitate discussion between central and local government has considerable merit. We recommend that the Government explore further with local government how this might work in practice.*

Government Response

While the UK Government does not intend to establish an English devolution task force between central and local government, it has embarked on a process of sustained and systematic engagement and consultation with a wide range of stakeholders on the Levelling Up White Paper which was published in February. This engagement will be ongoing. In addition, the White Paper committed to working with mayors and local leaders in the shaping of local growth strategy.

Following the publication of the White Paper there was a comprehensive period of engagement across the UK in which the Secretary of State, ministers and senior officials have been to all parts of the UK to discuss the implementation of the Levelling Up White Paper in each area. This is ongoing and is being used to inform future levelling up policy and delivery in the spirit of co-creation and co-delivery.

In addition, the external Levelling Up Advisory Council will advise on and support major themes of the White Paper, reporting on the progress against missions including devolution. There will also be expert advisory groups run as sub-groups of the committee. The Government is currently exploring some of the specific themes they could cover.

Recommendation: *The current deals-based approach to devolution is not sufficiently ambitious. We recommend the Government develops a principled devolution framework, in co-operation with the Local Government Association and devolved authorities, to provide a clear baseline for further devolution of powers within England. This should allow devolved authorities to choose which powers they are capable of delivering and wish to adopt, and which should remain at the centre.*

Government Response

The Levelling Up White Paper set out that the UK’s centralised governance model means local actors have too rarely been empowered to design and deliver policies necessary to drive growth. A number of responses to the Scottish Government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities’ (COSLA) joint Local Governance Review from councils in Scotland argued for greater empowerment,¹ while the Welsh Local Government Association has also made the case for greater freedoms for local authorities in Wales.² In England, the Local Government Association has asked for a clearer and more transparent framework to give all areas more freedom to access devolution deals.

¹ Local Government and Communities Directorate. [Local governance review: joint statement](#). 2021

² WLGA. [A Manifesto for Localism](#). 2021

The Levelling Up White Paper sets out, for the first time, a devolution framework for England. It provides a roadmap for places in England that wish to unlock the benefits of devolution, whether that is moving towards a London-style transport system to connect people to opportunity, improving local skills provision, or being able to act more flexibly and innovatively to respond to local need. The framework will help to drive progress towards our mission to achieve full devolution in England by 2030.

There is no one size fits all approach to devolution, and in England areas will want to choose the right model for themselves. However, while the framework is flexible, it does place a strong emphasis on the importance of high profile, directly elected local leadership, strong local governance, and joint working across sensible and coherent economic geographies. The framework indicates where places with stronger governance models will be able to access more powers. The powers described in the framework are not a guaranteed, minimum offer.

The framework will also develop over time. The Greater Manchester and West Midlands 'trailblazer deals' will act as the blueprint for other Mayoral Combined Authorities (MCAs) and the Greater London Authority (GLA) to follow. Trailblazer deals will enable local leaders to present the case for the devolution of strategic functions and decision-making powers including exploring options to streamline the funding landscape for MCAs. Local leaders will get any further autonomy in exchange for demonstrating greater accountability and performance. We look forward to working with other areas soon: the White Paper invited other MCAs and the GLA to bid for further powers, through the new devolution framework.

Recommendation: *We recommend that to facilitate further devolution to devolved authorities in England the Government should provide them with adequate resources and support to build the necessary capacity to exercise additional powers, as well as the capability to deliver them. This will be critical to the successful extension of devolution within England to the counties.*

Government Response

We agree that it is crucial that devolved authorities have adequate resources and that is why we provide MCAs with both a mayoral capacity fund and the ability to raise funds through a mayoral precept. Spending Review 2021 provided local authorities with a 3% average annual real term increase in their core spending power over the next 3 years to 2024-25. This sustained real term increase in core funding gives local authorities the certainty to plan over the long term with the largest sustained rise in core funding in more than a decade.

Recommendation: *The devolution framework should include steps to achieve greater coherence in England's sub-national governance arrangements to improve democratic accountability. We recommend the development of devolution within England should ensure greater alignment between subnational bodies to create functioning economic geographies which also respect local identities, in so far as possible.*

Government Response

As set out in the Levelling Up White Paper, future devolution deals in England should be agreed over a sensible functional economic area and/or a whole county geography, with a single institution in place across that geographic footprint. There may be scope to consider

public sector boundaries on a case-by-case basis, when requested, to support devolution. For instance, the UK Government will take steps to remove barriers to combined authority mayors taking on public safety functions. Where there are existing or planned mayoral combined authorities with coterminous boundaries to Police and Crime Commissioners and Fire and Rescue Authorities, the UK Government will look to transfer these functions to the Mayor. For remaining MCAs, resolution to any challenges will be sought, including exploring aligning boundaries.

Whitehall

Recommendation: *We recommend that a greater understanding of the Union should become part of every Government department's DNA but acknowledge this will take time to achieve. In the meantime, there needs to be strong political and civil service leadership of what should be regarded as a major change programme across Whitehall.*

Government Response

The UK Government agrees that an understanding of devolution and the Union should be core to all UK Government departments. There is ongoing work taking place across government in support of this, with a number of these changes building on recommendations made by Lord Dunlop in his review of UK Government Union Capability.

As noted in the Committee's report, the Union Strategy Committee, chaired by the Prime Minister and supported by the Union Policy Implementation Committee, chaired by the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and the Minister for Intergovernmental Relations are key committees focusing on ensuring that the Union is at the heart of UK Government decision making.

As recommended in Lord Dunlop's Review of UK Government Union Capability, each UK Government department now has a nominated non-executive director with responsibility for the Union, with these non-executive directors supported by the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities.

In addition, the UK Government is committed to making the civil service representative of all communities across the UK. We have committed to move 22,000 Civil Service roles from London and the South-east to communities across the UK by 2030, including to UK Government Hubs in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Commitments and locations were published in the Levelling Up White Paper, with over 15,000 roles committed to move by 2025.

We also have an ambitious programme to increase the devolution capability of civil servants across the UK, delivered in collaboration with devolved governments and UK Government Departments. Our work also includes a commitment to increase meaningful intergovernmental loans and secondments to improve intergovernmental working and UK-wide delivery, which is reflected in the Government Statement of Reform.

We will continue to work to support all UK Government departments and their civil servants to have a good understanding of devolution and the Union.

Funding Arrangements

Recommendation: *While greater fiscal devolution can increase the accountability of the devolved administrations to their electorates, it presents risks to devolved budgets as well as opportunities. As fiscal devolution develops and the funding of the devolved administrations becomes less reliant on the block grants, we recommend the Government examine how the funding arrangements could more effectively address relative needs in the nations and regions. A key purpose of the continuing social union requires the pooling and sharing of resources across the whole United Kingdom.*

Government Response

The UK Government is committed to working with the devolved governments to operationalise all agreed devolved powers, including over taxation. As set out in the Statement of Funding Policy, the funding arrangements continue to ensure that risks and resources are pooled and shared across the UK. In particular, the operation of the Barnett formula is now supplemented by agreed arrangements in relation to tax and welfare devolution, with Fiscal Frameworks in Scotland and Wales plus updated arrangements in Northern Ireland. Sharing resources fairly and allocating risks appropriately within the UK's overall macro-economic and fiscal framework is an important part of the UK Government's commitment to support all parts of the UK, while respecting the different devolution settlements.

Recommendation: *Over recent years a multiplicity of funding initiatives to which local government is invited to bid has emerged. This occupies a disproportionate amount of local government capacity. We recommend the Government rationalises the funding pots available to local government by introducing a framework of multi-year single-pot funds, which would facilitate long term planning aligned with local needs and allow for local government resources to be re-focussed on exercising devolved powers.*

Government Response

The UK Government agrees that securing better outcomes in places relies on effective central coordination of place-based policies. Multiple competitive pots of local growth funding have emerged in the last decade, leaving local actors to join up programmes and policies themselves.

Initial steps have been taken to address this complexity in the funding landscape. For example, the Levelling Up Fund provides cross-departmental capital investment in local infrastructure. The UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) launched in April will provide resource focused investment to support people, boost pride in place and strengthen communities.

But there is more that could be done. As outlined in the Levelling Up White Paper, to deliver a more transparent, simple and accountable approach, the UK Government will set out a plan for streamlining the funding landscape this year which will include a commitment to help local stakeholders navigate funding opportunities.

This review will be guided by the following principles:

- a. reducing the unnecessary proliferation of individual funding pots with varied delivery approaches;
- b. streamlining bidding, and supporting greater alignment between revenue and capital sources;

- c. ensuring places have robust ongoing monitoring and evaluation plans for the impact and delivery of investments and spending; and
- d. tailoring investment and delivery to the local institutional landscape of each nation of the UK.

In Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, where local partners also need to consider funds led by devolved governments, effective collaboration on UK-wide policies is important to maximise impact and minimise complexity. We will also continue to share lessons from efforts to streamline funding in England with devolved administrations.

Recommendation: *Meaningful and thriving devolution within England will not be achieved if devolved authorities are not granted the financial means to exercise their powers effectively. We recommend the Government introduces greater fiscal devolution to devolved authorities, which will require the Treasury to relinquish a degree of control over taxation. As with the Barnett formula, there will continue to be a key role for the redistribution of resources by central government to ensure that existing regional inequalities are not exacerbated, and that future geographic inequalities are addressed, in the interests of the Union more generally. Central government's continued role in redistributing resources should not be used as a vehicle to impose its own policy preferences on English devolved authorities in areas that can be devolved.*

Government Response

Local authorities' main sources of revenue, aside from government grants, are Council Tax and Business Rates. They have several additional revenue raising powers, and some powers to provide tax relief. The UK Government's Levelling Up White Paper outlines plans to extend this to allow councils to charge up to double the standard council tax rate on any home left empty for longer than a year, rather than two. This will empower local leaders to encourage more empty homes back into productive use, while raising additional revenue to invest back into local communities.

The Greater London Authority and most existing Mayoral Combined Authorities have fiscal powers including the power to charge a mayoral council tax supplement and they and local authorities can levy a business rates supplement. The Levelling Up White Paper commits to explore with Combined Authorities further flexibilities to enable them to raise their own funding through the business rates system to fund local economic development.

Recommendation: *The Government's lack of engagement with the devolved administrations on the overall design of the Shared Prosperity Fund is unhelpful and has undermined trust. To rebuild trust and partnership, we recommend the devolved administrations and devolved authorities should have a more constructive role in the governance of the Shared Prosperity Fund. This should include decisions about local priorities and the allocation of funding. Developing trust and partnership in this process will be a test of the UK Government's willingness to foster a Union based on mutual respect and partnership.*

Government Response

The UK government's priority is to deliver effective investment in all parts of the UK, to maximise benefits for citizens. Delivering effectively for people and communities is a goal we know we share with devolved governments. We want to work with the grain of devolved

administration activity and deliver better outcomes for communities across the UK in partnership with them wherever possible.

The UK Government remains committed to working with the devolved governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in the implementation of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund.

The UK Government has continued to engage the devolved governments at both a ministerial and official level ahead of the publication of the prospectus on 14 April. We are also working with local government associations and local partners to make the Fund is a success across the UK.

We plan to continue this engagement. We want to work with the Scottish and Welsh governments and the Northern Ireland Executive, including being part of a UK-wide ministerial forum, to work with their strategic geographies on the development of investment plans and to attend local partnership groups in a full way.

Conclusion

The UK Government would like to reiterate its gratitude to the Constitution Committee for their report on the future governance of the UK.

We have faced some extraordinary challenges in recent years, and we are striving to emerge from them in a way that allows our United Kingdom to flourish. Whether that be through: seizing the opportunities Brexit has afforded us; keeping our citizens and communities safe or building back better from the Covid-19 pandemic via the Government's Levelling Up agenda, an ambitious vision to improve living standards and increase opportunity in all parts of the UK.

We firmly share the Committee's belief that now is an ideal time to focus on how we can continue to revitalise the Union and deliver for citizens across the United Kingdom. A strong, healthy Union is at the heart of the UK Government's thinking, and will always be. We will continue to work to strengthen the Union, to ensure the institutions of the United Kingdom are used in a way that benefits people in every part of our country.