



Northern
Ireland
Office

Secretary of State for Northern Ireland

1 Horse Guards Road
London
SW1 2HQ
T 020 7210 0236
T 0207 210 6464

Stormont House
Belfast
BT4 3SH

Email: SoS.Lewis@nio.gov.uk
www.gov.uk/nio

Follow us on Twitter @NIOgov

Simon Hoare MP
Chair
Northern Ireland Affairs Committee
Committee Office
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

20 March 2020

Dear Simon,

Thank you for your letter of 3 February, sent to my predecessor, requesting updates on matters raised by the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee (NIAC) in the last Parliament. I will respond to each of these in turn, and then address the letter you sent to the Prime Minister on 4 February, which was transferred to my department. May I also take this opportunity to belatedly congratulate you on your re-appointment as NIAC Chair.

Committee report: Health Funding in Northern Ireland

I welcome this report, which usefully highlighted the issues facing the health and social care service in Northern Ireland. I will reply to you in a separate letter, providing more detailed responses to the recommendations made by the Committee for the UK Government.

Compatibility of the Northern Ireland Protocol with the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement

The Withdrawal Agreement means that the UK was able to leave the EU as one United Kingdom. The Protocol on Northern Ireland and Ireland ("the Protocol") upholds three strands of the Belfast ("Good Friday") Agreement. The recitals to the Protocol affirm that the Agreement, in all its parts, should be protected and they commit the Government to fostering east-west and north-south cooperation across the political, economic, security, social and agricultural spectrums.

Individuals' entitlement to a UK passport where the individual was born in the Republic of Ireland but is resident in Northern Ireland

My officials have discussed this matter with Home Office. The Home Office advised that any person born before 1949 was born at a time when Ireland was not a fully independent country. Therefore, they had the ability to retain British subject status, with the entitlement to register as a British citizen, if they so desired. However, any person born after 1949 would have been born in an overseas country, and thus would not automatically qualify for British citizenship, although they would enjoy more favourable provisions for naturalisation.

Compensation for UK victims of Gaddafi-sponsored terrorism

Mr Shawcross is currently carrying out a Scoping Exercise, focusing on investigating the feasibility of calculating the precise number of people affected and the amount of compensation due to them from the Libyan Government. My predecessor met with Mr Shawcross, and my officials remain in contact with his team.

Welfare mitigations in Northern Ireland (including the continuation of the free TV licence for the over-75s)

The New Decade, New Approach agreement included a commitment to extend welfare mitigations beyond March 2020. On 3 February, the NI Communities Minister announced that the Executive has backed this extension, and will table Assembly legislation.

The Government was disappointed with the BBC's decision to restrict the over 75 licence fee concession to only those in receipt of pension credit. We recognise the value of free TV licences for over-75s and believe they should be funded by the BBC. The BBC is responsible for the future of the concession from June 2020: it has set out plans to provide a 'Pay As You Go' payment scheme designed specifically for people aged over 75 who are moving from a free to a paid licence. The government will also shortly lay secondary legislation to turn the trial of the Simple Payment Plan into a permanent feature. This Plan is open to vulnerable people who may struggle to pay the licence fee, including those over 75, and it allows customers to spread out payments for their TV licence more evenly.

The status, under the Withdrawal Agreement, of fish landed in Northern Irish vessels in ports in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland

From 1st January 2021 the UK, as a whole, will be outside the Single Market and Customs Union. We will be in control of our own trade and our own laws. This also means that the UK will be a third country to the EU. Whilst the Northern Ireland Protocol enables NI-registered vessels to land in the Republic of Ireland exempt from tariffs, other UK-registered vessels would be required to pay the EU's Common External Tariff unless agreed otherwise in negotiations during the transition period.

When the first payments for victims of Historical Institutional Abuse will be received

The NI political parties have committed to prioritising the HIA redress scheme, agreeing to press on with the implementation of the scheme and to make payments as early as possible. The Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) has advised that the

application process is scheduled to open at the end of March 2020. Following this, the Redress Board panels will be available to sit from the end of April, with the first approved redress payments to victims to follow shortly thereafter.

I greatly appreciate your taking the time to share your wider thoughts on Northern Ireland at this crucial juncture. You are absolutely right that, although the political landscape is much improved thanks to the restoration of the Executive, we must remain alert to ongoing challenges and sensitivities.

The UK Government commitments to our veterans are key priorities for me. The Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioner will be an advocating voice on matters such as housing, education and health, while a review of the Aftercare Service will consider veterans' welfare provision. However, I also take on board your point regarding nationalist scepticism of Conservative motives in the veterans space and I will be working with Ministerial colleagues to ensure that any proposals are balanced, proportionate and fair.

I note your comment in relation to the Migration Advisory Committee's (MAC) recommendation that the threshold for skilled workers to migrate to the UK be lowered from £30,000. As you will now know the government has confirmed that it will accept the MAC's recommendation to lower the salary threshold for skilled workers to £25,600. The government's intention is to introduce a points-based immigration system that works in the interests of the whole of the United Kingdom, including Northern Ireland. The new immigration system will operate from 2021.

I agree that the agricultural and hospitality sectors in Northern Ireland will benefit from this amended policy. Tourism especially is a dynamic and rapidly expanding sector which makes a substantial contribution to growth and prosperity, and so it is very important that the manpower is there to continue driving it forward. My officials are working with departments across Whitehall to ensure that tourism in Northern Ireland benefits from UK-wide marketing initiatives, such as the GREAT campaign.

I would of course be happy to meet with you, when events permit, to discuss the above matters, as well as the role of NIAC.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Brandon', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

RT HON BRANDON LEWIS CBE MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND