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NIAC ORAL EVIDENCE SESSION 25 NOVEMBER 2020

Dear Simon,

Thank you for the invitation to attend the Oral Evidence Session of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee on 25 November 2020. I hope that the Committee found this useful and informative.

Since I gave evidence before the Committee, a UK-EU Trade and Cooperation Agreement has been agreed and ratified. The agreement delivers a comprehensive package of capabilities that will ensure we can work with counterparts across Europe to tackle serious crime and terrorism – protecting the public and bringing criminals to justice.

During the course of the session, you asked for figures in relation to recruitment of extra Border Force personnel and customs officials, including how many of those newly recruited had completed training.

As part of preparations for the end of the transition period, Border Force and HMRC built up additional resources as needed, and continue to do so for ongoing requirements. In addition to approximately 900 officers recruited prior to financial year 20/21, UK Border Force have recruited over 1000 additional staff UK - wide,

which will reach 2000 by July 2021. Around 670 of these were specifically required for the end of the Transition Period. HMRC staff numbers are expected to reach c. 8500 by the end of January 2021 and they had in place the required resources at the end of the year to meet additional requirements, including port related activity. The resources are meeting the anticipated overall operational requirements for Northern Ireland.

The member for Scarborough and Whitby, Robert Goodwill also asked how a reliance on the 1959 Convention on Mutual Legal Assistance would impact the speed that DBS checks could be undertaken. The EU Trade and Cooperation Agreement includes arrangements that will simplify and speed up cooperation with EU Member States on mutual legal assistance, building on the relevant Council of Europe Conventions.

We have also agreed new arrangements for the exchange of criminal records, using shared technical infrastructure allowing us to exchange data in a fast and secure way. This includes the exchange criminal records information for vetting purposes, meaning Northern Ireland can continue with DBS checks as they have done previously.

We have always maintained that if there had been no further agreement reached on law enforcement and criminal justice, there would be some mutual loss of capability for the UK and EU Member States. I am glad that the agreement we have reached protects this in important areas such as these.

I trust you will find this update beneficial, however should the Committee have any further questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Your sincerely,

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

ROBIN WALKER MP
MINISTER OF STATE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND