



The Lord Carlile of Berriew CBE KC

Chair, Northern Ireland Scrutiny Committee
House of Lords
London, SW1A 0PW

By email:

hlniscrutiny@parliament.uk

21 July 2025

Dear Alex,

FOLLOW-UP ON EVIDENCE SESSION OF 25 JUNE 2025

Thank you for your invitation for us to appear before the Committee to provide evidence, including in relation to your current inquiry on *Strengthening Northern Ireland's voice in the context of the Windsor Framework*. It was a pleasure doing so and we were glad to explore the issues with the Committee. We were also grateful to hear about some of the challenges that have been raised with you and your colleagues.

We are now following up with you on a number of issues discussed in the course of the session, noting also your correspondence of 25 June regarding the Independent Review of the Windsor Framework and that from Baroness Ritchie of 24 June concerning energy labelling.

Independent Review of the Windsor Framework

We note the Committee's interest in the forthcoming report of the Independent Review of the Windsor Framework being conducted by the Lord Murphy of Torfaen. Lord Murphy has now discharged his obligation to submit the final report of his review to the Government within six months of the review being commissioned, ending on 9 July, which is set out in domestic law and the Terms of Reference for the Independent Review.

In accordance with these commitments, we can confirm that the Government is now proceeding to arrange the publication of Lord Murphy's report. This includes laying the report before Parliament and making similar arrangements with the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Having only very recently received the final report, the Government has not yet determined the timing for responding to it. The duty to complete this within six months is separate, and the law also provides for this. As your letter notes, we would expect this to properly account for relevant representations made in Parliament or the Assembly. We also would note that the Assembly has now risen for its recess until 31 August.

Structures for engagement

We note the Committee's interest in a document setting out the different channels that serve to engage external stakeholders under the Windsor Framework. There are a range of routes for stakeholders to rely upon, depending on the issue at hand, and these routes are summarised in the attached.

We would note that these structures in many cases have been designed with the particular needs of groups of stakeholders in mind, to enable productive discussion with the Government and the European Union, as relevant. Whilst we hope the attached goes some way to explain the purpose of the individual groups, we would also note that these are not as generous in number as sometimes suggested. We would also emphasise that there are further channels for businesses and members of the public to express their views on as regards to particular regulations or matters of policy, such as consultations launched by the Government, the NI Assembly, and the EU.

We would welcome ideas about how these arrangements could be made to work better, and value the suggestions that we receive from a broad range of stakeholders.

Guidance and support for businesses

We recognise that the existing avenues of support available for businesses was a point of keen interest in the evidence session, including in relation to the recent report of the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB). In the course of discussion, we touched upon the Government's online repository of guidance relating to the Windsor Framework. This is linked below and covers key areas such as trade support; customs, VAT, excise; manufactured goods; agri-food and drink; environmental standards; and medicines and healthcare:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/moving-goods-into-out-of-or-through-northern-ireland>

Given the broad-ranging provisions of the Windsor Framework, it is proper that specific advice and sectoral guidance continues to be provided directly by the relevant Department or regulator. The document collection on GOV.UK covers this guidance and was most recently updated last month to reflect the Government's approach to ensuring the continued supply of Veterinary Medicines to Northern Ireland.

The FSB's report also mentions the importance of the Trader Support Service and its usability and clarity going forward. Businesses continue to make use of that service and the Northern Ireland Customs & Trade Academy (NICTA), a digital educational platform that it operates. This provides comprehensive guidance on moving goods into and out of Northern Ireland, free access to previous webinars and a wide range of fact sheets and videos. In February of this year, HMRC published the procurement opportunity for the next phase of the TSS so that traders are provided ongoing support from 2026 and we will account for the views of stakeholders in the approach we take moving forward.

Energy labelling

You raised the arrangements for the labelling of certain electrical white goods such as tumble dryers and what this might mean for products traded across the United Kingdom. These arrangements are given effect in Northern Ireland through domestic law under the [Ecodesign for Energy-Related Products and Energy Information \(Amendment\) \(Northern Ireland\) Regulations 2025](#), which were recently approved by Parliament.

These arrangements reflect changes to the EU's approach to ensuring the efficiency of this category of products, and we can confirm that the Government is also looking to achieve higher standards of energy efficiency across the whole of the UK. We intend to consult on the merits of mirroring these regulations across the rest of the UK, reflecting our commitment to protecting the UK internal market. This consultation process will start with tumble dryers, and we would be happy for our officials to inform the Committee when that consultation has commenced should that be of interest.

We should note that, in any case, the EU's higher standards are likely to become the industry default. It is therefore likely that manufacturers will regardless choose to meet those standards as they are accepted across the whole of the UK.

Next steps

We would be pleased to be in touch on the forthcoming publication of the report from the Independent Review of the Windsor Framework, noting your Committee's keen interest in these matters, and similarly look forward to hearing the Committee's own findings.

The Government will also continue to engage with parliamentary committees in line with its scrutiny commitments, including as we take forward the work following the UK/EU Summit. We discussed the Committee's interest in a number of these matters. With this in mind, we would like to take this opportunity to clarify the record with regard to the dispute resolution mechanism that will apply through the new arrangements. As mentioned, where a dispute involves a question on the meaning of European law, that question will be referred to the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU). CJEU rulings on specific questions of EU law will be binding on the independent arbitration panel but the panel will rule on the dispute itself. This arrangement has some comparisons to those which apply under the Windsor Framework.

Please once again accept our thanks for taking the time to engage with us jointly on these issues last month. We would be grateful if this letter could be passed to Members of the Committee in response to the questions raised in the session. We are copying this letter to Lord Ricketts, Chair of the European Affairs Committee, Tonia Antoniazzi MP, Chair of the Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, and Ciara Ferguson MLA, Chair of the Northern Ireland Assembly Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'H. Benn'.

**RT HON HILARY BENN MP
SECRETARY OF STATE
FOR NORTHERN IRELAND**

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'N. Thomas-Symonds'.

**RT HON NICK THOMAS-SYMONDS MP
MINISTER FOR THE CABINET OFFICE
HIS MAJESTY'S PAYMASTER GENERAL**

Channels for engagement on the Windsor Framework & Northern Ireland's trading arrangements

<u>Name</u>	<u>Purpose</u>
<i>Windsor Framework-related engagement structures</i>	
Independent Monitoring Panel	The Panel oversees the performance of the UK 'Internal Market Guarantee' and conducts its own stakeholder engagement directly to support this work.
Veterinary Medicines Working Group	The Group advises the Government on the flexibilities that are needed by farmers, industry and animal owners to support the supply of veterinary medicines to Northern Ireland.
Horticulture Working Group	The Group facilitates work with industry and other representatives on specific supply concerns and wider sector issues.
Independent Review of the Windsor Framework	The Review's purpose is to provide the Government with a report of its conclusions on the functioning of the Windsor Framework arrangements and its implications on social, economic and political life in Northern Ireland.
Specialist departmental engagement	Government departments implementing the Windsor Framework conduct a broad range of sectoral engagement. For example, HMRC undertook regular engagement with freight and fast parcels operators ahead of the 1 May switch-on, also leveraging the Joint Customs Consultative Committee; and Defra engages with a range of supermarkets and agri-food stakeholders on a weekly basis.
UK/EU Joint Engagement	The co-chairs of the Windsor Framework's Specialised Committee conduct joint engagement with a broad range of business and civic stakeholders ahead of each meeting. It is also a matter for the co-chairs of the political-level Withdrawal Agreement Joint Committee to conduct periodic engagement with stakeholders, which they intend to do jointly in due course.
<i>Other vehicles for engagement and consultation</i>	
Northern Ireland Assembly - Citizen Space website	The Assembly's 'Citizen Space' portal enables individuals and businesses to feed into the Assembly's scrutiny of particular EU regulations, where the Democratic Scrutiny Committee is undertaking an inquiry.
Government consultations	The Government routinely consults on a range of domestic and trade policy initiatives of relevance, such as with the recent launch of HSE's consultation on Chemicals Legislative Reform .
European Commission - Have your Say	The European Commission's own Have your Say portal allows individuals and businesses to share their views on new EU policy proposals and existing laws. Submissions are accepted from Northern Ireland stakeholders and private individuals.
UK Domestic Advisory Group ('DAG')	The DAG is a consultative body which enables the UK Government to hear periodically from those most affected by the operation of the UK-EU Trade and Cooperation Agreement, across the United Kingdom as a whole.
InterTrade UK	InterTrade UK promotes trade opportunities across the United Kingdom as a whole. It conducts its own stakeholder engagement directly to support its work.
East-West Council	The East-West Council advises on shared challenges and opportunities with an East-West dimension. It can bring together representatives from government, business, education, trade, transport, and culture sectors.

