Rt Hon Julian Smith MP
Secretary of State for Northern Ireland

Dear Julian,

Northern Ireland welfare mitigation package

When you gave evidence to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee on 23 October, members of the Committee raised with you the recommendations of our joint report on Welfare policy in Northern Ireland, published in September. You undertook to reflect on this matter and to speak to the Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service.

As you know, central among our recommendations was that the Government confirm as soon as possible its intention to pass legislation to enable the Department for Communities to continue to pay mitigation payments after March 2020.

Whilst this would ordinarily be a matter for a restored Assembly, our report documented the exceptional circumstances surrounding the ending of the mitigation package. Tens of thousands of affected claimants face a potential ‘cliff edge’, some losing hundreds of pounds per month. We heard that people fear falling into rent arrears or being forced to move if the payments end. There is a strong political consensus that the payments should continue, and clear precedents of the UK Government legislating to continue payments which would otherwise be subject to a sunset when there is no Assembly, for example, the Renewable Heat Incentive Scheme.

The Department for Communities has said it will need to start contacting claimants if the package is not to continue and is already increasing its preparations to pay mitigations via Discretionary Housing Payments, which carries a huge administrative burden and risks claimants falling through the net.

Our Committees therefore call on the Government to confirm that that it will bring forward the necessary legislation to extend the package after March 2020, and that this will be an urgent priority for the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland after the general election.

With best wishes,

Nigel Mills MP