2 May 2018

Dear Lord Boswell,

Thank you for your letter of 18 April, following up on my letter to you of 26 March. I regret that the Committee felt that the response had not fully addressed the issues that you had raised with me.

In your letter you have raised issues regarding the need to ensure that communities, particularly those in border areas, who feel they are most likely to be affected by Brexit are adequately protected; and this should be done working with the Irish Government. Let me be very clear that this Government does not want to see any communities disproportionately affected by the decision to leave the EU, including those living close to the land border with Ireland. It is precisely why we have prioritised, with the EU and Ireland, the issue of the border and what we can all do collectively to ensure that those people living, working and commuting across the border can continue to do so as they do now. Indeed only last week the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster engaged with businesses on both sides of the border to listen to their views in more depth.

Our commitment to no physical infrastructure, related checks, or controls at or near the border demonstrates that we have heard and reflected those concerns. The Prime Minister has been steadfast in ensuring that this commitment is at the front and centre of our negotiations with the EU. We are also committed to the maintenance of the Common Travel Area which has served these islands well, and which will allow continued free movement of Irish and UK citizens across each others’ jurisdictions for leisure, work and settlement.

I accept that the region of the border, on both sides, has had lower growth and employment opportunities over other areas and regions in Northern Ireland and Ireland, though one cannot overlook the years of the troubles that so affected these areas in particular. This is one of the reasons that the Government has been so clear in our determination to secure a
continuation of a PEACE programme in partnership with the EU and Ireland once we have left the EU. The PEACE programmes have been hugely successful in bringing co-operation, stability and opportunity to the border region and we want to see that continue.

This Government will guarantee funding for structural and investment fund projects signed until the point the UK leaves the EU, even where projects continue after we leave. We will also guarantee the payments of any awards won by UK organisations who bid directly to the EU for competitive funding, even when specific projects continue beyond the UK’s departure from the EU. As set out in the joint report issued by the UK and EU negotiating teams on 8 December, both the UK and EU will honour their commitments to the PEACE and INTERREG funding programmes under the current multi-annual financial framework. Possibilities for future support will be examined favourably.

The government has also committed to create a United Kingdom Shared Prosperity Fund after the UK leaves the EU. This fund will support all regions across the four nations of the UK to achieve sustainable, inclusive growth, based on our modern industrial strategy.

It must also be acknowledged that the Assembly and the Executive are responsible for some of the issues here under the devolution settlement. The 1998 Belfast Agreement sets out the constitutional position in detail, particularly in respect of the UK Government’s right to act in strand one (internal NI) or strand two (North South) matters. I am sure that as we progress towards a future partnership with the EU our close working relationship with Ireland through strand three of the 1998 Agreement will facilitate the ability to act in a positive way.

You further raised the issue of the North South mapping exercise and its applicability to the so called ‘backstop’ option. As you know the Government agreed principles with the EU in the 8 December Joint Report. These principles set out our plan to address Northern Ireland’s unique circumstances and the border in the context of the wider UK-EU deep and special partnership. That is the right approach - we want a deal that works for all parts of the UK, whilst recognising Northern Ireland’s unique circumstances.

These principles also address the question of a fall-back option to avoid a hard border and disruption to businesses and supply chains both sides of the border if we cannot reach the deep overall agreement that we seek. In that scenario, the Government will ensure regulatory continuity in those sectors that are crucial to cross-border cooperation, businesses and the farming community. These are sectors where cross-border policies and approaches have already received cross-community support. It is crucial we are able to give these assurances on relevant areas such as the integrated single electricity market.

In March the Prime Minister wrote to Donald Tusk to underline the Government’s commitment to the Joint Report agreed in December, including to the guarantee of preserving North South cooperation.

As to your request to be sighted on the mapping exercise itself, I am pleased to confirm that my Right Honourable Friend, the Secretary of State for Exiting the EU has recently written to the Chair of the Exiting the EU Committee, the Rt. Hon. Hilary Benn, MP, on the same matter. My Rt. Hon. Friend has confirmed that the he is happy to commit to publishing the results as soon as they are available.
Currently, the joint mapping exercise remains part of ongoing negotiations with the European Commission and further work has been agreed to finalise it. The Government is hopeful that we can conclude this exercise soon. Following that, as the mapping work is a joint UK-EU exercise, including the Irish Government, we would, of course, seek to coordinate any release of information with the European Commission and the Irish Government. DExEU officials are now working with the Commission to ensure publication is transparent and coordinated.

Finally, Robin Walker and Minister Vara would be happy to appear before the Committee in the run up to the June Council. We remain happy to appear in front of the Committee and will work with the Committee Clerk to identify a suitable date.

Yours sincerely

Karen Bradley

RT HON KAREN BRADLEY MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND