



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for The Executive Office

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Post-Brexit Common Frameworks:
House of Lords Common Frameworks
Scrutiny Committee

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answer. If the questions come via you and the answers come via me, we will keep good order between us.

Baroness Andrews: We can certainly try. Thank you very much. There are quite a lot of us on this call. It is very good to see you, and I want to thank you for your time and for your Committee's support for this inquiry. We will not have time to introduce ourselves individually, except when we ask our questions, but I am sure that you know people on this call already, and we are all extremely good friends. Some members of our Committee are absent because we have competing business in the Chamber, and there will be a few imminent and rather important votes. However, we will be able to manage that on our phones.

We only have a short time, so we have a small number of questions, but they are important. We have been taking evidence from Wales and Scotland, from Ministers, academics and stakeholders, and it is a great pleasure now to get your views on how the process of the common frameworks programme is working and how you see the parliamentary scrutiny working *[Interruption.]* We will carry on, I think. What we are intending to do, of course, is to ensure that our Governments work as closely as possible together and that our future scrutiny will be robust and effective. Your evidence today about that process and about parliamentary relationships is extremely important to us, so thank you again.

I am going to start off, if I may, with a very basic question. What role has the Northern Ireland Assembly been playing so far in scrutinising the common frameworks with regard to your relationship with the Northern Ireland Executive during the process? What is your impression of the common frameworks programme to date, Mr McGrath?

Mr McGrath: Thank you very much for that question. Please refer to me as Colin. Only the police or my mother refer to me as "Mr McGrath", at times when I am in trouble.

Baroness Andrews: Happily I'll do that.

Mr McGrath: I was apprehensive of presenting to your Committee, because I feel that there is a deficit. We really do not have extensive knowledge of the common frameworks, what they are or what they are going to do. The Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive have a unique position compared to the other devolved Administrations. The others, by and large, have a unified approach from their Government, whereas here we have a disputed position. Our Committee scrutinises the role of the Executive Office, and, in that office, there are competing opinions and outcomes wanted from the process of Brexit. As a result, getting agreement within that office for information, perspective and approach can be difficult. That is not to level blame at one side or the other. It is just a pretty human answer. If two people have differing views on something, asking them to get an agreed view, which they then present to this Committee for scrutiny, is going to be a very difficult process.

Thus far, only four common frameworks have had to be presented to the Assembly. I understand that one is at our Infrastructure Committee, one at our Justice Committee and two at our Health Committee, although I could stand corrected. That is where the four of them are currently. Those individual Committees will be providing a certain amount of scrutiny to the nuts and bolts of what that common framework will actually do, why it is required and how it can be delivered within that Department. Even in taking that, because of the nature of our five-party Executive, that means that there is an Ulster Unionist Department, a DUP Department and an SDLP Department that are providing scrutiny and to be coordinated by an Executive Office which is headed by Sinn Féin and the DUP. All the competing views and opinions are there.

We often use the adage that Brexit is a form of divorce. Like a couple of families on the periphery during a divorce, there are some things that you just do not talk about. Here, people's views and perspectives have impacted on how an official position is got to. Ultimately, that causes a democratic deficit of a form, because we are not really getting the capacity to scrutinise the governance of the common frameworks. The individual Committees are still getting that opportunity to investigate the nuts and bolts of how that common framework will work in practice. We know that you have requested that the devolved Executives and Governments present to you, and you have found it difficult to secure somebody from here. Other Committees in the House of Commons and the House of Lords that have sought input from the devolved Administrations have had that input from Wales and Scotland, but have not been able to secure it from here.

To sum up, Kay, there is quite a shortage in the things that we are not talking about, rather than in the things we are talking about.

Baroness Andrews: Thank you very much indeed, Colin. That was an extremely helpful explanation and introduction for us. These are novel and innovative processes anyway. We saw the Minister last week, and she said that we could expect 30 such frameworks by the end of the year in some shape or form. We all have our work cut out. However, I am very glad that we have a chance to talk [*Inaudible.*]

Lord Caine (House of Lords Common Frameworks Scrutiny Committee): Hi, Colin. Can you hear me OK?

Mr McGrath: Yes, we can indeed, Jonathan. It is good to see you again.

Lord Caine: It is good to see you and all those Committee members whom I have had extensive dealings with over the years. It is very good to talk to you. I have three rapid questions, two of which you actually touched on in your reply to Kay, but I will fire away anyway. First, how engaged do you think the Northern Ireland Executive have been with the common frameworks programme? I know from experience that the Northern Ireland Office was involved in common frameworks from 2017 until the Executive were restored in January, but how disadvantaged do you think Northern Ireland was in the common frameworks process due to the lack of an Executive and Assembly for three years? Finally, at the risk of being slightly more controversial, what concerns do Committee members have about the possibility of divergence between Northern Ireland and Great Britain?

Mr McGrath: I will pass to the Deputy Chair, Doug Beattie, to answer that question.

Mr Beattie: Lord Caine, it is really good to see you. You are looking as young as ever.

Lord Caine: Thank you. Doug, call me Jonathan, please. I say that to everybody.

Mr Beattie: Jonathan, you hit a really good point. The fact that we had no devolved government for such a long period really has put us on the back foot. With everything that is coming down the tracks, we had a really difficult body of work to do before COVID came into it, and that has made it even worse. There is a real attempt to try to make up that deficit and to engage as much as we possibly can. I think that the Executive are doing a good job in trying to catch up, but we are still on catch-up, and therefore we are maybe not getting all the information from the top all the way down to the scrutiny Committees so that the scrutiny Committees can really understand how these frameworks are working and how they are going to impact as a whole. If you take an individual framework, you can look at the nuts and bolts of that and see how that will work post the transition period, but when you try to look at how that feeds into other ones, that is where we have a problem. There is a bit of not-joined-up thinking when it gets outside the Executive and down to Committee level.

With regard to the concerns about derogation, things are rapidly changing, and we are trying to keep up with the changes. I know Christopher Stalford wants to jump in on this one, but we are concerned. Colin explained it well, and you know it well anyway. We all have competing views about where we should be going within the United Kingdom or elsewhere, and there are huge concerns there. We are trying to digest some of the information that is coming to us, we are doing that. Even today, as we are speaking to you, we are trying to digest what is being said by Michael Gove. You made a really good point at the start, Jonathan, which is that we started behind the curve because we had no Executive. I do not think that we have caught up yet, and we do not have that "jointery" with Committees and the Executive that we would have wished to have at this stage.

Lord Caine: That is very interesting. Thanks.

Mr Stalford: Hello, Jonathan. Good to see you again.

Lord Caine: Hi, Christopher.

Mr Stalford: I hope all is well at your end.

My understanding is that there are 160 areas where these common frameworks will apply to Northern Ireland, which is more than in any other devolved region. As these powers are returned to Whitehall from Brussels and then passed on to us, there are serious implications around things like the Sewel convention and what that means for the devolution settlements throughout the United Kingdom, not just the one pertaining to Northern Ireland. I am a devolutionist and I believe in devolution, but it is

important that as much of the competency — there are certain areas that, obviously, cannot go from the centre to the devolved regions — that relates directly to the work of the Assembly should come to the Assembly in order to prevent potential conflict in the future between Stormont and Westminster around exercising powers. Divergence is a major concern for me; I do not know what has been produced with regard to an outcome, but I think that it has been an inevitability since Government policy in Whitehall appears to be pointing in the direction of divergence. It is not particularly surprising that that is the outcome that it will produce, but, for someone who believes in the United Kingdom, that is a source of regret to me, and it is a particular source of regret that it is a Conservative and Unionist Government that is presiding over such a situation.

Lord Caine: I could not possibly comment. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Stalford: Yes.

Lord Caine: Thank you for that. I could come back, but I know that Margaret is keen to come in.

Baroness Andrews: Thank you, Jonathan. Margaret, over to you.

Baroness Ritchie of Downpatrick (House of Lords Common Frameworks Scrutiny Committee): Thank you, Kay. Colin and colleagues, thank you for the opportunity to have a conversation with you. I still recognise the room that you are in, and you are still getting tea and coffee.

Notwithstanding that, what impact do you think that the Northern Ireland protocol could have on Northern Ireland's participation in the common frameworks programme in the future? We all know — you referred to it earlier — that the Northern Ireland protocol was approved in principle yesterday evening and will now go for final approval to the Joint Ministerial Committee. As a final question, what do you think that the implications of that will be with regard to the relationship between the protocol and the common frameworks programme?

Mr McGrath: Thank you for that question, Margaret. One always has to be extra careful when constituents are on StarLeaf; you have to be extra careful because you could get into a lot of trouble with your answers, so I will tread carefully.

My thoughts on that are that it dovetails somewhat with Jonathan's question insofar as the divergence issue. There is the potential that divergence could equal division whenever it comes to the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive. Something may start in London or Brussels as divergence but will be defined as division by the time that it gets to here, because there will be that push and pull in that the protocol says that you stick to one set of rules whereas obviously a common framework could be suggesting that you go somewhere else. There is concern that there will be some sort of democratic deficit insofar as, if some of those divergences occur, those decisions will be taken in London to trump Belfast, or in Brussels to trump what London is saying. We really are going to be caught in between, and the initial difficulty is probably going to be a period of confusion and a period of which rules people should follow. The impact of that is what we can see now, which is the impact that confusion has on businesses and communities right across the North. Anything that adds to that or continues that into the future would be difficult. I was part of a call this morning, along with other party representatives, with the deputy ambassador from Canada, and I think that there may be a quicker ramifications on certain matters in Scotland — maybe the issue of an independence question — which may come from the fact that, if people do not want to diverge from particular sets of guidelines or rules, then people will start to get unsettled at the rules that are being pushed on them from London through potential common frameworks. I think that it would only be a short period of time before that type of sentiment was transposed across the Irish Sea. If we were, as part of the protocol, sticking to one set of guidelines while being forced by London to adhere to a different set of rules, then I think that that could cause real confusion, concern and division at the end of the day.

Ms Anderson: Hello, Margaret, Jonathan and Kay; it is nice to see you.

Baroness Ritchie of Downpatrick: Hello, Martina.

Ms Anderson: Hello. I just want to say that, in the past, EU law created consistency across this island and, obviously, between us and Britain. When trying to develop this common approach and common framework across what they call the UK, Britain did not take account of the protocol and, particularly, the third principle that the British Government had in the common framework, which was recognition of

the economic and social linkage North and South. So, whilst we are talking about divergence, we know that, across the island — and I make no apology for fighting as hard as I did in Europe to ensure that we had regulatory convergence across this island and the 151 areas where here intersects with EU law — we have a situation where the British have tried to produce a common framework in the context of what they call the United Kingdom, pulling in the North. They talk about the four nations — of course, this is not a nation, but they took that approach to it, and they had not taken account of the protocol and the all-Ireland element of it.

I will give you one example, Margaret. This morning, at the Infrastructure Committee, we had a statutory rule in respect of transport that had been brought to the Committee a number of weeks ago. Every time the statutory rule came forward, which was removing the reference to EU law from this piece of legislation, for instance, I interrogated and questioned that, because I did not really understand what was happening and did not appreciate it too much, only to discover this morning that they had sought further legal advice and told us that it cannot be changed because national domestic law cannot change EU law when there is a relationship with a protocol.

You are doing sterling work in what you are involved in, but my concern is that this has been done under the auspices of a UK approach, as opposed to taking account of the all-Ireland approach, strand two of the Good Friday Agreement, the 151 areas that intersect here with EU law and with the island of Ireland. Therefore, whatever about the time that was spent when the Assembly was not up and running, it is losing a little bit of credibility to be saying that, because we did not have an Assembly, work was not done. We have civil servants who did excellent work during that time, but there was a democratic deficit, and we all recognise that. So, Margaret, I think that your Committee should look at the common framework in the context of strand two — the all-Ireland element and the protocol — because it is not going to be the same across the board, and the Committee needs to take account of that.

Baroness Ritchie of Downpatrick: Thank you for that, Martina. Knowing me, you will appreciate that I raise the Northern Ireland protocol every time that we meet in Committee.

Ms Anderson: One thing, Margaret: the powers going from Brussels to here will come here. They do not have to travel a journey to London. Of course we have the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020 and the clause in it that allows the British Government to interfere. Whilst they have said that they will remove some of those clauses, I think that they are going to come and ask our advice on a legislative consent motion, and, if we do not agree with it, they will ignore us as they have always done.

Baroness Andrews: Thank you very much, Margaret. Thank you, Margaret, and thank you, Colin. It is really interesting to hear the dialogue. Can I ask Paul Murphy to ask a question? I am sure you know Paul and his very distinguished career in relation to Northern Ireland.

Lord Murphy of Torfaen (House of Lords Common Frameworks Scrutiny Committee): Thank you, Kay. It is great to be here in Northern Ireland, even if it is virtually. My question is about stakeholders. What information have you received, if any, regarding engagement of different stakeholders in Northern Ireland during the development of the common frameworks? Are any of the Northern Ireland stakeholders supportive of the programme?

Mr McGrath: Thank you, Paul, for that question. Normally we encounter each other at the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly (BIPA), so it is good to see you again here, because BIPA has not been taking place over the past year or so. Like everything else, there will always be two answers or two avenues that can be taken for the answer to this question. Number one is through the official lines in terms of stakeholders giving evidence to Committees and so on and being consulted with. I have been temporarily sitting on the Health Committee, so I have had an opportunity to see those two common frameworks discussed at that Committee. I have to say that the engagement with stakeholders has been very limited. I will share out the answer in a moment, and maybe members who are on other Committees will be able to explain. Obviously, the Health Committee, like every other Committee, has had COVID to deal with and all the ramifications from that, so it maybe has not had the ability to give the attention that is required.

Earlier, Jonathan asked about the period of devolution. We know that the initial work on common frameworks was done as far back as March 2018, so there was the best part of two years when a lot of work to draft, develop and contribute to the progress of the common frameworks was being done when we did not have the Executive here. Therefore, the opportunity was missed for the interaction

that maybe would have taken on a more formal route of bringing people in to present in front of Committees and to listen to stakeholders and hear exactly what they were saying. From a governance perspective, we have not had a chance for the Department to come in and explain to us what the officials were doing in the period when we did not have devolution. It could very well be that officials were out engaging with the sectors and with stakeholders, but we have not been updated formally on that taking place. Again, it all feeds back to my initial remark where I said that I was somewhat apprehensive about discussing this with you because I feel that our understanding and knowledge of it is so limited.

The other route is that, as political parties, we will engage with stakeholders and with sectors. We will listen to the views of the sectors. Obviously, amid the confusion that there is amongst the sectors, the business community and others, with them desperately wanting some answers about what is going to take place, they will have generally looked at the common frameworks as a solution to a problem. It may not be the problem or the solution that they wanted, but the frameworks were providing structure, guidance and direction for them. That would not be through a formal submission to any Assembly Committee; that would be in our engagement with stakeholders via our political party route.

Ms Anderson: Paul, to add to what our Chair has said, we had a stakeholder engagement with the 11 councils here in the North last week and the week before, and not one of the councils mentioned the common framework. That is not to extrapolate that they are all ignorant about them, but I do not think that they are engaging with them. I think that that is what that told us. They were giving us briefing about the implications of being, for some of us, dragged out of the EU against our will, particularly around funding. The councils mentioned a whole raft of issues, but the common framework did not seem to be on their radar at all. That is just a weathervane of information that might inform your thinking.

Lord Murphy of Torfaen: Thank you, Martina.

Baroness Andrews: Thank you very much, Paul. Thank you, Martina and Colin.

Mr McGrath: Chair, it has maybe been remiss of me not to mention that there are four members of our Committee who are amongst your number on StarLeaf: Pat Sheehan, Emma Sheerin, George Robinson and Trevor Clarke. Chair, can we ask any of those members at this stage if they have anything that they want to contribute to the responses that we have had so far?

Baroness Andrews: Yes, that is absolutely right.

Mr McGrath: Do any members on StarLeaf want to add anything? This is normally where there is silence. I wanted to include them, Kay, in case there was something that they wished to add. I will pass back to you.

Baroness Andrews: It is a most inclusive conversation on a very helpful [*Inaudible.*] Christine.

Baroness Crawley (House of Lords Common Frameworks Scrutiny Committee): Thank you very much, Kay. Good afternoon, Colin and the members of the Committee. It is very good to be with you today.

It has been very interesting to hear the issues that, you feel, are coming through on the common frameworks. Colin, as you said, Northern Ireland will be most affected by the common frameworks, and that is important when it comes to scrutiny and transparency. You may feel that you have said enough about whether you are satisfied with the internal scrutiny of the frameworks by your legislature, but if you want to say any more about that, please do so. In the future, once they have been implemented, our Committee will be very keen to continue the scrutiny, to have annual reports, and to ensure that the development of the frameworks is not done behind closed doors. How do you feel about the future scrutiny of the frameworks? Thank you.

Mr McGrath: Thank you, Christine. My immediate reaction is that if the common frameworks impact on business, communities and people's lives, it will be incredibly important that scrutiny of them and their impact continue. The democratic structures should be there to do that. In other words, people should be able to approach their MLAs, MPs, MSPs to articulate their concerns and issues. There should also be a mechanism to allow that to be fed back and adjustments to be made, if required. That is good democracy.

In some respects, many have become very disheartened by democracy, with the outcome of referendums and other votes. However, we always need to hold on to the fact that, in a democratic society such as ours, people can articulate their views to those who represent them and can, ultimately, influence change. That is what our societies are built on. That should continue as we move forward with the common frameworks, because they will impact on people's lives. I am happy to pass to Christopher Stalford to continue.

Mr Stalford: Thank you. The dictionary definition that one would use for a common framework is an agreed approach to a particular policy, including its implementation and governance. Governance is not a one-off event. It is a constant and continuous process, particularly when things change and especially if we are looking for improved governance and approaches.

Martina is right: the level of knowledge — awareness is probably a better word — about those areas is limited, but the frameworks will impact on people's everyday lives, particularly in Northern Ireland, but throughout the United Kingdom. That is why I think that they may provide an aegis under which the devolved institutions and Westminster will have to pull closer together to oversee those areas, the implementation of the common frameworks, and the governance of those policy areas. It will require much increased levels of coordination and communication from the centre to the devolved regions.

Baroness Crawley: Thank you.

Mr McGrath: Martina Anderson will add to that.

Ms Anderson: Christine, I have always regarded EU law as the floor and not the ceiling. Deregulation may take place with convergence across England, Scotland and Wales, but, because we have a protocol here, I am hopeful that none of the protections that we have in place will be diluted. The British Government may have proposed a common framework for areas such as food safety, hygiene law, hazardous substances or driver licensing, and that may be applicable in Britain.

However, when you come to Ireland, and to the North of Ireland and Derry, where I live, we are being told that we need a green card to travel to our brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, friends and relations living literally two or three miles away. Yet, someone can come from Germany, France, Italy or Spain to Ireland and into Donegal without a green card. There will be issues that will need some convergence across the island as opposed to the common framework approach that has been taken in this case.

Baroness Crawley: Thank you.

Baroness Andrews: We have come to our final question, and it is Baroness Randerson.

Baroness Randerson (House of Lords Common Frameworks Scrutiny Committee): Good afternoon. I am delighted to be able to talk to you this afternoon. You have outlined your experience so far in Northern Ireland. However, have your Committees had any contact with the subject Committees that are affected by common frameworks in the other devolved legislatures? Has there been any joint working and, if not, should there be? Would you welcome joint working either with UK parliamentary committees or those in the other legislatures? What about the potential for the inter-parliamentary forum or the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly to play a role in the future?

Mr McGrath: Thank you, Jenny. There are a couple of different levels to explain that. First, as I have highlighted, only four of the 30-odd common frameworks have actually made it into our system. Of those, the Committees that the frameworks go to are the Agriculture Committee, the Infrastructure Committee, and the Health Committee. Those Committees might have had interactions with committees in other jurisdictions. However, this Committee has had nothing presented to it about the common framework approach for us to scrutinise, and that could be for one of three reasons. First, the Committee did not sit for a long time because the Assembly only came back in January and is now playing catch-up. Secondly, because of COVID-19 the Committee has had remote meetings during April, May and June. We are now starting to get a sense of the deadline that is coming up, and there have been a lot of other priorities. I will brush over the third point as I have forgotten it [*Inaudible.*] I will stick to two reasons and, if the third comes back to me, I will come back to you.

Mr Stalford: Common frameworks could be an area of work for the British-Irish Council (BIC) to consider taking on. The membership of BIC is Ireland, the United Kingdom, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, Guernsey, the Isle of Man and Jersey. Given the inter-relationships on these islands and with the Crown dependencies, it may be an ongoing piece of work. If the British-Irish Council considered taking on common frameworks as an area of work, that would be helpful.

Mr McGrath: I have remembered my third point: the lack of an agreed position in the Executive Office means that it is very difficult for it to present a position for us to scrutinise. That can create difficulty as well. Those are definitely things that we should give more attention and scrutiny to, especially as more of them come on board.

Ms Anderson: It would be wrong to give the impression that there is a difference of opinion just in the Executive Office. There are differences of opinion in the Executive, as a five-party coalition; there are three anti- and two pro-Brexit parties. As Christopher said, strand 3 of the Good Friday Agreement is the British-Irish element. There will be intersections of EU law that are aligned across this island. The protocol will allow access to the EU single market for goods and for us to be in the EU customs union code.

You also have the British Government's relationship with here. At times, we will have to see where we can align all of that. We do not want Brexit to adversely affect businesses any more than it has to. At least they know that, because of the protocol, they can work across the island of Ireland and get access to the EU. That is appreciated by most who trade across the island. Work will need to be done with the institutions in the South. We had a meeting last week with the Committee in Leinster House, and we were to have a meeting with the Good Friday Agreement Committee as well. I do not think that we would be averse to having meetings with anyone who will align policy across this island for the benefit of all the people who live here.

Mr McGrath: I often do my other Committee by StarLeaf; there is an awful frustration because, if you are left in the audience, you cannot unmute yourself. Our other Committee members are in the audience cannot unmute themselves. Can Pat, Emma, George and Trevor be unmuted by our comms team here to see whether they have any perspective that they want to raise? Use the raise-hand function if there is anything that you want to add to any of the questions that have been asked thus far. Emma, are you happy enough? Would you like to contribute anything?

Ms Sheerin: No, I think — can you hear me?

Mr McGrath: Yes, we have you.

Ms Sheerin: Sorry. Everything has been covered. Obviously, none of the implications is positive for the North, but we feel that the decisions about an awful lot of this have been made for us. There is not much input that we can have, which is frustrating. Thank you. Everything has been covered.

Mr McGrath: Pat, do you have anything to add? I will call you by name because I know that they will bring you on the screen.

Mr Sheehan: No, Chair; I have nothing to add. Martina has covered all the issues. Thanks.

Mr McGrath: OK. George, do you have anything that you want to add before we finish? OK.

Trevor Clarke, do you have anything at all that you want to add?

Mr Clarke: I am fine, Chair; I have nothing further to add.

Mr McGrath: That is grand. Thank you, Trevor.

Jenny, it is back to your question; did you want to seek clarification?

Baroness Randerson: No, that is fine. Thank you.

Baroness Andrews: Colin, I see that Jonathan has his hand up. Can we take a question from Jonathan, please?

Lord Caine: Thanks, Kay. Christopher mentioned the British-Irish Council. We have discussed in our internal meetings how it could be involved in the common frameworks process. I think that I probably attended more meetings of BIC than anybody, with the exception of Martin McGuinness, over the years. His record, I suspect, is unlikely to be equalled. Christopher, BIC can have a role, but, as we have discussed before, its format would have to change considerably. At the moment, it is a bit of a talking shop. If it became involved in this process, its remit would have to be beefed up. What is your view on that?

Mr Stalford: I agree; it is something that we should look at. You are right about the impact that it has and can have. It will require a fundamental reform of its role, but that it is worth considering.

Lord Caine: I agree.

Mr McGrath: Jonathan, on an informal basis, pre-COVID-19 there was talk of an inter-parliamentary forum meeting to look at Brexit. However, that has not happened, not even virtually, and there has not been much connection to share concerns about Brexit or common frameworks. It seems to happen at Executive level between the various devolved regions, but, at Assembly level, there is very little connection for people to discuss concerns.

Baroness Andrews: Chair, if you are happy with that, then, sadly, we had better draw it to a conclusion. This has been an incredibly helpful and constructive exchange. It is extremely important for us to have the role of our Parliaments validated, and the role of parliamentary exchanges and scrutiny validated. It is such a complex situation, and we now understand that from your very helpful words. It is good that we have made contact, and I hope that we can stay in contact because we will have to deal with the common frameworks.

In the new year, it will be a different, though no less relevant, situation. Keeping the channels of communication open, and information and intelligence flowing between us, will be extremely helpful. It will also be helpful for the Committee to take what you have said and make sure that it is understood by the Departments in the UK and the stakeholders, and Ministers.

I thank you most warmly on behalf of those you can see on screen, other members who are listening offstage, as it were, and those who were not able to be here today. We have had an incredibly productive and interesting hour. Thank you, Colin, for how you have chaired the meeting, and thank you, colleagues, for how you have responded to our questions. It has been really helpful. Thank you.

Mr McGrath: Thank you to you and the Committee. Goodbye.