



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for The Executive Office

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Brexit Issues:

Mr Declan Kearney MLA and Mr Gary Middleton MLA,
Junior Ministers, The Executive Office

24 February 2021

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Colin McGrath (Chairperson)
Mr Doug Beattie (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Martina Anderson
Mr Trevor Clarke
Mr Trevor Lunn
Mr Pat Sheehan
Ms Emma Sheerin
Mr Christopher Stalford

Witnesses:

Mr Declan Kearney	Junior Minister, The Executive Office
Mr Gary Middleton	Junior Minister, The Executive Office

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): I welcome junior Ministers Middleton and Kearney to the Committee. I welcome Gary to his new role. Though Gary has been in post for a number of weeks, he is in front of us for the first time. It is certainly not a quiet job or one without priorities. We wish you all the very best, Gary.

I pass over to the junior Ministers for a short presentation, and then we will open the meeting to questions.

Mr Declan Kearney (Junior Minister, The Executive Office): Thanks, Colin, and thank you, colleagues, for having us here this afternoon. We welcome the opportunity to provide you with a further update on EU exit matters. Let me say this at the outset: I understand that the Committee has yet to receive information that I hoped would be forthcoming after our previous meeting. I have spoken with officials on two or three occasions about it, and I hope to have it addressed as soon as possible.

Since we last spoke to the Committee, there have been a number of significant developments, not least of which was the appointment of Gary as junior Minister, replacing Gordon.

As I set out in my previous briefing to the Committee, agreement was reached in the trade and cooperation agreement, and key decisions were taken on the protocol in December. The focus of our work since then has been on operational readiness. There are different views, of course, on the protocol and on the trade and cooperation agreement itself. However, the decisions reached provide some of the certainty that businesses needed to prepare for the end of the transition period.

The decisions provided some certainty but left very little time to raise awareness and build understanding of the new requirements in moving goods or for businesses to fully prepare. It has been a challenging time for the businesses and communities that are trying to adapt. It is important that we recognise that and the outworking of the initial disruption following the end of the transition period. Reflecting on that, our focus has continued to be on operational readiness, working with businesses and officials in Dublin and Whitehall to identify and address issues, whether systemic or specific to individual traders, to better integrate systems and to engage businesses to raise awareness and compliance.

This ongoing work has had a positive impact through the development of solutions in areas such as groupage, which I spoke about in our last meeting. Gary will address that in his remarks. It has also been positive in the building of relations and practical cooperation between our officials and those in Dublin and London, and particularly important in addressing the issue of business readiness. As we highlighted in January, much of the disruption experienced at the end of the transition period was associated with a lack of preparedness on the part of British-based businesses moving goods into the North. That led to some disruption in the movement of goods from Britain, with significant delays for businesses seeking to move goods through Dublin port in particular. We heard anecdotal reports of higher volumes of empty lorries returning from Britain as businesses remained uncertain about the new requirements, which delayed movements.

As part of the wider work to address that and raise awareness and compliance, the Trader Support Service (TSS) has continued to deliver a number of webinars and reach out proactively to businesses. Importantly, those seminars have included officials from Irish Revenue Commissioners and the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM). I understand that the feedback from businesses has been very positive. In addition to demonstrating a joint commitment to the importance of east-west trade, the webinars have allowed traders to understand the requirements at every stage of the journey in moving goods between Britain and the North.

As we have heard from the sector, if businesses are to be prepared, there needs to be clarity, and they need support to work through challenges as they emerge. The focus on operational readiness and engaging directly with business to address issues has clearly had a positive impact. By way of example, volumes through our ports have returned to levels comparable with those in the same period last year, and there are lower levels of turn-backs on the Holyhead to Dublin route. For instance, freight flow from Britain to the North on 16 February was 1% higher than on the same day last year and 2% lower than on the same day in the previous week. In addition, there has been an overall decrease, from a high of almost 12% back in January, in the average number of HGVs arriving without the requisite paperwork at Holyhead.

That is not to say that there are not continued issues and challenges; there clearly are. I set out the examples of steel and parcels during our last session, and, of course, the ending of the various grace periods will also present particular challenges in the coming months. We are in a process of change, and further challenges will emerge. A key point, though, is that the collaborative approach with colleagues in Dublin and Whitehall, focused on finding solutions, has proved important to date in resolving the challenges and beginning to create the space to look at the opportunities that the protocol presents. That is an important point because, although there are different views on EU exit and the protocol itself, we are committed to working together to achieve the best possible outcome for our businesses and citizens. That requires us to focus not only on addressing the challenges but, importantly, on exploiting the opportunities. To do that effectively, it is essential that we are represented appropriately in the governance structure of both the withdrawal agreement and the trade and cooperation agreement, and we will continue to emphasise that during ministerial engagements. Our officials are also engaging with the British Cabinet Office as those new structures are developed to ensure that our interests are represented, particularly where there is a clear intersect between the operations of the protocol and the trade and cooperation agreement.

As well as ensuring effective governance, it is essential that we are legislatively on a firm foundation not only now but in the coming months and years to ensure that we can secure the best outcome for people here. The First Minister and the deputy First Minister are considering 25 common frameworks that have received provisional confirmation from the respective Joint Ministerial Council (JMC).

At that point, Colin, I will conclude and hand over to Gary to make his remarks. Thank you.

Mr Gary Middleton (Junior Minister, The Executive Office): Thanks, Declan. First, I thank the Chair for his very kind and warm welcome. Obviously, it is a delight to be in front of the Committee today. I know that the Committee has been grappling with a number of issues. As you can see, the Executive

Office is a very wide and extensive Department, and I am trying to get across all the detail. Things have been going very well so far.

I thank the Committee for the work that it does with us as Ministers. As junior Minister Kearney said, Executive parties have differing views on the protocol and on the trade and cooperation agreement. However, we are committed to working together to try to get the best outcome for our citizens and our businesses. Declan set out the context, so I will provide you with more detail on the operational issues that we continue to face and deal with, as well as an overview of where we are and the further challenges that we expect to see in the coming days.

As you will have heard, some of the main issues that we have faced since the end of the transition period include the lack of readiness of GB businesses and matters relating to groupage. Junior Minister Kearney and my predecessor, junior Minister Lyons, raised the groupage issue with the UK Government on several occasions in January, and it has been raised on several occasions since. We were pleased to see the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) publish additional and new guidance on groupage, which it developed working alongside our Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs and industry representatives. We are grateful to DAERA for its work on this so far. We are especially grateful to the industry representatives. It is important that we hear from them. They want to share their expertise with us, and they took part in the trials that were held to test and refine the guidance. The trials continue to be held to ensure that any further issues are picked up. Guidance will be updated as necessary. We understand that DEFRA is preparing similar trials with the Republic of Ireland to ensure that the new processes work for goods that are transited through ports there. We hope that that will be helpful to our businesses.

Another significant issue for us in January was the lack of preparedness among businesses in GB around what the new requirements would mean for them. Since then, a lot of work has gone on to try to improve the readiness of GB businesses to trade with us here in Northern Ireland. Ministers have raised the issue regularly with the UK Government. We appreciate the extensive and intensive programme of engagement that they have put in place to try to ensure that their businesses are as prepared as they can be. Our officials have been involved in the UK Government's senior officials' business readiness group. It gets regular updates and discusses targeted communications from across Whitehall, including from HMRC, DEFRA, the Department for Transport and, of course, the Cabinet Office's border and protocol delivery group. At a ministerial level, we continue to attend the regular XO Committee meetings. We take every opportunity that we can as Ministers to raise issues in that Committee. We are also involved in the Government's Brexit business task force, which brings together businesses, officials, Ministers, trade associations and our officials.

We also have regular meetings with the Trader Support Service. As junior Minister Kearney said, the Trader Support Service is continuing to engage with businesses. Figures show that the number of businesses registered with the service has increased and that the number of open cases is falling. That is encouraging. The increased uptake shows market confidence in the service, and the decrease in the number of open cases shows that some issues are being resolved and that traders are getting more used to the new requirements. We continue to encourage any business that might benefit from the services offered by the TSS to register with it, and we would be grateful for the assistance of Committee members in getting information on that out and ensuring that businesses avail themselves of the support as and when required.

Although there has been good news, with the resolution of some issues and the decrease in the number of cases being raised, we are aware of further significant challenges coming down the line. We are continuing to focus on doing everything that we can to help our businesses to continue to operate in the new environment. Businesses have articulated serious concerns about the impact of further charges and the difficulties that they will create for businesses and local consumers. The Committee may be aware that, from Monday of this week, 22 February, official certification has applied to the movement of fresh meat, minced meat and meat preparations from GB to NI, for example. It is early days, but we will assess the impact of that on the supply of those products to businesses in Northern Ireland. This requirement will apply until the end of the grace period for the so-called prohibitions and restrictions (P&R) on 30 June 2021, unless, of course, an alternative can be agreed.

Given the new application of certification to those products and the upcoming end of the grace period for supermarkets and their suppliers on 31 March, we are concerned that the official control system might be overwhelmed. There might not be sufficient veterinary capacity to provide the increased number of export health certificates (EHCs) that will be required. Given the potential impact of that on the choice and cost of food here, we intend to continue to raise that issue with the UK Government.

The Committee will be aware that discussions are ongoing between the UK Government and the EU on grace periods, not just for P&R goods but the impact on supermarkets, parcels and medicines. Those discussions are also considering pet travel and solutions to enable goods to move tariff-free in line with product-specific quotas. You will also be aware that the EU Commission vice president, Maros Šefčovič, met business leaders and members of civic society very recently and heard at first hand about some of the challenges that they were facing.

As we speak, the First Minister and the deputy First Minister are attending a meeting of the Joint Committee. We await the outcome of those discussions with great interest. We will stand ready, as always, to do what we can to help our businesses and our citizens.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Thank you very much, Minister. I see that Minister Kearney is back with us. He made gallant efforts during your part of the presentation to get his camera working. I will kick off with a couple of questions. A few members are lined up with questions as well.

I want to go back to something that you said at the very end, Declan. It is a matter of public record — it has been raised in the Welsh Assembly and in the House of Lords — that there is a delay in developing the 25 common frameworks as part of the Brexit process. The suggestion is that the delay is being caused by the Executive Office. Can you explain where the common frameworks are currently and what the hold-up is now that they have been passed everywhere else? If they are waiting to make their way through the Assembly's structures to be assessed, what is the delay?

Mr Kearney: Yes, Colin, I am happy to come in on that. If you will bear with me, I want to get some specific details for you. Am I still on camera, Colin? I find myself drifting in and out, and I was not sure whether I was being heard.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Yes, that is perfect.

Mr Kearney: Following the approval by relevant portfolio Ministers, the joint First Ministers were asked to confirm 25 frameworks. You correctly pointed out, as I indicated in my remarks, that they have been provisionally confirmed by the respective Joint Ministerial Committee (JMC) Ministers. Further advice was provided to Ministers on 8 February on the implications and risks associated with the lack of Executive provisional agreement on the common frameworks. We want to ensure the operability of the frameworks. There is a hazard that the British, Scottish and Welsh Governments will pursue British-only frameworks, if you will, rather than taking a four-Administration approach. The hazard that flows from that is that it would disarm our officials' abilities to exercise influence on behalf of the Executive. In light of the discussions in other Administrations, that is an issue. The fact that it has been addressed, for example, by the Seanad, means that it has to be moved through to conclusion as quickly as possible. I have raised this with officials, but I regret that I am not in a position to provide any further detail on progress at today's hearing. Where we are on the frameworks is an issue that has been discussed by myself on a number of occasions. The latest was on Monday past. I will do everything within my influence and ability to ensure that the issues are brought to a conclusion and that we get ourselves into a more sustainable position on the common frameworks.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): I appreciate your saying that there is not the progress that you would like to see on the common frameworks. Maybe I got lost a wee bit in the detail of what is actually causing the problem. I read the frameworks as being overarching to England, Scotland and Wales and Northern Ireland, and that they are just approved in each. Are you saying that a framework may be delivered in GB that is different from Northern Ireland and that there could be problems because of that?

Mr Kearney: The point that I am making is that you would not have a four-Administration coordination. Unless we move ahead at pace to close those issues, that hazard does arise: that we lose influence on the one hand on the part of officials, and, secondly, we would not have a coordinated four-Administration approach to the common frameworks. Clearly, that would not be an advantageous situation for us to find ourselves in.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): I am trying to drill down into this. Is that basically saying that we disagree with some of the frameworks and we want to sort them out? Is that where it is at?

Mr Kearney: No. They have not moved through the Executive Office and been signed off at this time.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): OK.

Mr Kearney: Clearly, maximum operability of common frameworks is in everyone's interests.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Sure. Gary, do you have anything to add?

Mr Middleton: Nothing, other than they are under consideration. Declan articulated the position whereby if the other nations in the UK were to move ahead, it would put us at a disadvantage, even in feeding in some of the issues. We need to get that over the line, but we will feed back to you as and when we get confirmation that we can move forward.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Thank you. Minister Gove wrote to Mr Šefčovič a few weeks ago stating that he wanted to see flexibilities in the protocol to make it work. He said that he was working on a list with the Executive on those flexibilities. Could the Committee get a copy of the proposed flexibilities? Has there been progress on their delivery?

Mr Kearney: Yes, he did write to Mr Šefčovič, and the issues raised in his letter are a matter of public record, so I presume that there is no difficulty at all in sharing additional information on those matters with the Committee.

You will be familiar with the chronology from the submission of his letter. There were meetings subsequent to that. It is fair to say that Maroš Šefčovič made it clear that the European Commission is willing to look at pragmatic solutions to any difficulties that arise, but it sees the addressing of those issues as a two-way street. The Commission made the point, and this is also a matter of public record, that it does not feel that the British Government have maximised all the flexibilities available to them in the agreement and the protocol.

In the context of a two-way-street approach to addressing the issue of disruption, I do think that the European Commission is open to that discussion. The Joint Committee is meeting today, and the Specialised Committee met yesterday. I am aware that it touched on a number of the flexibilities that were indicated in Michael Gove's correspondence. No conclusion was arrived at in the Specialised Committee on those matters, but I am sure that they will be focused on and addressed again today in the Joint Committee meeting.

If you were to ask me whether I thought that the various parties to the negotiation with responsibility for the implementation of the withdrawal agreement and the protocol are in solution-finding mode, then, yes, I do think that the British Government have pivoted since we last met. In fact, I [*Inaudible*] how the protocol could be operated smoothly. I think that the European Commission appreciates that we have experienced difficulties in recent weeks but that those are not insurmountable.

In their joint communiqué of 3 February, Michael Gove and Maroš Šefčovič committed the British Government and the European Commission to work closely together to ensure the proper implementation of the protocol and to ensure that the interests of all our citizens were met. I met Michael Gove on the following day and I said that I thought that the tone of the communiqué was correct and that it created the right acoustics for the follow-up engagement between the two delegations from the British Government and the European Commission, which followed in the subsequent week.

Therefore, there has been a fair degree of engagement in the period since, both at delegation level and now with the Joint Committee meeting today. I think that that is the context and the space within which those issues need to be addressed. I think that we will continue to hear that the resolution of those issues is to be found within the framework of the protocol and on the basis that the two principal sides need to work together and use the various measures available to them. I hope that that is useful.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): OK, thank you. Gary, do you want to add anything?

Mr Middleton: Yes. Obviously, you will no doubt have seen the list of issues that the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (CDL) had put into his letter to Šefčovič. A number of them referred to extending the grace periods, trying to find a permanent solution for P&R goods, and extending temporary arrangements for parcels and medicines.

The difficulty — there is obviously not a common shared view — is that we feel that a temporary sticking-plaster approach is not sustainable in the long term. Speaking to businesses, we know that

their main concern now is not even with regard to clarity; it is a matter of change, and we have to recognise that there are difficulties here that are way beyond teething problems.

I welcome the ongoing engagement between the CDL and the EU. There have been numerous engagements, many of which junior Minister Kearney and I attended, and that is useful. However, we need to get to a point where there is a clear recognition of the detriment that the protocol is doing to businesses in Northern Ireland. Until we get to that position or recognition, it will be very difficult to move forward and to get out of our current economic position.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): I could comment that a temporary solution is not meant to be a long-term solution. In that sense, the temporary is meant to be temporary until you find a permanent solution, but I take the points that you made after that. Doug Beattie is next. Martina said that she had to go at 4.00 pm and it is 10 minutes to, but I think she has gone.

Mr Beattie: Let Martina in first, since she has to go.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): I think she has gone, act. I am looking down my list, just to make sure. She has just gone. She was there a second ago. We will pass over to you, Doug.

Mr Beattie: Declan, you are welcome as always, and, Gary, it is good to see you. As ever, the answers so far have been clear and concise. I want to get your thoughts on this. At the moment, about 15% of the point-of-entry certificates, in the whole of the EU, go between Great Britain and Northern Ireland, yet we account for less than 1% of the trade. That was in the month of January. Is the EU applying its rules and regulations more strictly on the route between GB and Northern Ireland than it does on routes from the rest of the United Kingdom, including into Dublin?

Mr Middleton: I will come in on that first. Thank you, Doug, for your very kind remarks. The EU position, in regard to the checks and health entry documents seems quite ridiculous. However, it is a ridiculous position that the EU is demanding checks and declarations on EU goods, produced in the EU but distributed from GB. That is a very strange position. As you said, Doug, given the size of Northern Ireland, we are dealing with 16% of all health entry documents, in comparison with the whole of the European Union.

It also has to be noted — I find this quite interesting among the statistics that we have seen — that the number of pests, contaminants or diseases discovered by SPS checks in Northern Ireland is zero.

We talk about flexibility, about making Northern Ireland work, and making the agreements work, but we need to be reasonable. We cannot have the internal market of the United Kingdom disrupted to the point where it is effectively crippling our businesses and creating a very detrimental situation, even compared to other entry points across the European Union.

Mr Kearney: Good to see you again, Doug. I will just add a comment to that. First, I do not have to hand that statistic that you referenced. Personally, anecdotally or otherwise, I pick up no feedback to suggest that there is a disproportionate, adverse or punitive approach taken by the European Commission to the operation of controls. We will hear the European Commission say that SPS issues, on our side, can be avoided if the British Government properly respect or observe European Union SPS rules.

That brings us back to the nub of the smooth operation of the protocol. We are approximately eight weeks in. There have been some difficulties with it. I indicated that at the last meeting, and I am pleased to see that the trajectory still seems to be positive towards finding resolutions to some issues. Others appear to have had a partial resolution. Others have not been properly bottomed out. It requires both the British Government and the European Commission to be properly engaged within the framework of the protocol to ensure that it operates smoothly and proportionately. There should be a frictionless approach, or as frictionless as possible, towards trade east-west and west-east, on an all-island basis, and between Dublin and the southern ports and their counterparts in Britain. That needs to be our focus as an Executive and as a Chamber, and we should work unanimously to ensure that that happens.

However, the truth is that, as a result of the protocol, we now have new trading realities, and that is an inescapable consequence of Brexit. Our function and purpose has to be to mitigate and minimise those issues to the greatest extent possible to ensure that businesses are not badly affected and, importantly, that our customers and consumers do not end up bearing a greater cost. However, as a

direct consequence, a curtain of bureaucracy now exists in how we trade east-west — between Britain and here — and how we trade between the North and Britain, but a huge curtain of bureaucracy also now exists between Britain and the European mainland. Those issues reflect the new trading realities brought about as a result of Brexit. Our job is, with steady heads and a calm approach, to ensure that we navigate those curtains of bureaucracy so that, as I said, we see no disadvantage to either our businesses or our consumers.

Mr Beattie: Thanks for that. That is very clear. You are right. I would support some form of SPS treaty with the EU. That would help us an awful lot. I hope that the UK Government are listening.

How are we capturing the small businesses and the issues that they are facing? Some of the situations are bespoke and unique. Let me give you an example. I was speaking to someone from a car dealership in Castlederg who does 60% of his trade into the Irish Republic, but now, if he sells a car into the Irish Republic, the Irish Republic puts 21% VAT onto the car. That is not an EU issue; that is a trade border issue between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic. That is the very thing that the protocol was supposed to stop. How do we capture that information? How do we deal with that, apart from people like me drawing it to the attention of various people and saying, "Have a look at this"? That person in Castlederg in the border area — he will not be alone — is facing a trade border between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic.

Mr Kearney: It is important that we try to capture that in a systematic way. That is an instance outside your constituency that has been brought to your attention. Other instances have arisen in my constituency, Doug, and I then make an intervention, as a constituency MLA and as a Minister, making the appropriate use of the access that I have to ensure that those business people — I am talking about small mechanical engineers and so on — have a way through the difficulties that they are encountering.

The low-level stuff to which you refer needs to be addressed in a systematic way by our officials. We need to ensure that we are gathering all the information and that it informs the kind of engagements that are taking place between our officials and those in Whitehall and also between our officials and their counterparts in Irish Revenue to find solutions to those difficulties or, indeed, mitigations.

You are quite right: things are happening that were not provided for. They are not consequences of the protocol. I can think of one instance in relation to a steel tariff where someone has become a casualty of what appears to be the incorrect application of the rules. We need to scale up understanding among our businesses, but we also need to ensure that there is a net created by our officials so that the small traders and small business people, in particular, like the person you referred to, do not fall between the cracks. We have a big piece of work to do to ensure that the new all-island trading realities and business realities are addressed in the appropriate way.

Mr Middleton: Doug makes a key point on engagement. I know, from the last four weeks in this role, the extensive engagement that takes place to feed into the UK Government and for the UK Government to feed into the EU, and vice versa. The difficulty is that when we hear of issues, whether they are North/South or east-west, the fact is that there are certain groups and business who are very well connected, speak up for themselves, are connected to large organisations and representative groups, and there is nothing wrong with that. However, some of the smaller businesses going about their day-to-day lives are hitting issues. It is about reaching those people.

Doug, that was one of the concerns we raised about the meeting between Šefčovič, the Secretary of State and businesses in Northern Ireland. We felt that it was important to get beyond those we always hear from, and it is important to continue to hear from them, but also to hear some of the other issues being faced at a local level.

How we listen to businesses could be improved. In fairness to the officials, our briefing papers are usually very extensive, and we raise issues on behalf of the people. However, in sharing the issues with the protocol, we need to get down to the nitty-gritty and the niche issues so that they can be addressed and those people can be heard. I take your point. We will take that away, Doug, and look at how to bring those issues forward.

Mr Beattie: Declan and Gary, thank you. I did have another question about exporting bull semen, but I will leave it for another day.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Yes. It is very close to dinner time, so we will move on quickly.

Mr Lunn: Hello, Declan and Gary, and congratulations, Gary. I am interested in the point that Doug raised. Surely, the guy he is speaking about is insinuating that double VAT is being collected. The VAT was added to be charged either in the Republic or the North. There has always been significant cross-border trade, particularly in new cars, depending on the exchange rate. I will be interested to see how that one pans out.

I have looked at the Manufacturing NI survey. Forgive me, but I had to step out for a few minutes; I hope I do not repeat anything. The Manufacturing NI survey of business attitudes, as of the end of January, is quite positive. Businesses are doing what business does well: adapting and finding ways of working the system, and probably getting familiar with the new forms and certificates. I am interested to see what happens at the end of February. Are we going to do a survey every month? At the moment, according to the overall results of the survey, over half the businesses are at least reasonably satisfied by the way things have panned out. Some are making good progress. One of the answers is:

"Currently struggling significantly with new processes, likely to ease."

Twenty-eight per cent of respondents gave that answer. I know that there is a big political discussion going on, and politics is what politics is, but business appears to be finding a way. Is that a fair comment?

Mr Kearney: Good to see you, Trevor. Yes, I think that it is. Business people are problem solvers and are solution-focused. The survey returns that you referenced are in the public domain. Anecdotally and through discussions, I have picked up that the customs difficulties are improving. As you said, many companies are adapting, and that extends into the agri-food sphere, where significant requirements need to be met. Our business sector, typically, is adapting to the new circumstances and finding ways through. Our job is to ensure that their efforts are given greater resilience from within the institution of government, and that we are constantly bending our efforts to ensure that they are assisted in how that is done. There is much more that can be achieved as a result of the direct engagement between the European Commission and the British Government on that two-way street basis that I mentioned in response to Colin's initial question. If the British Government is fulfilling all of its requirements under the protocol, then that clearly gives you leverage in seeking additional assistance from the European Commission and additional, if necessary, flexibilities to ensure that life is made easier for business, trade and commerce.

Ultimately — many businesses see it in these terms — we have dual market access. For all of the cant and the negativity around the protocol, it has found a way through the curtain of bureaucracy that has now been thrown up as a result of the decision, through Brexit, to leave the European Union. It has created a landing zone for many businesses that put their minds to work to come up with solutions; to find a way through in order to not only maintain markets but find new markets. There is a perfect opportunity now to have, if you will, an each-way bet for businesses to exploit the benefits of the internal market with the British state, but, by the same token, having full access to the 450 million consumers who constitute the European Union single market.

Mr Middleton: I read the survey, and those surveys are useful. In going forward, I note Declan's point on dual access. The difficulty with that is that access from GB to Northern Ireland is not unfettered. Despite the commitments given, GB is a third country to Northern Ireland. Effectively, that is what the protocol has done and that should never have been. What should have happened is that the UK, as a whole, should have left on the same terms. It has created a situation where Northern Ireland's largest market, GB, is disadvantaged by the current situation. I take your point about businesses and some of those businesses that were surveyed, but to look wider than that, the implication goes beyond that.

Individual lines and the impact that it has had on products coming in, whether that be through parcels, there are going to be concerns with the grace periods. There have been concerns that many businesses in GB have decided not to bother and not invest in this because they are saying that it is not worth their while. The other issue with goods coming from GB, is the cost impact on consumers here. Furthermore, the time that it takes for the goods to get here is affecting businesses. When we say we have dual access, we have to stipulate that with the fact that we may have access outwards, but that is not much use if we rely heavily on goods and product coming from GB to ensure that we can manufacture our goods and then export them. In order to get dual access and for that to be successful, we need unfettered access with our main market in GB. That is the point that we need to make when we are talking about having the best of both worlds, which we obviously do not have.

Mr Lunn: Thank you for that, Gary. You and I would be on slightly different sides of the discussion in the political aspect of it all. Unfettered was always going to be impossible to achieve on both fronts, North/South and east-west.

If you looked at the situation at the beginning of January, it was when business was gearing up to a new regime, it was pretty horrific. I agree with you. Look at the situation now, and look at that survey, which was done almost a month ago. There is another one to come in a few days' time. Let us just see where we are. When I hear arguments about sausages, Christmas presents or birthday presents, I wonder. Do we not have sausage producers in Northern Ireland? For every complaint that I hear about business difficulties here, I hear about somebody else who has found a business opportunity. That is really what it is all about. We can trade in both directions. I am not trying to get political, but I will be interested to see what the next survey says.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): It would not be like us to get political in this Committee, but thank you, Trevor, for not doing that.

I apologise; I meant to bring in Emma Sheerin previously because she is having difficulty with using the raised-hand function on the platform that she is on. Emma, my apologies to you for that.

Ms Sheerin: Chair, not at all; you are 100%. Thanks to the two Ministers. I reiterate the congratulations and welcome — or maybe it is commiserations that I should be offering to Gary; I am sure that your workload has increased.

My question is a bit of a deviation from what you have been discussing thus far. All sorts of things have been discussed since we left the EU, including problems that have arisen and different solutions. People have touched on the fact that our business people and producers in the North are problem solvers. I have been contacted by constituents with all sorts of different situations, and that is what is coming across. Perhaps there is a need for greater transparency or help from some local Departments with paperwork. I want to ask about the rights of European citizens in the North and Irish people living in the North who value their European citizenship and the rights that they were able to attain in the past by virtue of our EU membership and want to see that continuing with our new arrangement. In the light of that, how important is it that the North maintains a bureau or office in the EU, and how important is that in ensuring that those rights are delivered and on holding the different stakeholders, whether they be the Irish Government, the EU or the British Government, to account on things such as the European health insurance card (EHIC), the ERASMUS programme and different things that we, living in the North as part of an EU member state, have become accustomed to? Will you expand on that?

Mr Kearney: I am happy to go first. The points that you raise about rights are provided for under article 2. The protocol indemnifies and entrenches the rights that citizens here enjoy under the terms of the Good Friday Agreement. Of course, the European Union is a stakeholder in our peace settlement; it made a very significant contribution in terms of templates to the authorship and creation of the Good Friday Agreement. We have to take it as a given that the rights of citizens here in the North will continue to be respected, from whatever section of the community they come; whether they are newcomers who have made this place their home, or whether they are of an Irish identity or a British identity, all of those rights need to be underlined and entrenched. The provisions are there for that. Therefore, in terms of the proper implementation of the protocol, the guarantee of that rests with the British Government and the European Commission in respect of the specific change that we now have under the terms of the protocol. The protocol was introduced as a protective mitigation measure as opposed to something that was designed to in any way infringe, reduce or detract from citizens' rights.

You asked about the permanency of our European bureau. We, as a regional Government, have an international footprint. The three locations where we have bureaux are the European Union, the United States/North America and China. Interestingly, the bureau that contains the largest number of personnel is, in fact, our Brussels office. That reflects the very close relationship that we have had with the European Union to date. It would be counterintuitive to think that we would not continue to maintain a permanent presence within the European Union, with full access to the European Council, the European Commission, the European Parliament and the full bureaucracy and institution of the European Union. I could not imagine that we would not want to do that on an ongoing basis, particularly in light of the fact that we have the protocol and that this part of Ireland has been taken out of the European Union under the terms of the withdrawal agreement.

An interesting thought to conjure with is that, in fact, under the terms of the protocol, the North now has a foot in both camps. We are like a half-sized state remaining within the European Union. That is a good thing. It is recognition of our special and different circumstances. It confers upon us a special status. An important platform for that special status that is conferred upon us by the European Union is found in the continued existence of our European bureau in Brussels. It is important that that continues in order that our power-sharing Government and Assembly maintain a very high level of connection and interaction with the structures of the European Union. That is how we will ensure that we optimise the reality of dual access to both the single European market and that we get best benefit from our continued access to the British internal market.

Mr Middleton: Obviously, I take a very different view to that. First, I thank Emma for her kind words of welcome. In respect of the EU office, obviously, we have left the EU. There will always be a place for engagement, and we need to encourage that engagement. The difficulty is that, over the past four years, the European Union has effectively demanded full respect for its workings, its customs union, its single market and, of course, its laws, but it has not shown the same respect or regard for the UK's laws. We talk about the Belfast Agreement and the practical realities in Northern Ireland and how it works, and the same respect has not been shown in that regard.

We need to work through the immediate challenges. Unfortunately, we have seen very much a tone-deaf approach to the rights of unionists, in particular, in Northern Ireland and disregard for the agreements that are in place. However, there is always room for discussion and engagement. Emma, you mentioned the likes of the ERASMUS programme, and those programmes are important. Of course, the UK has announced the Turing programme, a worldwide programme that will benefit our citizens immensely. We need to ensure that we can get the best deal for our citizens here and, of course, respect all views. Unfortunately, that has not been the situation to date.

Mr Kearney: We need to avoid conflating the way that we manage the new economic and trading realities, to which Brexit has given rise, with identity issues and identity politics. In my view, having a permanent office in Europe makes economic and political sense. We can sort out, under the terms of the Good Friday Agreement, the political differences that continue to beset our society and the communal division within our society. It is a mistake to bring those issues into the discussion of how we continue to interact with the European Union and the European Commission. The Commission office that we have gives us a beachhead for ensuring that we stay properly focused, in a pragmatic and practical way, on the real-world economic and political issues that we need to deal with. We will deal with our political difficulties here at home.

Ms Sheerin: I thank the Ministers for their answers. It will not come as any surprise that I agree with Minister Kearney's reflection on and assessment of things. There is a responsibility on us all not to hype things up and not conflate the issues that we see at the minute. The Irish Sea border has always been there, but it has not affected British people living in the North, it has not stopped them being British. Unionists need to realise and acknowledge that they are still unionists and still British, and our new arrangement does not affect that. It is important for us to take cognisance of that.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Thank you. Three more members need to ask questions, so can members try to get as much of their questioning into one question or one statement, with one or two questions, as part of one input? Also, I urge the Ministers to rattle through their responses as quickly as they can and keep them succinct. Hopefully, then, we can get through everyone's questions.

Mr Clarke: Before I start, Chairman, maybe on reflection, you should take a wee bit of your own advice sometimes, because it is 4.20 pm and some of us have not even spoken in today's meeting. Maybe if you took some of your own advice and did not hog the meeting at the start, the rest of us would have a bit more time.

Minister Kearney, your colleague talked in their contribution yesterday about other "opportunities" when the difficulties for trade coming from GB to Northern Ireland were pointed out to him. How can he describe that as unfettered access for Northern Ireland?

Mr Kearney: I am not privy to the particular comments that you cite, Trevor, so I will take your point in the context of unfettered access and the point that I made about our ability to have dual market access to the British internal market and the single European market. I have set out my position on that pretty quickly. While most businesses that operate in the North and source goods in Britain have experienced some difficulties, those will be overcome. Take a manufacturer who imports chemicals

from Britain: once they crack the curtain of bureaucracy — the paperwork that applies — the further compliance issues will be all the cheaper.

I think that there are opportunities here. I referred to this in answer to a question that, I think, you put, or a comment that you made, at the last meeting. British trade advisers were counselling British-based businesses, in order to minimise the expense, cost and bureaucracy that they were incurring by maintaining their economic relationship with the European Union, to set up subsidiary companies on the European mainland in order to be able to continue to trade effectively but without the costs that they were going to incur on the basis of managing the new realities. To put that into some practical context, rather than British-based companies looking at setting up subsidiary companies on the European mainland, with all the set-up costs that that would incur, why not set up the additional structure here, in the North, and create a jump-off point from here directly into the Twenty-six Counties, given the access that we have into the European market? Why not ensure that British-based companies enjoy the same access that companies based in the North enjoy? Instead of having the cost of relocating to the European mainland, they could relocate subsidiaries to the North and find a gateway opening up to them. That goes back to the point about practical solutions being found to some real-world difficulties that are arising from the new economic and trading realities that have been imposed by Brexit.

Mr Clarke: You could say that that sounds like a reasonable thing for a business to do. However, businesses have already established themselves here and in GB and there has been a good trading relationship between them. I do not put an awful lot of weight on what a particular radio show that is on at 9.00 am on BBC Radio Ulster says, but this morning it referred to 80% of businesses that do business with Northern Ireland saying that they were going to discontinue that from 1 April because of the difficulties with the fettered access as opposed to unfettered access.

You and I will agree on one thing: traders in Northern Ireland will be imaginative and will try different things. However, you cannot trial that from a very small base and grow it overnight to retain employment and jobs for people in different locations. Indeed, they will do it for economic reasons; they will not do it because they are forced to do so. That is what worries me about businesses not being able to trade in the way that they have done. I declare an interest as someone who has been involved in the motor trade for many years, and there is a simple example in that sector. This time last year, our lorries were going out weekly with loads of cars and were coming back with loads of cars. Now they cannot do that, so the hauliers are being hit. There is no option because of the difficulties with the protocol for those people with transporters who take cars out and in. That is one person who you cannot blame. In addition, as Doug Beattie already referenced, there is the trading problem between us and the Republic of Ireland in the car trade, so people here who are involved in the motor trade and the hauliers who move the cars are being hit both ways.

Mr Kearney: I will conclude to let Gary come in, as I do not want to hog this. The problems you mentioned are practical and immediate not systemic consequences of the protocol. Those are the kinds of issues that need to be identified and isolated, and then we need to use the kind of engagement that we have through the joint consultative working group, which has been inaugurated, to find the practical solutions to those kinds of unintended consequences that have arisen. I absolutely agree with you that our businesses are very innovative and solution focused, but they also deserve help, support and assistance from us to optimise the opportunities that can exist from continuing productive and profitable relations with the internal market but also seeking out opportunities with the single European market.

Mr Middleton: I will come in briefly on Trevor's point, which was well made, on some of the figures for the number of businesses that are not willing to trade here given the position that they have been put in by the protocol. The difficulty caused by deciding to crack the paperwork, as has been mentioned, is that adds time and cost to the process. Where is that cost borne? Therein lies the difficulty for us, and no matter what guidance you provide or what preparedness you have, you will not solve that problem. We need to deal with the challenges and difficulties that have been placed between GB and Northern Ireland and recognise them as being real issues that will not be dealt with through paperwork. We need to recognise that the GB market is our largest market, and until we do so and recognise that in equal comparison with how we trade with other jurisdictions, significant problems will remain.

It is not realistic to suggest that everybody should just move here. We know that there are business challenges, even given the pandemic, so it is not realistic to suggest that everybody should move here for dual access, because, again, the difficulties arise when we rely on GB goods and parts for products being imported here but that cannot be done. Therein lies the difficulty.

Mr Sheehan: I want to read out part of an email that I got within the past hour. It relates to our previous presentation from officials on the shared future funding. This young lad, Arón Hughes, says:

"I am a T:BUC young ambassador with the Department for Communities. Having heard the news this afternoon, it has made me deeply concerned."

He is talking about the fact that the shared future funding is being stopped:

"This programme has changed my life from the development of my confidence to gaining an essential qualification to get me where I am today and given me life-changing opportunities, such as travelling to Rwanda last August."

Would the two Ministers like to comment on that?

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Pat, I appreciate that we are in a Brexit oral briefing, but the point that is being made is relevant. We all received that email this afternoon during the meeting. Also, because the Executive Office did not provide us with an appropriate paper before the meeting, we were not able to prepare to ask questions. The Ministers are paid the big bucks because, occasionally, they have to be put on the line to be asked questions. If you are able to give us an update on that, it would be really appreciated. People are concerned.

Gary, do you want to come in?

Mr Middleton: I can do that. I do not have a precise update. This is the first time that I have seen the email, so I am happy to come back with more detail on it. The Executive's position is that full replacement of the spending power that was previously derived from EU sources will be taken forward. I take the point about 'Together: Building a United Community' (T:BUC) and the challenges that are there. There was confusion about that in the last contribution, when the officials were in front of the Committee. Junior Minister Kearney and I have been involved in discussions about trying to ensure that that funding is sustained.

Unfortunately, I do not have any more detail at this stage. I have not seen the email, but I am happy to come back to you on it in the very near future. Again, I apologise that the Committee did not receive a briefing note. As you will appreciate, a lot of these issues change not only on a daily but on an hour-by-hour basis. It is important that we get papers to you that are as up-to-date and relevant as possible.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Declan, is there anything that you want to add to that?

Mr Kearney: I have not seen the email, Colin, but I am very familiar with the programme and may even have met that young guy. That programme does amazing work on the ground. It is transformational. In civic, community and political terms, we are selling young people like him short by a mile when we cannot guarantee the resource that would allow for that kind of programme to continue.

We are now in a very challenging period, with a flat Budget available from this British Government. We face the prospect of a new era of austerity when we get to the other side of COVID, when the full scale of an economic emergency will probably manifest itself. The lack of certainty about being able to rely on continued access to European funds is frightening. It is good that our young people may have some continued access to programmes such as ERASMUS — I know that I am raising a separate issue, but it is all linked — but no guarantees attach to any of that. Given that the funding resource that we can expect from the British Exchequer in the coming period is flat and, in net terms, a reduction and that imponderables are being thrown up about the loss of European funding, that personal story that Pat outlined will be magnified across the board among many young people we know in our communities and whom we represent and among many young people further afield.

Mr Middleton: Just to add to that very briefly, Chair, it is my understanding that we have an engagement in March with some young people or, certainly, representatives working with the shared future fund. I would be very happy to meet whoever the gentleman or young person was in that email. I am sure that, without putting him on the spot, junior Minister Kearney would be happy to have any discussions about supporting our young people going forward. Thanks for raising that, but I will take the detail and come back to you on it.

Mr Sheehan: Thanks for that. Briefly, I was not trying to throw a curveball in, Chair; it is just that I thought that, given that we know that the Budget is going to be very challenging and that the British Government are bringing us into another period of austerity, it is sometimes about the personal stories. Here is a young man who has been given a great opportunity as a result of funding that the Executive Office is able to provide and of a programme that the Executive Office was able to set up. Now the carpet is just being pulled out from under him. Declan mentioned the ERASMUS project, which I was also going to come on to. There is a similar situation with that as there are great opportunities for our young people to go away to study in other European countries and to sample the life, culture and language there and all the opportunities that go along with that. Now that is being taken away as well. It is disappointing that, in both those programmes, it is young people who are going to suffer as a result of Brexit on one hand and the British Government's Tory austerity on the other. There is not really a question there, but thank you anyway.

Mr Middleton: Chair, I just want to add that I mentioned in the previous answer that the ERASMUS scheme is being replaced with the Turing scheme. That is going to be a worldwide scheme, and, hopefully, young people will be able to benefit from it. It is important that we, as an Executive, prioritise in all these issues. Of course, the Finance Minister will no doubt want to prioritise how he puts his vision forward as well. However, as I said, I thank Pat for that.

Mr Stalford: Mr Chairman, the practical outworkings of the protocol when we are only 60 or 70 days in have demonstrated that it creates barriers to trade. I want to raise an issue that I think is just an example of cruelty. As a consequence of the protocol, it is difficult for people who are blind or visually impaired to travel with their dogs. That is because guide dogs that are travelling from Great Britain to Northern Ireland are being classed as pets. It is an example of where the inflexibility that was talked about needs to be addressed.

In the last 10 years, 250 puppies have been trained to become assistance dogs in Northern Ireland through the breeding centre in England. As a result of the arrangements that are in place, the supply of pups that are being taught has been suspended, as you have to wait until they are around 15 weeks old, which is well past the point for their development. I think that that is an example of just how the inflexibility is having a negative impact not only on the economy but on human beings and their everyday life. It is important that those issues are highlighted because economic arguments can sometimes be very abstract. That is an example, and the invocation of article 16 by the European side to attempt to restrict the vaccine supply that is coming to the United Kingdom is another example of how the arrangements that have been put in place represent a sword of Damocles hanging over our head. They can be used against us to hurt people in a very practical sense. I know that Declan will disagree with me fundamentally on that, but those who argued for rigorous implementation should have been very careful about what they wished for. There is no question there, but if someone wants to speak to that, they are welcome.

Mr Kearney: I am happy to respond, and I appreciate that that was more of a statement than a question, Christopher. I could not agree with you more about the difficulty that the instance you cited throws up. It is wrong. It is very challenging. It is very difficult for someone with visual impairments, who is a disabled member of our society, to then be disadvantaged in that way. That needs to be resolved and fixed. What happens with pets, and that extends to pets that provide assistance for people with visual impairments, was, in fact, discussed, alongside chilled meats, medicines and parcels at the Specialised Committee meeting yesterday.

Since the beginning of the year, through the XO meetings we have raised all those issues repeatedly, including guide dogs and pets. We have argued that what is required is a passport for pets of all description so that they can move back and forward without impediment in order to ensure that citizens such as you described are not in any way disadvantaged or having their rights disproportionately infringed. Those issues need to be resolved. It is a cruelty that someone has to live with that type of difficulty on top of an existing disability.

In the broader context, the fact is that the British Government have been involved in these negotiations for years now. We had an agreement that was struck by Theresa May. There was a backstop agreement that, arguably, would have provided greater flexibility and a much better landing zone for so many of these issues than what has been created as a result of the hard Brexit that was finally fought for and procured. As a consequence, the protocol emerged. Regardless of our different political points of view on these points, Christopher, Boris Johnson had the shape of this in 2019. He knew what was coming down the track. There were no surprises about the kind of issues arising from the protocol that would have to be addressed.

In the broader economic sense, issues such as SPS checks and so on have, rightly, been raised in today's meetings. Bearing that in mind, this particular British Government's negotiating team could, in fact, have gone for something different. It could have chosen to go for greater alignment with the EU's food safety rules, much along the lines of what Norway and Switzerland secured with the EU. That would have ensured much less friction. It would have created a different pathway for some of the issues that I listed as having been discussed at the Specialised Committee yesterday.

We could have avoided many of those difficulties if a much more enlightened, strategic approach had been taken in the negotiations in the first place. The truth of it is that Boris Johnson and co saw this coming. They negotiated with their eyes wide open. The job now for people like Christopher and me and you, Chair, is to ensure that we have a smooth operation of the protocol and are very pragmatic about and solution-focused in how we do that. We share the input in implementing it in the interests of all our citizens, and I know that that is the common ground between us, and that always has to have primacy.

Mr Middleton: What Christopher said highlights the direct interference that has been felt in our everyday lives. The pet example is one very sad case, but it goes beyond that. Whether it is medicines for our health service here, seeds, soil, parcels, second-hand cars, tractors, those are all issues that are essentially a straitjacket for Northern Ireland. That is what has been placed on us. Until we come to the realisation that these are beyond teething problems and are serious issues for the internal workings of the United Kingdom, we will not be able to resolve them. Time and time again, people talk about solutions. Solutions were put forward to these problems initially. The DUP talked about eCustoms, online declarations, small business exemptions, trusted trader schemes and bilateral agreements. All those things were put forward and dismissed. The Joint Committee is now having to come together again. I hope that it listens to the genuine concerns that are out there in our communities and comes to a resolution so that we can move forward and Northern Ireland can be prosperous once again.

Mr Stalford: I have one brief point. The UK is, at present, aligned with EU rules. We have not had any divergence thus far. These arrangements have been in place for fewer than only two months — or fewer than 60 days. The fact that these difficulties have been thrown up even with our existing alignment demonstrates just how unworkable the situation is.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Martina Anderson had to go at 4.00 pm, but, as we are still here, she has come back.

Ms Anderson: Some people might say that I am a glutton for punishment. I have been Zooming since 9.00 am in different meetings.

First, as someone who comes from this constituency, I congratulate Gary on the position that he now has. With your indulgence, Chair, I also acknowledge the role that the Executive Office played in today's signing of the heads of terms for the city deal and the inclusive future fund. We had the joint First Ministers and the Finance Minister Zooming in, which was deeply appreciated. The financial package that will be invested in Derry and Strabane is the biggest ever. It shows how, in the middle of the pandemic, hope and reality have come together to shape people's futures. It is not aspirational; it is real. This is a great news day for Derry. Thanks for affording me the opportunity to say that.

I will make a comment, if you do not mind. There is probably too much that I could say about the whole Brexit journey and where we are now. At the time of the discussion about Brexit, the vote on Brexit and the transition period, I met guide dog owners. I highlighted that that would be one of the issues of our being dragged out of the EU. We also highlighted funding. Those of us who identified the problems that there were going to be were accused of being part of Project Fear and of scaremongering. Unfortunately, that has become Project Fact.

We have to work together. I am acutely aware of people's views about where all this has landed. Being dragged out of the EU was going to cause a harder border somewhere on the island of Ireland. I listened to the two Ministers before I had to go, and I have been following the meeting since. I am mindful of the efforts that the Executive Office is making to see what kind of resolution can be found to some of the issues. I am also very mindful that we have a grace period that we cannot waste. I hope that whatever kind of preparation has to be done is being done so that, if the grace period is not extended, we do not waste it.

Mr Middleton: I thank Martina for her kind words. I share her enthusiasm and support for what was announced today in the heads of terms of agreement. That is a good new story. If only we had more of those, we would be in a much better place. We can look forward to that. As has been said, we need to congratulate all those who were involved in that good news story.

To come back to the point about the guide dogs and pets, that will have to be resolved. From the information that I have, I know that Minister Poots had a meeting at the tail end of January to try to get clarity on it. He said that he would allow additional time for pet owners to become familiar with the new requirements, hence the reason why there would be no routine checks on or before 1 July 2021, although it was stipulated that the right to undertake checks should there be suspicion of illegal activity or welfare concerns has been reserved.

There is ongoing engagement with officials on the matter. They are working with their counterparts in GB and, of course, the ROI. It is an issue that we are going to have to come back to, but, again, there is going to have to be a workaround because it is not practical and is causing a lot of offence to people, and that needs to be addressed.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Declan, would you like to add anything to that?

Mr Kearney: Yes, just a focal scoir, Colin, thanks. We are now in what you could describe as process land. The protocol is here, and it is here to stay. That was most recently acknowledged by the British Secretary of State today. However, it is a public position that has been articulated by Michael Gove and other senior British Government civil servants in the last few weeks at hearings in the House of Commons and the House of Lords. It does make any of us any less republican or unionist to accept the fact that it is here. We look to the bigger picture and find the common ground that we can share to ensure that businesses can continue to prosper, our consumers are not in any way disadvantaged or those who rely upon guide dogs are in no way disadvantaged or have their rights further infringed as disabled members of our society. That is the common ground that we have.

We need to ensure that the two-way street requirement that is shared by the European Commission and the British Government to meet their respective obligations is carried out to the full; that we are guardians of all of our citizen's rights; and that we have a weather eye to ensuring that the protocol works smoothly as a reality, because, whether we like it or not, it is here to stay, and it is not going away. We need to ensure that the provisions in the framework of the protocol are properly implemented, where there is a need to find some flexibility, mitigation or easement, those options are properly investigated and that if we can bring those into reality we do so within the framework of the protocol, because that is the framework that guarantees us critical positions.

On that basis, if we work together and have calm nerves, steady heads and use the same kind of language, we can have very significant leverage over not only the responsibility of the British Government doing what they have to do but, importantly, effectively, as a new half-member state of the European Union, we exert the necessary influence and pressure on the European Commission to ensure that it is meeting its obligations, that the difficulties that we are experiencing at the moment are short-lived and that we start to change the landscape that we are currently operating in.

Most important is that we take the acrimony, negativity and hostility that has built up over the last few weeks out of the debate on the protocol and out of the debate on how we ensure that these economic realities are properly managed by us all. I hope that that is useful as a final comment.

The Chairperson (Mr McGrath): Thank you very much. Thank you for your question, Martina.

I thank both Ministers for their attendance this afternoon. I appreciate that the session has taken a little longer than planned on the agenda, but, as the Minister mentioned, given that there is so much negativity and noise in the community, it is important that we take opportunities like this to lay out exactly what the views and perspectives are and to acknowledge that there may be different views. At least, we all know, in the realm of a Committee, where everybody stands.

One thing that I am conscious of probably missing from last week and this week is the promotion of Minister Lyons to Minister of Agriculture. The Committee should have wished him well in his endeavours there.

Thank you both very much for your attendance, and we wish you well with your work.

Mr Middleton: Thank you.

Mr Kearney: Thank you, Chair.