



**FROM:** Rt. Hon. **ARLENE FOSTER MLA**                      **MICHELLE O'NEILL MLA**  
First Minister    Deputy First Minister

**DATE:**                      **18 MARCH 2021**

**TO:**                      **DR CAOIMHE ARCHIBALD MLA**  
Chairperson, Committee for the Economy

**RE: BUSINESS PREPAREDNESS FOR EU EXIT**

Thank you for your correspondence dated 26 November 2020 on business preparedness for EU Exit. We apologise for the delay in responding to you.

We note the issues that were highlighted by Department of Economy officials at their appearance in front of your Committee.

We also note the correspondence received from Colin McGrath MLA on behalf of the Committee for the Executive Office in support of your Committee's position.

The Executive Office has chaired a cross-departmental communications working group with participation from DfE, DAERA, Invest NI, InterTradeIreland and NIO to ensure that guidance and information has been targeted so that businesses understand how they can move and market goods.

There has been significant levels of communications activity across departments including stakeholder engagement; events; workshops; 1-2-1 advice and paid-for communications activity.

DAERA and DfE have also produced a detailed review of their communications and activities undertaken in regards to business preparedness, which we have provided for your consideration in the Appendix to this letter.

As you will be aware, our experience since the end of the Transition Period has shown that businesses here were, for the most part, prepared for the changes but there was a lack of similar preparedness among businesses based in England, Scotland and Wales. We have raised this issue with the UK Government at Ministerial and official level and will continue to monitor the preparedness of businesses to trade with us.

Yours sincerely

**THE RT HON ARLENE FOSTER MLA  
FIRST MINISTER**

**MICHELLE O'NEILL MLA  
DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER**

**CC:**

Rt Hon Diane Dodds MLA, Minister for the Economy

Edwin Poots MLA, Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Colin McGrath MLA, Chairperson, Committee for the Executive Office

## **APPENDIX**

### **DAERA COMMUNICATION AND BUSINESS PREPAREDNESS ACTIVITIES**

1. DAERA has a well-established focussed resource for the strategic promotion of messaging on trader readiness that helped business prepare for the end of the transition period and navigate the new rules from 1st January 2021.
  2. In order to assist joined-up communications and consistent and reinforced messaging, DAERA participates in regular check point meetings with a range of Government communications and engagement partners including DEFRA, HMRC, DfE, TEO, NIO, Invest NI, InterTrade Ireland and the Cabinet Office.
  3. Officials have also been working with colleagues across government to identify the key business preparedness messages relevant to DAERA stakeholders and assist in their promotion. This has included promoting the benefits of enrolment in the Trader Support Service (TSS); the Movement Assistance Scheme (MAS); advising stakeholders of the Digital Assistance Scheme (DAS) volunteer programme and supporting Defra and HMRC in disseminating guidance for businesses to ensure accuracy when interfacing with HMRC systems.
  4. There is constant engagement between officials and NI businesses from across the agri-food, plant, equine, livestock, waste, environment and chemicals sectors both directly and through industry representative bodies for example via the Trade and Agriculture Committee (TAC) and the fortnightly Agri Food stakeholder's forum.
  5. A series of webinars, open to all businesses, were held in November and December 2020 and January 2021. The events focused on many topics, including trading implications, certification requirements and imports and exports of animals and agriculture commodities, marketing standards and labelling and advice on navigating the new Points of Entry and IT systems. Each event was well attended with numbers peaking at 600 and all sectors of NI business were represented. We were assisted by colleagues from across
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other government departments such as DfE; HMRC and FSA. There was a concerted effort to extend invites to include businesses in GB and Defra colleagues participated in these latter events. Stakeholders were encouraged to raise their queries before, during and after the events and all answered queries have been posted on the DAERA website.

6. Work is also continuing to provide complementary information sources and bespoke engagement activities to supplement the DAERA webinars and programme of sectoral engagement. This includes providing regular updates on new procedures and guidance via our agri-food business and Umbrella/Trade Group Email alert; DAERA's free EU Exit News text message service and DAERA's social media platforms. Work continues to refresh and design new content for the DAERA website to provide stakeholders with an up to date EU Exit information hub.
  7. The Department continues to work with Defra on a co-ordinated communications and engagement plan for the months ahead with particular attention to the end of the grace periods. Engagement with other NI government departments, organisations and UKG to co-ordinated communications planning and delivery is also ongoing.
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## **DfE COMMUNICATIONS AND BUSINESS READINESS ACTIVITIES**

1. The Department for the Economy continues to work with Invest NI and InterTradelreland to offer practical support for businesses on dealing with the new trading environment arising from the Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) and Protocol.
  2. We have continued to encourage businesses to go to the Invest NI and InterTradelreland websites and to avail of the support available.
  3. This support includes Invest NI's online platforms with 1-2-1 Advice Clinics which are open to all businesses regardless of size, sector or location and provide the opportunity to ask for company specific advice in a number EU exit related business areas and InterTradelreland's Brexit Advisory Service to advise businesses in planning for and mitigating the impact of Brexit through events, clinics and online webinars on impacts and preparation.
  4. We have also worked closely with NICS Comms Group to ensure a coordinated approach around stakeholder engagement/business readiness activities and to update NI Business Information webpage (to act as a "landing strip" for all Business/end of transition needs). We are continuing to refresh the webpage in line with TCA and Protocol implementation and interaction to take account of emerging business issues.
  5. We have also undertaken a range of direct communications with business organisations to identify and promote actions that their members should be taking. For example, we have recently used this channel to underline the importance of firms applying to the UK Trader Scheme.
  6. The Minister for the Economy and officials continue to liaise closely with Whitehall to resolve issues identified by businesses. For example issues around GB supplier readiness for customs declarations to NI and also via Dublin, online shopping and e-commerce concerns and issues around export
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declarations for chemicals have all been raised in these channels. Officials also liaise directly with TSS and HMRC on customs and VAT issues.

7. The Department working alongside Invest NI and InterTradeIreland continues to offer practical support for businesses on dealing with the new trading environment arising from the TCA and Protocol. This builds on the work they have been undertaking for the past year.
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## **INVEST NI COMMUNICATIONS AND BUSINESS READINESS ACTIVITIES**

Invest NI has provided a range of advice and guidance to business both pre and post the end of the transition period on 31 December 2020.

The advice and guidance is available to all businesses within Northern Ireland regardless of size, sector or location. In July 2020 Invest NI relaunched and refocused its communication activities on business preparedness for EU Exit and what businesses could do to prepare. We have increased the range of support, advice and guidance available on investni.com and nibusinessinfo throughout 2020-21.

### **November/December 2020: EU Exit Readiness Campaign Overview**

The EU Exit Business Advice Campaign launched on 16 November and ran until 31 December 2020.

#### **Objectives:**

Increase levels of business readiness/preparedness for the end of the EU Exit Transition Period on 31 December 2020 by:

- Driving traffic to Invest NI's EU Exit Microsite
- Driving traffic to NIBusinessInfo's 10 Step EU Exit Checklist
- Converting website traffic to generate EU Exit Resilience Reports (in particular businesses not financially supported by Invest Northern Ireland.)

### **Performance review**

#### **Invest NI**

- Weekly traffic to the EU Exit Microsite grew by an average of 38% over the duration of the campaign, achieving over 5,500 customer visits over the 7 weeks of campaign activity.
  - The activity also performed well in extending the reach of the EU Exit Resilience Too. The average number of reports generated each week grew from 42 to 77,
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an increase of 83%, while the proportion of reports generated by the wider business base increased by almost 10% from 33% to 42.5%.

## **January – March 2021: EU Exit Business Advice Campaign Overview (Interim report)**

The EU Exit Business Advice Campaign launched on 25 January 2021.

### Objectives:

Increase awareness of Invest NI as a source of EU Exit information for the wider business base

Drive traffic to invest ni.com to allow businesses to self-serve by:

- Booking to attend weekly topic specific webinars
- Booking a one-to-one session with a subject matter expert at weekly advice clinics
- Accessing expert commentary through news features
- Watching subject specific tutorials

### Performance review

Campaign activity is achieving high rates of impressions. However, over 5 weeks it is evident that engagement and CTR is highly dependent on the subject matter of weekly events – for example those focusing on VAT, Customs Tariffs or Supply Chain achieve much higher engagement and click through than those focusing on EEA Workers rights or Data Management.

None the less, traffic landing on Invest NI.com is showing good dwell times (mostly over 2 minutes), enabling us to assume that the visitor is consuming the information provided.

Statistics also show that paid media is accounting for over 50% of traffic landing on destination pages, displaying significant value for money with regard to campaign objectives.

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## **1-2-1 advice in depth webinars**

Invest NI has been running EU Exit Advice Clinics and Information Workshops to support businesses since December 2018. These moved to online platforms with 1-2-1 Advice Clinics introduced in October 2020. The clinics are open to all businesses regardless of size, sector or location and provide the opportunity to ask for company specific advice in a number of EU exit related business areas. The clinics also include detailed presentations giving key EU Exit advice.

Businesses can book up to 3 x 20 minute sessions at any Advice Clinic. In the period up to 25 February 2021:

- 13 Advice Clinics were held.
- 1,200 business representatives attended these events
- 856 1-2-1 appointments delivered
- 2,600 views of EU Exit presentations and guidance.

A further 5 Clinics will be delivered by 31 March 2021.

From June 2020 Invest NI has also delivered a series of in depth webinars covering key subjects based on business need. These include:

- 14 webinars on EU exit issues
- 1,659 attendees

A further 4 webinars will be delivered in March 2021 with topics including:

- Rules of Origin
- Trader Support Service Supplementary Declarations
- Digital selling

It is expected that these advice clinics and webinars will continue into April and May 2021.

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## **nibusinessinfo**

Invest NI's nibusinessinfo.co.uk website has played a central role in the ongoing maintenance and development of online advice and guidance to ensure future changes are communicated and associated support is highlighted. This includes coverage of financial and advisory support schemes, policy information and advice on key business areas.

A dedicated campaign page ([www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/euexit](http://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/euexit)) provides access to information guides, related business news ([www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/news](http://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/news)), events ([www.events.nibusinessinfo.co.uk](http://www.events.nibusinessinfo.co.uk)) and business support ([www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/support](http://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/support)).

Key messages have been shared via a monthly newsletter (issued to over 8,500 customers), including a dedicated EU exit newsletter (distributed on 20 November) and social media channels (combined following of over 52,000 customers).

Total nibusinessinfo.co.uk campaign to date (1 January 2019 – 14 February 2021)

- Over the last two years the nibusinessinfo.co.uk website has published almost 500 guidance pages on Brexit / EU Exit topics.
- Customers have visited these pages more than 57,800 times with a total of more than 104,800 page views recorded.
- More than 36,000 customer clicks to further information on external websites (government sites, stakeholders etc.) have been recorded.

Current increased level of customer activity (1 January – 14 February 2021)

- Over 29,000 page views were recorded – 28% of the total campaign activity since the campaign began two years ago has occurred in this period alone.
  - The site received over 13,000 visits in January – the busiest month for customers accessing EU Exit content during the lifetime of the campaign.
  - Between 1 January and 14 February 2021:
    - Over 120 pages were created/updated with the latest support and guidance.
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- 53% of the EU Exit support pages available to customers were accessed.
- The most accessed page was our EU Exit campaign landing page.
- The most accessed guidance pages were Apply for an XI EORI number and Moving goods into, out of, or through Northern Ireland.
- The most clicked external link was to the Trader Support Service.

### **Organic social media activity (January 2021)**

In January 2021, there were a range of EU Exit social media posts covering DAERA & HMRC webinars, Invest NI Advice Clinics, sending parcels, VAT, Goods Vehicle Movement Service, Trader Support Service, selling services to the EU and hiring staff from the EU.

- Facebook - 11 EU Exit related posts, generating a reach of 30,000 and 260 clicks
  - LinkedIn - 11 EU Exit related posts, generating 6,500 impressions and 139 clicks
  - Twitter - 14 EU Exit related posts, generating 49,000 impressions and 146 clicks
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## **INTERTRADEIRELAND COMMUNICATIONS AND BUSINESS READINESS ACTIVITIES**

To date, InterTradeIreland has engaged directly with c.15948 firms through its Brexit Advisory Service, including website learning and information resources, dedicated events and the Brexit Voucher supports. In addition, the All-island Business Monitor has been tracking business preparedness levels, finding in the Q3 business monitor that just 9% of NI firms have Brexit plans in place. Although 35% of businesses that trade cross-border have made Brexit preparations.

### **Communications Campaign:**

At the end of October InterTradeIreland launched a new communications campaign to encourage firms to take the available steps to better prepare for the end of the transition period. The campaign ran across radio, digital and social media from 26<sup>th</sup> October to 29<sup>th</sup> November. The campaign message was “We can help make Brexit manageable. Let’s move forward, together.”

Online three specific landing pages were created to support search traffic generated from three digital ad groups:

1. Making Brexit manageable
2. Preparing for Brexit
3. Brexit funding and advice

The early analysis of the campaign shows the following engagement levels:

Digital Impressions: 2,083,422 (over 2 million)

Reach: 863,782 (Close to 900K)

Link Clicks: 32,695

Page Views: 14,744

### **Brexit Advisory Service Numbers:**

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The Brexit Advisory Service has received 331 voucher applications and 130 enquiries year to date.

Event stakeholder engagement from the start of the year to end of February is 160.

It should be noted the InterTradeIreland Brexit Webinar – Managing cross border supply chain, Customs and VAT on 2 March have over 700 businesses already registered.

The InterTradeIreland Brexit 2020 web resource users increase month on month are at 16,000.

**Events:**

InterTradeIreland has a number of events/webinars planned for the first quarter of 2021.

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