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Intergovernmental relations in the UK

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This briefing paper describes the institutional landscape of intergovernmental relations in the UK, with a focus on Northern Ireland.

This information is provided to Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) in support of their duties, and is not intended to address the specific circumstances of any particular individual. It should not be relied upon as professional legal advice, or as a substitute for it.

Introduction

In the UK, intergovernmental relations describe the engagement between the UK Government and devolved governments in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. They include formal and informal contact between ministers and civil servants using multilateral or bilateral channels.¹

The introduction of devolution in 1998 changed the territorial constitution of the UK. Intergovernmental relations became central for decision making and dispute resolution between the UK Government and new devolved governments in Belfast, Edinburgh and Cardiff.² Since then, the salience of intergovernmental relations has continued to grow following events such as Brexit and Covid-19.

Intergovernmental relations in Northern Ireland are particularly significant and take a distinctive shape. British and Irish relations, alongside American facilitation, played an important role in reaching the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement in 1998. Strands Two and Three of the Agreement also established several intergovernmental bodies including the North/South Ministerial Council, the British-Irish Council, and the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference.³

Until recently, intergovernmental relations had been largely informal and typically operated through the Joint Ministerial Committee on an ad-hoc basis.⁴ A new system was introduced in January 2022, following a joint review by the UK Government and devolved governments.⁵ It formalised relations in a three-tier structure consisting of the Prime Minister and Heads of Devolved Government Council, interministerial standing committees and policy-specific interministerial groups.

Additionally, in 2024 the incoming Labour Government announced that it would ‘reset’ intergovernmental relations.⁶ One major change to support this goal was the creation of the Council of Nations and Regions which brings together the Prime Minister, heads of the devolved governments, alongside English metro mayors.

¹ [Intergovernmental relations](#), Institute for Government, 2022

² [Intergovernmental relations in the United Kingdom](#), House of Commons Library, 2023

³ [The Belfast Agreement](#), Northern Ireland Office, 1998

⁴ [The territorial constitution: what is it and why does it matter?](#), The Constitution Unit, 2025

⁵ [Review of intergovernmental relations](#), Cabinet Office and DLUHC, 2022

⁶ [Change: Labour Party Manifesto 2024](#)

This briefing paper describes the institutional landscape of intergovernmental relations in the UK, with a focus on Northern Ireland. To do so, it provides an overview of the three-tier intergovernmental relations structure and recent changes to ‘reset’ relations. It discusses how intergovernmental relations operate in Northern Ireland and how changes have worked in practice. Finally, it explains the relevance of intergovernmental working for internal trade in the UK.

1 Intergovernmental relations in context

Intergovernmental relations pre-date devolution by over 100 years in the UK. British Imperial Conferences took place as early as 1887, bringing together representatives from across the UK and British Empire to discuss colonial issues.⁷

By 1944, Imperial Conferences had been replaced by Commonwealth Prime Ministers’ Conferences (now, Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting) which continue to be held every two years. Antigua and Barbuda hosts their next meeting in November 2026.⁸

1.1 Previous intergovernmental relations structure

The introduction of devolution in 1998 changed the territorial constitution of the UK.⁹ Productive engagement between the UK Government and new devolved governments in Belfast, Edinburgh and Cardiff became central to “manage the intersection between devolved and reserved powers, and to support joint decision-making where governments share responsibilities”.¹⁰

Between 1999 and 2022, intergovernmental relations in the UK were laid out in a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). First published in October 1999 and updated through October 2013, the MOU on Devolution created a Joint Ministerial Committee that brought together ministers from the UK and devolved governments on a consultative basis.¹¹

⁷ [Intergovernmental relations in the United Kingdom](#), House of Commons Library, 2025

⁸ [Antigua and Barbuda to host 2026 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting](#), Antigua News, 2024

⁹ [The territorial constitution: what is it and why does it matter?](#), The Constitution Unit, 2025

¹⁰ [Devolution and intergovernmental relations](#), POST, 2024

¹¹ [Intergovernmental relations in the United Kingdom](#), House of Commons Library, 2025

1.2 Brexit

The Brexit process raised the profile of intergovernmental relations in the UK. Membership of the EU's single market had limited the scope of policy divergence because many decisions affecting central and devolved governments were made at the EU level and applied across the UK.¹²

After Brexit, intergovernmental relations became increasingly important to manage the range of policy areas returned from the EU that overlap with devolved competencies.¹³ In addition, arrangements to regulate policy divergence such as common frameworks and the UK Internal Market Act 2020 also require considerable intergovernmental engagement.¹⁴

1.3 Covid-19

The Covid-19 pandemic also significantly affected intergovernmental relations. In its inquiry into intergovernmental relations during the pandemic, the House of Commons Scottish Affairs Select Committee reported that the crisis led to both “new ways of intergovernmental working” and “further tested intergovernmental structures that were already under strain”¹⁵

Existing structures were generally side-lined during the pandemic in favour of an ad-hoc approach. The Joint Ministerial Committee was not used, and instead devolved representatives were invited to Cabinet Office Briefing Room (COBRA) meetings and to participate in new “ministerial implementation groups”.¹⁶ Although there was an initially high level of coordination, these meetings became less frequent over time.

The UK Covid-19 Inquiry reported that “a lack of trust between the then Prime Minister and some of the leaders of the devolved nations affected the collaborative approach to decision-making”¹⁷ This contributed to what the Institute for Government have called

¹² [UK intergovernmental relations: on state-form, sovereignty and Brexit](#), Territory, Politics, Governance, 2025

¹³ [Intergovernmental relations in the United Kingdom](#), House of Commons Library, July 2025

¹⁴ [The intergovernmental relations 'reset': one year on](#), SPICe Briefing, 2025

¹⁵ [Coronavirus and Scotland: Interim Report on Intergovernmental Working](#), Scottish Affairs Committee, 2020

¹⁶ [Intergovernmental relations during the covid-19 pandemic](#), House of Commons Library, 2025

¹⁷ [Chairs Statement Module 2 report core decision making and political governance](#), UK Covid-19 Inquiry, 2025

“an intergovernmental relations gap” limiting policy and public communication coordination.¹⁸

1.4 Consensus for reform

By 2022, the Joint Ministerial Committee system had largely ceased to function. Against the backdrop of Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic, a consensus had emerged that intergovernmental relations needed reworking.

Several parliamentary and government reviews considering aspects of devolution and intergovernmental engagement were published during this period. They included reviews by the Justice, Welsh Affairs, Scottish Affairs, and Public Administration Committees in the House of Commons, and the House of Lords Constitution Committee. Alongside the Dunlop review¹⁹, the Calman, Silk, and Smith Commissions also made reports.²⁰

Many of the conclusions reached were similar. A 2019 report of the Commons Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee noted that “there is a growing consensus that the current UK inter-governmental relations mechanisms are not fit for purpose” and said its evidence “overwhelmingly called for extensive reform or replacement of the current inter-governmental relations mechanisms as the UK leaves the EU”.²¹

The devolved governments viewed reform as necessary and, through the Joint Ministerial Committee in 2018, initiated a formal review of the existing structures to ensure they are “fit for purpose in light of the UK’s exit from the EU”.²² Following publication in 2022 of the Review of Intergovernmental Relations, the Joint Ministerial Committee system was abolished and replaced it with a new tiered structure.²³ It also

¹⁸ [Five things we learned from the UK Covid-19 Inquiry report on Module II](#), Institute for Government, 2025

¹⁹ [Implementing the Dunlop review into the UK’s union capability](#), House of Lords Library, 2023

²⁰ For overview, see [A Constitutional Crossroads: Ways Forward for the United Kingdom](#), Bingham Centre, 2015

²¹ [Devolution and Exiting the EU: reconciling differences and building strong relationships](#), House of Commons, 2018

²² [Joint Ministerial Committee communiqué](#), March 2018

²³ [Council of the Nations and Regions](#), House of Commons Library, 2024

noted the importance of strong intergovernmental relations to “recover from the challenges of the COVID-19 crisis”.²⁴

2 The Review of Intergovernmental Relations

The review of intergovernmental relations introduced a new system of engagement in January 2022, agreed by all four central and devolved governments. The Joint Ministerial Committee system was replaced by a three-tier structure consisting of: the Prime Minister and Heads of Devolved Government Council; interministerial standing committees; and policy-specific interministerial groups. These groups are scheduled to meet regularly rather than taking place on an ad-hoc basis, as in the previous arrangements.

Overall, the system is intended to “provide a positive basis for productive relations, facilitating dialogue where views are aligned and resolution mechanisms where they are not”²⁵ The review also aims to introduce a “new era” for intergovernmental working with greater transparency and accountability.²⁶ It committed all governments to more frequent reporting to their legislatures. The new structures are notably non-statutory, and do not create or override any legal relations.²⁷

2.1 Engagement principles

The review states that intergovernmental working will be “founded” on five principles:

1. Maintaining positive and constructive relations, based on mutual respect for the responsibilities of the governments and their shared role in the governance of the UK
2. Building and maintaining trust, based on effective communication
3. Sharing information and respecting confidentiality
4. Promoting understanding of, and accountability for, their intergovernmental activity

²⁴ [Review of intergovernmental relations](#), Cabinet Office and DLUHC, 2022

²⁵ [Intergovernmental relations within the UK](#), House of Lords Library, 2024

²⁶ [Review of intergovernmental relations](#), Cabinet Office and DLUHC, 2022

²⁷ [Intergovernmental relations in the United Kingdom](#), House of Commons Library, 2025

5. Resolving disputes according to a clear and agreed process.²⁸

2.2 Three-tiered governance

At the top tier, the Prime Minister and Heads of Devolved Governments Council is responsible for overseeing intergovernmental relations in the UK.²⁹ It is intended to meet annually and is chaired by the Prime Minister. The Council's functions include setting strategic policy direction and acting as the final stage in the dispute resolution processes.

At the middle tier, interministerial standing committees consider issues affecting several portfolios and any cross-cutting international issues.³⁰ There are two main committees, the Interministerial Standing Committee (IMSC) and Finance: Interministerial Standing Committee (F:ISC), both of which aim to facilitate policy collaboration across governments. Some time-limited interministerial committees may also be convened.

The IMSC is made up of ministers with intergovernmental relations responsibility from all governments and, when required, ministers from other departments. Chaired by members on rotating basis, it is intended to meet monthly.³¹

The F:ISC is made up of HMT officials and devolved governments' finance ministers. It operates similarly to the IMSC and considers fiscal and funding issues.³² Chaired by finance ministers on rotating basis, it is intended to meet quarterly around key events.

At the portfolio tier, interministerial groups enable regular department-level engagement on specific policy areas. They are organised and supported by participating teams for each government and effectively replace the previous Joint Ministerial Committees.³³ The review set out a number of preliminary interministerial

²⁸ [Review of intergovernmental relations](#), Cabinet Office and DLUHC, 2022

²⁹ [Intergovernmental relations within the UK](#), House of Lords Library, 2024

³⁰ [Intergovernmental relations in the United Kingdom](#), House of Commons Library, 2025

³¹ [IGR Secretariat Annual Report 2023-24](#), Cabinet Office, 2025

³² [Intergovernmental relations in the United Kingdom](#), House of Commons Library, 2025

³³ [IGR Secretariat Annual Report 2023-24](#), Cabinet Office, 2025

groups, including net zero, environment, trade, education, food and rural affairs, but these may be adapted according to changing needs.³⁴

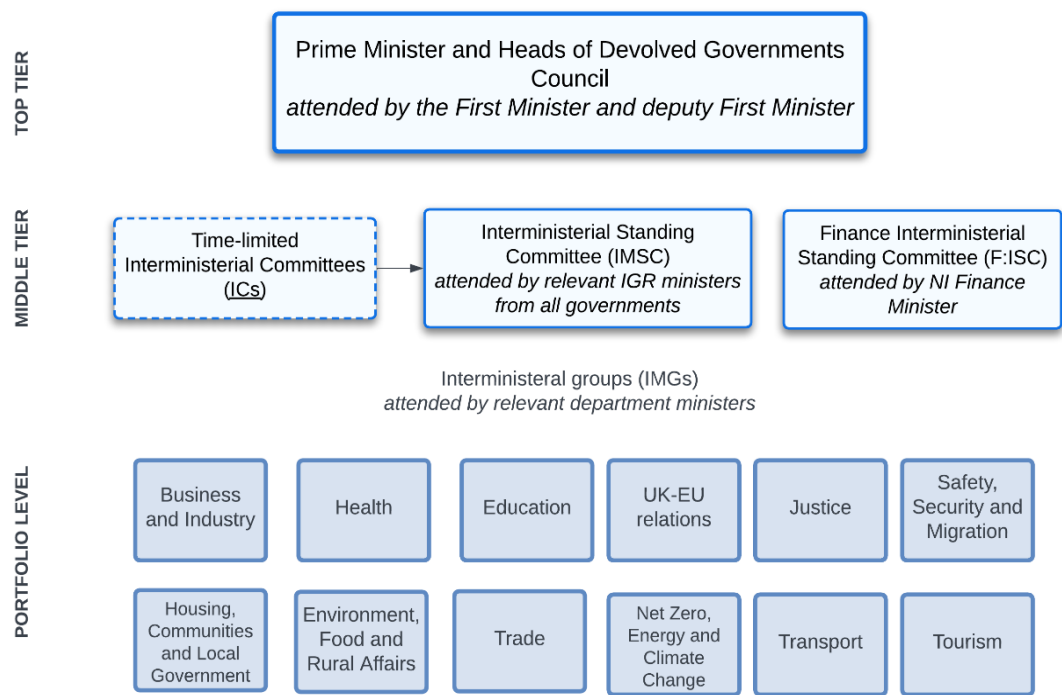


Figure 1. Structure of UK Intergovernmental Relations³⁵

2.3 Intergovernmental relations secretariat

The review also created a standing Intergovernmental Relations Secretariat to support the Council, the IMSC/F:ISC and IMGs.³⁶ The Secretariat is accountable to the Council and must serve all administrations equally and impartially. It is tasked with administrative support, maintaining effective relations at each tier and facilitating dispute resolution. The secretariat is hosted and funded by the Cabinet Office and staffed by officials from all governments.³⁷

2.4 Dispute resolution

³⁴ [Intergovernmental relations and UK-EU policy](#), UK in a changing Europe, 2025

³⁵ [Brexit and Devolution](#), Northern Ireland Assembly, European Affairs team (undated)

³⁶ [The Intergovernmental Relations Secretariat: function and role](#), DLUHC, 2023

³⁷ [Intergovernmental relations in the United Kingdom](#), House of Commons Library, 2025

The review also sets out a dispute resolution process for intergovernmental relations issues. In contrast to the previous arrangements where the UK government had to recognise a dispute for it to progress, any government may now raise a dispute with the secretariat.

Issues may be escalated if a disagreement cannot be resolved at portfolio level and may impact two or more governments.³⁸ The process is chaired by a body not party to the dispute, and the secretariat can seek third-party advice or mediation. There are three stages:

1. Consideration of dispute by Intergovernmental Relations Secretariat;
2. Consideration by IMSC or F:ISC;
3. Consideration by Council

The secretariat reports on the dispute outcomes during the final escalation stage, and if governments are unable to reach a resolution, each government must make an explanatory statement to their respective legislature.³⁹

2.5 The review and Northern Ireland

The intergovernmental relations review was careful to clarify that the newly introduced architecture should not be “construed as conflicting with the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement”.⁴⁰

Northern Ireland’s initial involvement in the new structure was limited by the absence of a fully functioning Executive between February 2022 and 2024. During that period, senior civil servants from the Northern Ireland Civil Service were able to attend meetings in an observational capacity, in the absence of ministerial representatives.⁴¹

Northern Ireland is also the only devolved government to have raised a dispute, relating to a disagreement over a pension payment scheme for those who were injured in Troubles-related incidents.⁴² However, the dispute was raised when the Executive

³⁸ [Review of intergovernmental relations](#), Cabinet Office and DLUHC, 2022

³⁹ [Intergovernmental relations within the UK](#), House of Lords Library, 2024

⁴⁰ [Review of intergovernmental relations](#), Cabinet Office and DLUHC, 2022

⁴¹ [Intergovernmental relations within the UK](#), House of Lords Library, 2024

⁴² [Intergovernmental Relations Within the United Kingdom](#), Hansard, House of Lords, 2024

was not fully functioning. It remains to be seen whether the dispute will be progressed now that there is a new Executive in place.⁴³

3 Northern Ireland and intergovernmental relations

Intergovernmental relations have long played an important role in Northern Ireland. British and Irish relations, alongside American facilitation, were central to the peace process and in reaching the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement in 1998.

For this reason, intergovernmental relations take on a distinctive shape in Northern Ireland. Strands Two and Three of the Agreement considered intergovernmental relations through a constitutional and partially international framework. Unlike the non-statutory structure outlined above, the Agreement created several statutory bodies involving the governments of Northern Ireland, the UK, and Ireland.⁴⁴ They are the North/South Ministerial Council, the British-Irish Council and the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference. More recently, the East-West Council was created in 2024 as part of the Executive's restoration.

3.1 North/South Ministerial Council

The North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) was established by Strand Two of the Agreement. It brings together government ministers from Northern Ireland and Ireland to “develop consultation, co-operation and action within the island of Ireland”.⁴⁵

The Council works cooperatively across 12 policy areas. For six of these – agriculture, education, environment, health, tourism and transport - common approaches are agreed and implemented using existing mechanisms in each jurisdiction. The remaining six are implemented using cross-border and all-island bodies. They include Waterways Ireland, InterTradeIreland, the Language Body, Food Safety Promotion Board, Special European Union Programmes Body, and Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission.

Since its creation, the NSMC has met 30 times in plenary format. The most recent meeting, held in Dublin on 17 October 2025, focused on trade and economic

⁴³ [Two years into the reform of intergovernmental arrangements – has the new approach been implemented?](#), SPICe Spotlight, 2024

⁴⁴ [Intergovernmental relations in the United Kingdom](#), House of Commons Library, 2025

⁴⁵ [North South Ministerial Council](#)

growth.⁴⁶ A joint secretariat, based in Armagh and staffed by personnel from the Irish Civil Service and the Executive Office, supports the NSMC.⁴⁷

3.2 British-Irish Council

The British-Irish Council (BIC) was established by Strand Three of the Agreement. It brings together the governments of UK, Ireland, Guernsey, Jersey, the Isle of Man, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

The Council aims to “promote the harmonious and mutually beneficial development of the totality of relationships among the peoples of these islands”.⁴⁸ It provides a forum for consultation and cooperation on several issues across climate decarbonisation, culture and heritage, and economic and social inclusion.

The BIC usually meets twice a year at ministerial summits and via work sector meetings on specific policy areas. The 44th Summit meeting was hosted by the Welsh Government in December 2025.⁴⁹ Since 2012, it has been supported by an Edinburgh-based standing secretariat, headed by officials from the governments of the UK and Ireland, and staffed with officers from the Northern Ireland, Scottish and Welsh Governments.

3.3 British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference

The British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference (BIIGC) was also established by Strand Three of the Agreement. It brings together the Irish and British governments for bilateral cooperation on non-devolved matters. Normally, it is chaired by Irish Foreign Affairs Minister and Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

According to the Agreement, the BIIGC aims “to promote bilateral cooperation at all levels on all matters of mutual interest within the competence of the UK and Irish

⁴⁶ [Thirtieth Plenary Meeting](#), North South Ministerial Council Joint Secretariat, 2025

⁴⁷ [North South \(NSMC\)](#), The Executive Office

⁴⁸ [The British-Irish Council](#)

⁴⁹ [PM told budget 'missed opportunity' for NI by Stormont leaders](#), BBC News, 2025

Governments”.⁵⁰ It replaced the similar Anglo-Irish Intergovernmental Conference which had been created under the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement.⁵¹

The most recent meeting of the BIIGC was in Farleigh House in Dublin on 17 November 2025⁵². In recent years, meetings have focused on legacy, political stability, and security cooperation. It is supported by a standing joint secretariat based in Belfast.

3.4 East-West Council

The East-West Council was created as part of the return of the Northern Ireland Executive in 2024. Its format was outlined in the Safeguarding the Union Command Paper - the deal which effectively restored power sharing institutions in Northern Ireland after they had ceased to fully function 24 months earlier.⁵³

The East-West Council brings together government, civil society and business representatives from across the UK. It aims to raise the profile of Northern Ireland in business and government, as well as fostering links across education, sport and culture.⁵⁴ In response to a Written Question on 9 June 2025, Secretary of State Hilary Benn said the Council “provides exciting opportunities for Northern Ireland as we prioritise building and strengthening connections across the United Kingdom, focussing on shared opportunities and addressing mutual challenges.”⁵⁵

The Council’s inaugural meeting was held in London in March 2024, while it most recently met in Belfast on 12 June 2025⁵⁶.

⁵⁰ [British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference \(BIIGC\) April Joint Communiqué](#), Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2024

⁵¹ [British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference](#), The Executive Office

⁵² [British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference \(BIIGC\) 17 November 2025 Joint Communiqué](#), Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2025

⁵³ [Northern Ireland devolution: Safeguarding the Union](#), House of Commons Library, 2024

⁵⁴ [Safeguarding the Union](#), HM Government, 2024

⁵⁵ [Written Question \(UIN 55770\)](#), UK East-West Council (Northern Ireland Office), 2025

⁵⁶ [East West Council delivers £1 million support for Northern Ireland’s community and voluntary sector](#), Northern Ireland Office and Cabinet Office, 2025

4 The intergovernmental relations “reset”

In the leadup to the UK 2024 General Election, the Labour Party pledged to “reset the UK Government’s relationship with devolved Government’s in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland”.⁵⁷

To achieve this, the party’s “Change” manifesto said it would create a new Council of the Nations and Regions and introduce a Memorandum of Understanding on legislative consent. Since then, the Labour Government has often emphasised the “reset” as an improvement in the day-to-day workings of the central and devolved governments.⁵⁸

4.1 The Council of Nations and Regions

The creation of a new Council of the Nations and Regions was one of the first acts of the Starmer Government after its election victory in July 2024. Proposals for the Council came out of a recommendation in the Labour Party’s Commission on the UK’s future in 2022, chaired by former Prime Minister Gordon Brown.⁵⁹ The Council itself was confirmed in the King’s Speech on 17 July 2024, as part of the government’s plans to strengthen working with the devolved governments.⁶⁰

The Council aims to facilitate working between the central and devolved governments, alongside the Mayor of London and Mayors of Combined Authorities.⁶¹ It takes a structured approach to tackling cross-cutting issues faced by devolved and local governments. The deputy prime minister and the minister for intergovernmental relations also attend, while others may be invited when relevant to their portfolios.

The Council is chaired by the Prime Minister and meets biannually in locations around the UK. It held its inaugural meeting on 11 October 2024 in Edinburgh, and met for a second time in London on 23 May 2025.⁶² Like many intergovernmental relations bodies, it is supported by a standing secretariat of UK government officials.

⁵⁷ [Change: Labour Party Manifesto 2024](#)

⁵⁸ [The intergovernmental relations ‘reset’ one year on](#), SPICe Briefing, 2025

⁵⁹ [A New Britain: Renewing our Democracy and Building our Economy](#), Labour, 2022

⁶⁰ [The King’s Speech 2024](#), Prime Minister’s Office, 2024

⁶¹ [Council Of the Nations and Regions](#), House of Commons Library, 2024

⁶² [Written Statement: The Council of the Nations and Regions – 23 May 2025](#), Welsh Government, 2025

The Council is notably the first formal body to involve England in the intergovernmental relation structure.⁶³ A recent report from the Bennett Institute and PolicyWISE described this as “an important innovation” in territorial governance, with a real potential” to improve relationships between the UK, devolved governments and English Mayors.⁶⁴ The report was also cautious to note differences in constitutional standing and capacities between devolved governments and metro mayors, as well as calling for greater clarity on the Council’s role within the existing intergovernmental relations framework.

4.2 Legislative consent

Legislative consent forms an important part of the UK’s constitutional arrangements.⁶⁵ Under the Sewel convention, the UK Parliament retains sovereignty to legislate on devolved areas, but they will “not normally” do so “except with the agreement of the devolved legislature.”⁶⁶

In practice this means that, when the UK Government plans to legislate on an area that falls within the convention, they are expected to consult with devolved governments. When the bill is passing through the UK Parliament, the devolved legislatures vote on a legislative consent motion that may grant or withhold consent for the bill, partially or fully.⁶⁷

This process aims to “prevent the UK Parliament from unilaterally changing devolved powers or overriding decisions made by devolved institutions”.⁶⁸ As a constitutional convention, however, it is not legally binding, and the UK Parliament may pass bills without devolved consent. Ministers from both Scotland and Wales have criticised the

⁶³ [The State of Intergovernmental Relations in England](#), University of Liverpool and Liverpool John Moores University, 2025

⁶⁴ [A More Collaborative Way of Governing](#), Bennett Institute for Public Policy and PolicyWISE, 2025

⁶⁵ [Legislative consent: what, why and how?](#)

⁶⁶ [Memorandum of Understanding between the UK Government, the Scottish Ministers, the Welsh Ministers, and the Northern Ireland Executive Committee](#), 2013

⁶⁷ [Sewel convention](#), Institute for Government, 2024

⁶⁸ [Legislative consent: what, why and how?](#), House of Commons Library, 2018

previous UK Government's willingness to legislate without devolved consent,⁶⁹ a practice which became more frequent after Brexit.⁷⁰

In addition to creating the Council of Nations and Regions, Labour's Change manifesto also committed to strengthening legislative consent. To do so, it said the Government would introduce a new MOU on the Sewel convention, "outlining how the nations will work together for the common good."⁷¹

Since Labour entered government in 2024, there has been some progress towards a Sewel Convention MOU. Writing to the Scottish Affairs Committee Chair in February 2025, the Secretary of State for Scotland Ian Murray said,

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster is leading on the coordination of this work, closely supported by the Secretaries of State for Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. Initial conversations between officials in each government took place last year and we look forward to continuing that soon.⁷²

4.3 Northern Ireland's position

In September 2024, the House of Lords Constitution Committee published a report on "The Governance of the Union: Consultation, Co-operation and Legislative Consent".⁷³ Their inquiry considered intergovernmental relations in light of the new tiered structure and followed up on a 2022 report that had identified a deterioration of relations and a lack of cooperation, respect and insufficient engagement.⁷⁴

The new inquiry called for evidence on intergovernmental relations cooperation since January 2022, consultation between the UK Government and devolved governments, and respect for the Sewel convention.⁷⁵

⁶⁹ See discussion in [Inter-institutional relations agreement between the Senedd and the Welsh Government](#), Welsh Government, 2025; and [The intergovernmental relations 'reset': one year on](#), SPICe Briefing, 2025

⁷⁰ [The precarious state of the state: Devolution](#), Institute for Government, 2024

⁷¹ [Serving the country – The Labour Party](#)

⁷² [Correspondence from The Rt Hon Ian Murray MP to Patricia Ferguson MP](#), 26 February 2025

⁷³ [The Governance of the Union: Consultation, Co-operation and Legislative consent](#), House of Lords, Select Committee on the Constitution, 2024

⁷⁴ [Respect and Co-operation: Building a Stronger Union for the 21st century](#), House of Lords, Select Committee on the Constitution, 2022

⁷⁵ [An effective Union for the common good should be priority for new Government](#), House of Lords, Select Committee on the Constitution, 2024

A response from the Northern Ireland Executive on 12 September 2024 said,

We consider it too early to propose any enhancement to the structures. The current structures were developed and agreed following a lengthy process of discussion between the four governments, and all have demonstrated a commitment to their operation. Practical issues arising from the implementation of the IGR agreement are resolved at official level forums, established to oversee its operation. In addition, the creation of an impartial Secretariat has provided a valuable resource for administrative support and co-ordination of business across the governments.⁷⁶

Meanwhile, the Northern Ireland Assembly Executive Office Committee response on 12 May 2024 said,

9. There should be consideration as to how the new bodies created under the Safeguarding the Union command paper – the East-West Council, the Independent Monitoring Panel of the Windsor Framework and Intertrade UK – complement the inter-governmental arrangements

11. Consideration should be given to the effects of the inter-governmental arrangements and commitments in the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement

16. The inquiry should consider the lack of communication and consultation in relation to the delivery of UK-wide programmes. This was most marked during the period the Northern Ireland Assembly was not sitting, particularly in relation to the loss of EU funds and the delivery of replacement funds, such as the Shared Prosperity Fund. The local voluntary and community work was dismissed.⁷⁷

After reviewing the evidence, the Committee recommended, inter alia, that the UK Government should commit to respecting the Sewel convention, introduce a new principle of positive engagement that requires engagement on legislative proposals in areas of devolved competence, and finalise and fully implement all common frameworks.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ [Northern Ireland Executive Office – Written Evidence \(GOU0013\)](#)

⁷⁷ [Northern Ireland Assembly – Committee for The Executive Office – Written Evidence \(GOU0009\)](#)

⁷⁸ [Constitution Committee report on the governance of the union](#), House of Lords Library, 2025

5 Common frameworks

Since Brexit, the trading relationship between different parts of the UK has become a key area that depends on effective intergovernmental relations. The internal trade regime is still in its infancy, but the final two sections briefly outline how common frameworks and the UK Internal Market Act 2020 (UKIMA) operate in parallel to the intergovernmental architecture introduced by the 2022 review and the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement.

Common frameworks create common practice in policy areas to maintain a UK-wide approach,⁷⁹ and allow the UK and devolved governments to mutually agree some amount of regulatory consistency for policy areas where returning EU powers are within devolved competence.

5.1 Common frameworks guidance

Guidance for developing common frameworks was agreed at a meeting of the EU Negotiations Joint Ministerial Committee in October 2017. Common frameworks aim to manage policy divergence in areas of devolved competence that were previously regulated by the EU.⁸⁰ They allow for a sector-specific agreements between the UK and devolved governments, rather than the wider reaching UKIMA.⁸¹

Each framework aims to set out a common UK approach, including how it will be operated and governed. Only one common framework has been finalised so far, while a further 27 are in operation but require final approval from UK and devolved ministers.⁸² For this reason, a recent House of Lords Scrutiny Committee reported that the frameworks represented an “unfulfilled opportunity” at present, despite helping reach consensus between governments in some areas.⁸³ In addition, six common frameworks apply only to the UK Government and Northern Ireland Executive.

Since taking office, the Labour Government has signalled that it will prioritise common frameworks for regulating the UK’s internal market since leaving the EU. In response to the 2025 UKIMA review, the UK Government said that common frameworks are the

⁷⁹ [Common Frameworks](#), Northern Ireland Assembly

⁸⁰ [Intergovernmental relations](#), Institute for Government, 2022

⁸¹ [The territorial constitution: what is it and why does it matter?](#), The Constitution Unit, 2025

⁸² [UK Common Frameworks](#), Cabinet Office, 2025

⁸³ [Devolution and intergovernmental relations](#), POST, 2024

“most important tool” to find shared approaches or manage different approaches,⁸⁴ and that UKIMA should “sit in the background, only operating to underpin an efficient and effective internal market”⁸⁵

6 The UK Internal Market Act 2020

The UK Internal Market Act operates alongside common frameworks to regulate internal trade within the UK. To do so, the Act establishes a legal underpinning for trade relations between different parts of the UK.⁸⁶

6.1 Market principles and UKIMA in practice

UKIMA is based on a set of market access principles aimed at reducing intra-trade barriers within the UK. These include non-discrimination, so that regulations in one part of the UK do not discriminate against goods or services from another region, and mutual recognition, so that goods and services that can be legally sold in one part of the UK can also be sold in any other region.⁸⁷ In practice, this allows goods produced in one jurisdiction of the UK to be sold in other parts without additional requirements.⁸⁸

Ministers from devolved governments can request exclusions to be made so that local regulations apply to all goods sold, if this is agreed through the common frameworks process.⁸⁹

The Act was opposed by the Scottish and Welsh governments, who argued that it undermined the devolution settlement by restricting their ability to effectively regulate their market post-Brexit.⁹⁰

As part of its statutory requirements, the UK Government launched a review into UKIMA and published a report in July 2025. In their response to the consultation, the Government said, the market access principles should not be weakened, recognising

⁸⁴ [UK Internal Market Act 2020: review and consultation relating to Parts 1, 2, 3 and 4](#), DBT, 2024

⁸⁵ [UK Government response to the Review of the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020 and Public Consultation](#), DBT, 2025

⁸⁶ [United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020](#)

⁸⁷ [Brexit and Devolution](#), Northern Ireland Assembly

⁸⁸ [Intergovernmental relations](#), Institute for Government, 2022

⁸⁹ [Process for considering UK Internal Market Act exclusions in Common Framework areas](#), MHCLG, Cabinet Office and DLUHC, 2021

⁹⁰ [The precarious state of the state: Devolution](#), Institute for Government, 2024

their important role in facilitating smooth trade. It also confirmed that common frameworks would be the “principal place” for intergovernmental working.⁹¹

⁹¹ [UK Government response to the Review of the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020 and Public Consultation](#), DBT, 2025