

Press release: Prime Minister to visit Northern Ireland

The Prime Minister will reaffirm her commitment to a Brexit that avoids a hard border and protects the Belfast Agreement, in a visit to Northern Ireland this week (Thursday 19 – Friday 20 July).

In a visit to a border area on Thursday with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the Prime Minister will meet with businesses to listen to their views on what working, living and trading across the border means to them.

The PM will deliver a speech on Friday in Belfast, which will emphasise her personal commitment to the strength of the UK's four nations and the solutions set out in the White Paper that address Northern Ireland's unique circumstances.

On restoring devolved government to Northern Ireland, the PM is expected to meet with political parties on working together towards this goal for the benefit of all communities.

She will also speak to young people to hear their views on Northern Ireland's future, for them and generations to come.

Prime Minister Theresa May said:

I look forward to hearing views from businesses on the border in Northern Ireland on our departure from the European Union.

I fully recognise how their livelihoods, families and friends rely on the ability to move freely across the border to trade, live and work on a daily basis.

That's why we have ruled out any kind of hard border. Daily journeys will continue to be seamless and there will be no checks or infrastructure at the border to get in the way of this.

I've also been clear we will not accept the imposition of any border down the Irish Sea and we will preserve the integrity of the UK's internal market and Northern Ireland's place within it.

From the start of the negotiations, the UK Government has put Northern Ireland's unique circumstances at the heart of our negotiations. And nothing will undermine our commitment to protecting the Belfast Agreement.

I also look forward to meeting political parties on working together to restore stable and effective devolved Government for the benefit of everyone in Northern Ireland.

News story: UK Minister for Africa condemns ongoing conflict in South Sudan

The UK's Minister for Africa, Harriett Baldwin, has visited South Sudan to call on all parties to find an urgent solution to the conflict which is causing extreme man-made suffering across the country.

During her visit, Mrs Baldwin made clear that the UK will not tolerate ongoing human rights abuses happening in the country, and urged South Sudan's leaders to demonstrate that they are committed to peace by abiding by the ceasefire they signed in Khartoum.

Meeting with First Vice President Taban Deng Gai, Mrs Baldwin handed over a copy of a UN report on the indiscriminate use of violence against civilians in the Southern Unity region of the country. She also shared World Food Programme data showing declining agricultural outputs across the country, heightening the risk of famine.

The ongoing conflict in South Sudan is having a devastating impact on the population. 7 million people (two thirds of the population) are in need of urgent humanitarian assistance and continued obstructions are threatening to prevent lifesaving assistance reaching those most in need. Human rights abuses are rife, including shocking levels of sexual and gender-based violence, which is having devastating consequences on the lives of the most vulnerable. Mrs Baldwin welcomed the announcement on Friday of UN sanctions and an arms embargo on South Sudan, which will help to hold the perpetrators to account.

The UK is one of the top three humanitarian donors in South Sudan, providing lifesaving support to hundreds of thousands of people, and some 340 British military troops providing important engineering and medical assistance to the UN Mission of South Sudan. UK aid is supporting the continuation of vital health and education services in the country, including supporting the country's only paediatric hospital, which the Minister had the opportunity to visit. Ms Baldwin also met young girls at a UK aid-funded school in Juba, who told her how ongoing conflict is affecting their lives and hopes for the future.

The conflict is driving the largest refugee crisis in Africa, with 2.5 million people having fled to neighbouring countries. The UK is providing extensive support to countries such as Uganda who are hosting huge refugee populations, and helping those refugees to rebuild their lives in the neighbouring countries to help bring stability to the whole region.

UK Minister for Africa Harriett Baldwin said:

South Sudan's leaders must demonstrate that they are committed to peace and immediately silence their guns. The UK stands with the people of South Sudan who are suffering the horrific consequences of this man-made crisis.

We will not abandon the people of South Sudan and their hopes for a peaceful future – which is why we're working to bring stability to the whole region, and provide the next generation with the skills they need to begin to rebuild their country.

The UN sanctions and arms embargo announced last Friday are a strong sign of international support for regional peace talks. I have seen for myself the effects of this devastating conflict. Meaningful progress will only happen if the perpetrators of violence know they will be held to account.

Press release: James Brokenshire provides stronger powers for councils to tackle empty homes

Introduced in March, this legislation originally contained provision for councils to double the rate of tax on properties that had been empty for 2 years or more.

The government is now going further and introducing an amendment that would allow councils to triple the council tax on homes left empty for five to 10 years and quadruple it on those empty for more than a decade.

Homes which have been empty for between 2 and 5 years would still be subject to the Council Tax bill being doubled under the proposal.

Secretary of State for Communities the Rt Hon James Brokenshire MP said:

We're determined to do everything we can to ensure our communities have the housing they need.

That's why we're giving councils extra flexibility to increase bills and incentivise owners to bring long-standing empty homes back into use.

By equipping councils with the right tools to get on with the job, we could potentially provide thousands more families with a place to call home.

Councils will be able to use funds from the premium to keep Council Tax levels down for hard working families.

Currently, there are just over 200,000 homes empty for 6 months or more in England, compared to 300,000 in 2010. This number has reduced dramatically since 2013 after councils were given powers to charge a 50% premium on council tax bills.

The vast majority of councils have introduced 50 per cent premiums on long-term empty homes. Where councils have applied the premium consistently every year, there has been a nine per cent fall in the number of homes being charged the premium.

To ensure the proposed new powers are not used to unfairly punish those facing difficult circumstances, the government has also announced today that it will publish revised guidance for councils on the use of premiums. This will also take into account issues relating to low-demand areas and ensure it does not hinder complex regeneration schemes.

The move is one of a range of measures introduced by the government to fix the country's broken housing market. Through an ambitious package of long-term reform and targeted investment, government is ensuring communities have the homes they need.

The amendment was made during the Third Reading of the Rating (Property in Common Occupation) and Council Tax (Empty Dwellings) Bill in the House of Lords today (18 July 2018).

Decisions on whether to charge a premium, and the exact rates to be charged will remain a matter for councils, taking local circumstances into account. It is anticipated that councils will be able to charge 100% premiums from April 2019, 200% premiums from April 2020 and 300% premiums from 2021.

The government is clear that the premium must not be applied where homeowners can demonstrate that their properties are genuinely on the market for sale or rent, or in cases of hardship. Councils will also need to take into account the issues of low-demand areas.

Councils have powers to refrain from charging the empty homes premium in individual cases, and there are various exemptions. No Council Tax at all can be charged on empty properties where the liable council taxpayer:

- has gone into care or hospital, is severely mentally impaired or has gone elsewhere to provide care
- is living elsewhere in armed forces accommodation for job-related purposes
- has died and probate has yet to be granted

No Council Tax premium can be charged on annexes being used as part of a main property.

Councils already have powers and incentives to tackle empty homes. Through the New Homes Bonus scheme introduced in 2011, councils earn the same

financial reward for bringing an empty home back into use as for building a new one.

Since 2013, councils have been able to charge a 50% premium on the council tax bills of owners of homes empty for two years or more. A total of 291 out of 326 councils applied an empty homes premium in 2017 to 2018. All but 3 are charging the premium at the maximum 50% rate.

News story: Campaign to increase number of BAME organ donors announced

The new campaign aims to increase organ donation rates within black, Asian and minority ethnic communities by raising awareness and breaking down barriers to donation. It will be delivered by NHS Blood and Transplant with support from the National BAME Transplant Alliance (NBTA).

The campaign follows figures from NHS Blood and Transplant that show 21% of people who died on the waiting list last year were from a black, Asian or ethnic minority background. The figure was 15% a decade ago.

The [NHS Blood and Transplant report](#) reveals only 7% of donors last year were from BAME backgrounds. This figure is increasing thanks to more families saying yes to donation when asked in hospitals.

Family refusal continues to be the biggest obstacle to organ donation among these communities. Around half as many families support organ donation compared with families from a white background.

Health Minister Jackie Doyle-Price said:

I am delighted that this year more people than ever from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds have received life-saving transplants. This shows great progress, but the fact remains that if you are from any one of these communities, you are more likely to need a transplant, for the simple reason that you are more likely to suffer from a disease that requires a transplant. At the same time, you are less likely to get a transplant than if you were white.

The campaign we are launching today will be a driving force to save more lives. The government, MPs, faith leaders, charities, campaigners, influencers, friends and families all have a role to play to address myths and barriers and bring attention to the lifesaving power of donation.

Our project will include a community investment scheme to enable local groups to deliver this vital work. For now, I would ask on behalf of everyone who has received a transplant, and everyone who is waiting for the life-changing news that an organ has been found: sign up to donate and give the gift of life.

Anthony Clarkson from NHS Blood and Transplant said:

While it is encouraging that more black, Asian and ethnic minority families are supporting donation – making more lifesaving transplants possible – change is not happening fast enough and too many lives are being lost. Although many black, Asian and ethnic minority patients are able to receive a transplant from a white donor, others may die if there is no donor from their own community.

We are asking more people from these communities to talk about organ donation and share their donation decision with their families. Words save lives.

News story: Research partnership visits Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre (DCDC)

The research institute, RAND Europe, formed the consortium, the Global Strategic Partnership, to respond to DCDC's need for the provision of research and analysis support to the Strategic Analysis Team.

The consortium includes the International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS) and the University of Exeter, spearheaded by the Strategy and Security Institute.

Representatives from the GSP member organisations described the capabilities they offered. MOD Crown Copyright 2018.

It also has access to organisations and individuals providing specific subject matter and analytical expertise. These include: QinetiQ, Newman and Spurr Consultancy (NSC), Aleph Insights, Simplexity Analysis and Professor Sir Huw Strachan.

The visit gave DCDC personnel a chance to engage with the different members of the partnership and hear first-hand how their capabilities could inform and support future work.