

Secretary of State holds talks with party leaders after restoration of Executive deadline passes

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the Rt Hon Chris Heaton-Harris MP spoke with NI party leaders following the failure to restore the NI Executive.

Following the meetings in Belfast, he stressed that he was now under a legal duty to call an election as set out in the New Decade New Approach agreement.

Mr Heaton-Harris also highlighted the serious situation that the lack of an Executive has left the people of Northern Ireland facing, including rising cost of living challenges, growing pressure on health services and a concerning financial overspend situation with no clear strategy for balancing the budget.

He expressed particular concern about the state of Stormont's finances, which half way through the financial year are forecasting a £661m overspend.

Mr Heaton-Harris also discussed MLA pay, and how he would be looking at taking action on this should the Executive fail to re-form. Since the election in May, MLAs have been paid more than £3 million, despite not being able to conduct business.

He met Vice President of Sinn Féin Michelle O'Neill, leader of the Democratic Unionist Party Sir Jeffrey Donaldson, leader of the Alliance Party Naomi Long and leader of the Ulster Unionist Party Doug Beattie. He will meet Irish Foreign Minister Simon Coveney on Wednesday.

Commenting after the meetings, Heaton-Harris said:

"I had conversations with party leaders today and expressed how disappointed I am that under current legislation the legal duty now falls on me to call an election. I listened to the party leaders' various views on calling that election."

"There are important issues of government to be dealt with due to the absence of ministers.

"I am particularly worried that the Executive has an enormous black hole in its budget, which potentially has serious implications for the delivery of many of Northern Ireland's public services. Measures to set a budget will be required in the short term.

"I will provide a further update on next steps in due course."

Energy bill support for Northern Ireland households launches

- Energy Price Guarantee launches in Northern Ireland today – cutting energy costs for households
- the UK government scheme will reduce energy bills until the end of March 2023 to help consumers this winter – providing equivalent support to that being delivered in Great Britain
- it comes in addition to wider support including a £400 discount on bills and scheme to protect businesses from surging energy costs

From today (Tuesday 1 November) households in Northern Ireland will receive money off their energy bills, shielding them from soaring energy costs as the UK government's Energy Price Guarantee launches.

The scheme reduces the price suppliers charge customers for units of gas and electricity, with support running until 31 March 2023 – providing crucial help to households who might otherwise face very significant increases in their energy bills.

It offers support equivalent to help already being delivered in Great Britain, which is expected to save consumers who use both gas and electricity around £700 this winter.

Households will see the discount on their energy bills from this month, with savings for October's energy use seen in bills from November. To make this as easy as possible, there is no need for consumers to apply for the scheme with support delivered automatically.

Business and Energy Secretary Grant Shapps said:

Getting this support to households across Northern Ireland will help ease the pressures facing families this winter, with consumers seeing a discount on their bills from this month.

We've worked at pace to deliver this support, including introducing new powers so the UK government can get it to households as soon as possible, with a further £400 discount on bills due later this winter.

Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Chris Heaton-Harris said:

This is vital support for households across Northern Ireland, providing relief for many families in the face of high energy

bills.

It is disappointing that this support has had to be delivered in the absence of a functioning Executive, but the government has been clear in its commitment to help Northern Ireland households through this challenging time.

Only this week the UK government put into law support to help households with their energy bills through the Energy Prices Act. This gives the UK government powers to ensure support can get to households, businesses and public-sector organisations in Northern Ireland this winter in the absence of a fully functioning devolved government.

It comes in addition to the previously announced £400 energy bill discount for all households through the Northern Ireland Energy Bills Support Scheme. This also offers the same level of support as households in Great Britain, with the UK government working at pace to deliver a solution which accounts for differences in the Northern Ireland energy market so it can get to households as soon as possible.

John French, Chief Executive of the Utility Regulator said:

The Utility Regulator welcomes the delivery of both the Energy Price Guarantee scheme and the Energy Bill Relief Scheme in Northern Ireland, the first schemes to go live from the UK government's energy support package. This support is desperately needed to help households and businesses in Northern Ireland with their energy bills this winter.

We have worked hard to assist the UK government with the delivery of these schemes and we will continue to provide proactive support to get the additional schemes rolled out in Northern Ireland. Specifically, we are currently working with the UK government to ensure that the £400 Energy Bill Support Scheme payment is paid to Northern Ireland consumers as soon as possible.

Under the Energy Price Guarantee, energy suppliers will reduce bills in Northern Ireland by up to 20p/kWh for electricity and 4.8p/kWh for gas. The discount for households in Northern Ireland has been set to account for energy use covering October.

For pre-payment meter customers in Northern Ireland, the Energy Price Guarantee will be applied to the rate you pay for each unit of energy at the same rate as for all other customers (20p/kWh for electricity and 4.8p/kWh for gas), so the money put on the meter will last longer than would otherwise have been the case this winter.

Those not on the main gas grid and therefore use alternative fuels like heating oil to warm their homes will instead receive a one-off £100 payment. This has been calculated to ensure a typical customer using heating oil does

not face a higher rate of growth in their heating costs since last winter, in comparison to those using mains gas who are supported by the Energy Price Guarantee. The government will set out the timing of this payment soon.

Support with energy bills is also available for businesses, public and voluntary sector organisations across Northern Ireland through the Energy Bill Relief Scheme. It works in a similar way as the Energy Price Guarantee, providing a discount on the wholesale cost of gas and electricity and could see wholesale energy costs reduced by half for some businesses.

Whilst the scheme applies to energy use from 1 October, savings applied to October bills are typically received in November – meaning businesses across the UK will start to feel the benefits this month.

Government support with energy bills will deliver substantial benefits to the economy – boosting growth and curbing inflation by 4 to 5 points, reducing the cost of servicing the national debt.

Households who are eligible for but who do not receive Alternative Fuel Payment, because they do not have a relationship with an electricity supplier for example, will receive the £100 via the Alternative Fuel Payment Discretionary Fund which will be provided by a designated body.

Details of when this payment will be made and how the UK government will identify eligible households will be confirmed shortly. The UK government is committed to delivering this support to customers as fast as possible. There is no central register, either in Great Britain or Northern Ireland, of people who do not use the gas grid for their heating; therefore, we are working rapidly with stakeholders on the best way to identify those who are eligible for support.

[See full details of government energy bills support.](#)

UK leads the way on ending plastic pollution

The Environment Secretary has today started talks with businesses, environmental groups, scientists and civil society on shaping a legally-binding global treaty that aims to end plastic pollution by 2040.

Plastic pollution is one of the greatest global environmental challenges we currently face and it is predicted that unless action is taken there will be a threefold increase in the amount of plastic flowing into the ocean between 2016 and 2040.

In partnership with the Ocean Plastics Leadership Network – an organisation

comprised of industry, scientists and activists – the UK Government is running a series of dialogue meetings, which will be key in strengthening the UK's leading voice at the treaty negotiations.

At the first meeting, stakeholders including Tesco, Sainsburys, Coca Cola, Nestle, H&M and Greenpeace came together to provide their views on how UK businesses can contribute towards bringing an end to plastic pollution, and inform the UK's negotiating position for a far-reaching treaty.

The international treaty will set obligations on countries to reduce pollution across the whole plastics lifecycle – from production and consumption to disposal and waste management. The first formal negotiations will take place on 28 November to 2 December 2022 in Uruguay and will be facilitated by the United Nations Environment Programme.

Environment Secretary Thérèse Coffey said:

"Plastic pollution has a direct and deadly effect on our wildlife, polluting our ocean and damaging our planet.

"Our laws are already helping to cut waste domestically, and international action is needed to end plastic pollution by 2040.

"Today's meeting was important in bringing together government, business and environmental organisations on this issue – it's vital for us all to work together if we are to make progress in tackling plastic pollution globally."

Dave Ford, Founder, Ocean Plastics Leadership Network said:

"We are honoured to collaborate with the UK Government on the UK Plastics Treaty Dialogues.

"Our objective with the series is to build knowledge and understanding of the UN Global Treaty process and various solutions, to help unite the myriad of stakeholders in working together in efforts to solve the plastics crisis.

"We aim to expand this effort to 20 countries worldwide."

Current commitments around the world will only reduce the annual discharge of plastic into the ocean by 7% by 2040, according to the [Breaking the Plastic Wave report](#) published by the Pew Charitable Trusts. The only way to achieve a significant reduction in the flow of plastic into the environment is by taking action across the whole lifecycle of plastic, reducing our consumption of plastic, re-using plastic products and improving waste management systems.

The UK has been a leading voice in attempts to tackle marine plastic pollution, [co-sponsoring the proposal to prepare a new treaty](#) and being a founding member of the High Ambition Coalition to End Plastic Pollution, a group of more than 30 countries calling for a target under the treaty to stop plastic from flowing into our lands and ocean by 2040.

This builds on the UK's world-leading efforts to tackle plastic pollution at home. We have so far introduced a plastic packaging tax on packaging that

contains less than 30% recycled plastic, a ban on microbeads in rinse-off personal care products, and measures to restrict the supply of plastic straws, plastic drink stirrers and plastic-stemmed cotton buds.

Our carrier bag charge has reduced the use of single-use carrier bags in the main supermarkets by over 95%. We plan to go even further through our Environment Act, which enables us to change the way we manage our waste. Through the introduction of extended producer responsibility for packaging, we will ensure producers cover the costs of collecting and managing plastic waste.

The Environment Act also gives us powers to introduce deposit return schemes, establish greater consistency in the recycling system, better control the export of plastic waste and introduce charges for single-use items.

The impact of parenting on children's outcomes

Parents and carers serve as children's first educators and teachers. This is something most people can agree on, yet offering parents advice on how they can best perform these important roles is something of a taboo. Home and family life is rightly private and pushing tired, stretched parents to do more and more can come across as patronising, 'parent-shaming' or simply tone deaf in today's difficult economic climate.

Yet, getting parenting right has the potential to shape a child's growth, development and life course for the better, irrespective of socioeconomic background or circumstance. More recently, government agencies, charities, schools and even private companies have clocked the holistic benefits of parent-child interactions and various campaigns have emerged on the topic such as the BBC's [Tiny Happy People](#) and the NHS' [Start for Life](#).

As the conversation around parenting gets louder, some are calling for further action. Lee Elliot Major, Professor of Social Mobility at Exeter University, says in the first episode of our Social Mobility Talks podcast: "There are too many parents who are not given the information of what you can do to help your children".

At the Social Mobility Commission, we have looked into the activities parents can do with their children to support their child's development. This work has shown that the early years are an essential window to act, as the experiences a child has in their first 5 years provide the building blocks for their life.

In these early years, there is great opportunity, but also great risk, as children that get ahead tend to stay ahead whilst those that fall behind

struggle to catch up. To bring this home, on average, the poorest children start school 4.5 months behind all others and leave school at age 18 a staggering 18.1 months of learning behind their more advantaged peers (Education Policy Institute, Annual Report, 2020).

What parents can do

Simple interactions between a parent and child can be learning moments for children in their early years, in ways likely more significant than at any other period in the child's life. Therefore, giving a child a leg up can be as simple as talking, playing and reading with them. Regardless of whether a child has the ability or vocabulary to respond, engaging in reciprocal communication can develop their cognitive and language skills and using an array of words is one of the strongest predictors of children's early language development.

In terms of play, 'guided play' – where a parent joins in a playful activity with their child – can lead to improvements in a child's understanding and retention of things like shapes and names compared with those who play alone. Learning through play also contributes to all kinds of healthy development features such as planning, self-regulation and mental flexibility.

For educational attainment reading is a big ticket item, but, as drawn out in our podcast episode on parenting, reading only reaches its potential impact if it is consistent – at least 3 times a week for 15 minutes. Reading with a child has been shown to improve their socio-emotional skills as well as literacy and numeracy and it is linked with lifelong benefits for cognition, vocabulary and pattern construction.

As often said, it takes a village to raise a child, and therefore every adult that's around in a child's early years has the potential to engage with them in productive interactions that can seed countless lasting benefits.

How we can help parents

To avoid shaming, patronising, nannying or burdening parents who are already trying to do the best for their children, policy makers, the health services and government departments need to find ways to offer empathetic but proactive guidance, confidence and support.

Parents need to be made aware that talking to their baby is beneficial, even if they are too young to respond – and assured that reading does not have to mean long complicated books but can be any words they see around them.

Research also shows that lack of confidence plays a key role in why parents do or do not engage with their children. For parents in general, but particularly those that might not have experienced this style of parenting themselves, wavering belief in their own abilities and skills may contribute to stress, anxiety and unhappiness which can itself act as a barrier to supporting their child's learning.

We therefore need to translate these findings into constructive action which fills the gaps in parents' knowledge and empowers them with the tools and confidence to interact more effectively with their children. We need to do this while recognising that parents operate within a wider environment, juggling raising their children with other challenges – such as getting food on the table, working long hours, keeping up with rising energy bills and finding secure housing.

The SMC will therefore be looking to increase parents' understanding of how they can nurture their children's talent in the early years whilst at the same time, considering how other factors, like improving education, growing the economy and creating more opportunities for more people in more places are so crucial. To succeed, we need to provide parents knowledge along with the time, resources and a favourable environment to act on it.

To shape our thinking, we will explore the impact of government-led initiatives that have targeted families to understand 'what works' in terms of enabling every child to fulfil their potential.

To listen to our podcast on the topic of parenting, a conversation between our Chair, Katharine Birbalsingh and Lee Elliot Major, Professor of Social Mobility at the University of Exeter, follow one of the links below:

[Privy Council appointments: 1 November 2022](#)

Press release

The King has approved the following new appointments to His Majesty's Most Honourable Privy Council



The King has been pleased to approve that Rachel Reeves MP and Baron Kennedy of Southwark be sworn of His Majesty's most Honourable Privy Council.

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