

Speech: Minister Smith NICCY speech

Thank you very much for inviting me to attend this excellent event today.

You've made it clear to me that there are worries about Brexit, about what it will mean for your families and for your future, and I want you to just take a moment to hear a different perspective.

I want to tell you about the opportunity of Brexit, about what it can mean for the economy, for jobs, for your university experience and for your future as the next leaders and involved citizens of Northern Ireland.

Before turning to the subject of Brexit I want to provide a short update on the politics because as those attending will be all too aware it is essential that we see the return of an NI Executive as soon as possible to allow Northern Ireland's issues to be fully represented at all levels in the negotiation process.

Despite intensive efforts it has not yet been possible for the parties to reach agreement and as a result the Secretary of State has not been able to bring forward legislation to enable an Executive to form. Crucially, a budget for the current financial year has yet to be set. The consequence of this is that the UK Government and the Northern Ireland Civil Service have assessed that Northern Ireland will begin to run out of resources soon.

The Government therefore intends for a Budget Bill to be introduced into Parliament on Monday in order to protect the delivery of public services in Northern Ireland.

The UK Government's strong preference would be for a restored Executive here in Northern Ireland to take forward its own Budget. So this step is one that the UK Government is taking with the utmost reluctance.

The UK Government's priority will continue to be the restoration of devolved government in Northern Ireland. The Secretary of State will continue to work with political parties to encourage them towards an agreement to form an Executive.

The issue you have spent the day analysing – the decision by the people of the UK to leave the European Union – presents a range of challenges and opportunities.

I want to stress that in discussions about the future of the relationship between Northern Ireland and Ireland, we have agreed that the Belfast Agreement should be protected in full. That means that if the people here want Northern Ireland to remain within the United Kingdom, that will continue to be the case.

The money in your and your family's pocket will be at the heart of our discussions on Brexit. We are leaving the EU but that does not mean we are turning our backs on our friends and partners in Europe.

What is also clear is that we are committed to securing a deal with the EU that works for the whole of the United Kingdom, including Northern Ireland. That was clear from the Prime Minister's speech in Florence recently, and we have made our intentions clear specifically about what we Northern Ireland to the EU in a paper we gave them over the summer.

At the moment, you can travel from the UK to Ireland without a visa and without a passport. For many decades we've had a system called the Common Travel Area. We want this to continue after Brexit, and the EU agrees with us on this.

We want to uphold the Belfast Agreement in all its parts; avoiding what some people call a 'hard border' when goods cross from one country to another. We want to work north-south with Ireland and we want Ireland to work with the UK east-west too. It's a great relationship at the moment and we want that to continue.

We have also made excellent progress discussing the citizenship and identity rights provided for in the Belfast Agreement and scoping the North-South cooperation that currently takes place under the Agreement.

We want there to be free movement of goods, and we want to ensure local businesses that your families may work in here in Newry and across Northern Ireland can continue to trade freely across the border.

The Government also recognises investors, businesses and citizens in the UK, Ireland, the rest of the EU, and beyond, need to be able to plan ahead. What would be most helpful to people and businesses on both sides, is for us to agree detailed arrangements for what's called an implementation period, so that people can get used to the changes and things only change once.

The Prime Minister said in Florence, and again recently in Parliament in Westminster that we want this period of implementation to give businesses and people certainty and time to prepare for the change; and a guarantee that this implementation period will only be for a certain time – two years.

No-one pretends that leaving the EU is easy, it is not. It will require a period of adjustment for both the UK and the EU, for our businesses and our citizens.

But the Government respects what people across the UK told them in the referendum on 23rd June last year. We will leave the political institutions of the European Union on 29 March 2019.

This momentous decision presents challenges, as you will all have seen from the media reports and briefings around issues like citizens' rights, financial obligations and the land border here in Ireland. But it presents the UK, including Northern Ireland, with opportunities too.

We have always been an open trading nation, forging alliances across the globe to trade with other people. Since we joined the then-EEC in 1973, we have been part of the trade agreements negotiated on our behalf by the Commission.

While these have benefited the UK and the EU, they have not always been in the best interests of each and every nation to which they apply. Some will gain more and some will lose more – that is the nature of world trade.

Leaving the EU provides the UK, for the first time in a generation, the freedom to negotiate trade deals across the globe with any nation we wish to do so.

Soon, the UK will decide what it is prepared to do to secure the deals it wants.

There are those who say the UK will lose the benefits it currently has, through the trade deals it is part of now, through the EU. But this overlooks the fact that the UK will have freedom to negotiate new terms with these nations which could be better than the ones we have at the moment within the EU.

Trade and immigration are two issues that are often seen to go hand in hand. The UK has benefited from immigration, bringing new cultures, skills and ideas to the UK economy. You only need to see here in Newry, which has a high level of immigration, the benefits this has brought to this area.

We will continue to welcome people to the UK. We need skilled migrants to work across our industries to ensure we have the right people in the right jobs to provide maximum benefit to our economy.

This is what EU exit allows us to do. To have our own immigration policy. One tailored to the different needs of the economy. One that is flexible and can react when we need more people, and equally when we need fewer.

Our trading relationship with the EU is also of crucial importance. We have said that we want to see an excellent free trade agreement with the EU. We believe the EU wants the same thing.

I'm an MP, and along with 649 others I have a vote on laws, one of which at the moment in front of us is called the EU Withdrawal Bill. When that law goes through it means we will have the same rules and regulations governing all of our trade now. Some EU laws will become UK laws.

This means that both our country and our neighbouring countries will be in the same regulatory position when we leave the EU, providing both the UK and the EU with an excellent opportunity to forge a great trading agreement.

Put simply, we buy more stuff from the EU than they do from us. So it's within the EU's interests to have a great agreement with us that doesn't punish the UK.

Obviously, the border down the road from here in Newry is the only actual land border the UK has with an EU country, in this case Ireland.

This does present some challenges, but there's also an opportunity, in that Northern Ireland can act as a bridge between the UK and the EU.

I was about your age when the Belfast Agreement was signed in Belfast between the UK Government and the Irish Government. So much has been done politically, in the economy and in relationships between people of all ages in the past 20 years. We don't want to lose any of that progress.

Northern Ireland's position will mean a slightly different set of rules will apply, to ensure the open border continues as it does now. Is anyone's dad or mum a farmer? You will know that animal health is really important, and it's important standards are kept right across the UK and Ireland to make sure our food is safe and our farms are safe. We're working to make that happen.

So it's clear we need specific solutions to the unique circumstances of Northern Ireland and Ireland ...and that is what we are working towards every day.

I'm really encouraged by what I've heard today. It's clear everyone here really cares about Northern Ireland, about the EU and about the future. It's clear many of you wouldn't have voted for Brexit, but what I want to assure you is that there are hundreds of people in the UK government working really hard every day to make sure we get the best possible Brexit, so when we leave, when you're a bit older and when you hopefully go to university or into training or a job you will know we have done our very best for you, for your families, and for everyone in this country.

And maybe one day someone in this room will be giving a speech like this. Maybe you'll be reflecting on Brexit and what it has meant for Northern Ireland and Ireland. I want to assure you that you will have positive things to say, that there are opportunities ahead and if we all work together, we will make a success of Brexit.

Press release: Thousands of fish released into rivers

The Environment Agency has released 8,000 young fish to give fish stocks a boost in north east rivers.

The chub and dace were released on Thursday, 9 November into the River Tees at Low Coniscliffe and River Wear at Maiden Castle.

It's part of the Environment Agency's ongoing plan to develop and restore rivers in the region, targeting those which have been affected by pollution or where barriers affect fish passage.

Fisheries experts will release a total of 30,000 fish over the next two weeks in rivers and Stillwater fisheries in the north east. As well as the Tees and Wear, fish will be released into the Skerne near Darlington and the Team at

Gateshead.

The fish – chub, dace, roach, bream, tench, rudd and crucian carp – were all reared at the Environment Agency’s fish farm near Calverton, Nottinghamshire, using funding from rod licence sales.

Commitment to anglers

Alice Fitch, Fisheries Team leader for the Environment Agency in the north east, said: “We are pleased that we can provide these fish for stocking as part of our commitment to rod licence paying anglers. Restoration and the creation of new fisheries for all people to enjoy is a very important aspect of our work.”

The Environment Agency releases fish into our waterways annually. Fisheries officers target fish stocking activity using data from national fish surveys to identify where there are problems with poor breeding and survival. Releasing fish helps the process of natural recovery in waters which have been impacted by pollution or suffered poor water quality.

Alice added: “Restocking is one of many things we do together with our partners to develop fisheries, including reducing the effects of pollution, improving habitat and removing barriers to fish migration.”

Fisheries officer Paul Frear releases dace into the River Wear.

Improved water quality

Many of our industrialised rivers have improved dramatically in water quality in the last 30 years and targeted and appropriate restocking has helped the restoration of natural fish stocks and viable fisheries.

Angling is a great way for everyone to keep healthy and enjoy the natural environment. All rod licence income is used to find work to protect and improve fish stocks and fisheries.

Anyone who wants to go fishing needs to buy a rod licence. A full annual licence costs £30 (short term and some concessionary licences are also available) and are available [online](#)

[Fish stocks boost for north east rivers](#)

[Press release: CMA publishes NI](#)

electricity transmission decision

The price control decision relates to the licence that electricity grid operator SONI Limited (SONI) has to operate the grid, which transfers electricity from generators to local supply networks in Northern Ireland (NI) and onwards to businesses and consumers.

This appeal focuses on changes to the licence's price control formula, which affects the income SONI can receive for its activities over the 5-year period from October 2015 to September 2020.

The Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) granted permission to SONI to appeal on 3 overall grounds, in turn divided into 'sub grounds' and specific 'errors', against the UR's decision to modify its licence.

The CMA has upheld the appeal in part. It found, in particular, that some of the UR's decisions have made it difficult for SONI to obtain the finance it requires to continue with its crucial role ensuring the reliable supply of electricity in NI. The CMA also found errors in other areas, such as pension provision for SONI's employees, and dismissed some other aspects of the appeal.

The CMA is now requiring the UR to amend SONI's licence to address the areas where the appeal was successful. In the other areas, the UR's decisions remain in place.

The summary of the final determination is available on the [case page](#), where other information relating to this appeal can be found. The final determination will also be published shortly.

Notes for editors

1. SONI is the electricity Transmission Systems Operator (TSO) for NI, operating the grid which transfers electricity from generators to local supply networks.
2. The UR is responsible for regulating the electricity industry in NI and for licensing electricity suppliers, generators and transmission and distribution companies.
3. The UR published its [Price Control Decision](#) on 14 March 2017. The Price Control Decision was intended to give effect to the arrangements determined by the UR in respect of the 2015–2020 price control for the SONI TSO business (the Price Control), as set out in the [UR's Final Determination](#), published on 24 February 2016.
4. An energy licence holder may appeal to the CMA against a decision by the UR to amend the conditions of its licence. The CMA must decide whether the appellant has demonstrated that the UR's decision was wrong on one or more of the grounds set out in its notice of appeal.
5. The CMA's group of panel members determining the appeal (the Group) has been: [Martin Cave](#) (Chair), [Katherine Holmes](#) and [Jon Stern](#).
6. The Group received and considered submissions from the Consumer Council

for Northern Ireland in addition to those from SONI and the UR.

7. The appeal has been conducted according to the CMA's published [rules](#) and [guidance](#) for energy licence modification appeals.
8. There were 3 grounds of appeal:
 - Ground 1 (financeability methodology) concerned the ability of SONI to obtain finance for its regulated activities, and to obtain a return consistent with the risks faced by SONI under the price control. We found that SONI was not allowed sufficient return in the price control to compensate it for the risks it faced.
 - Ground 2 (revenue uncertainty) concerned the approach to uncertainty. We upheld the appeal to the extent that the mechanism through which SONI would recover its costs of Pre-Construction Network Projects was insufficiently specified and codified. We also found that the mechanism for dealing with uncertain costs as presently specified resulted in significant uncertainties for SONI so that it was difficult for SONI to obtain the finance that it needed to carry out its functions. We dismissed the appeal on the 5 other errors alleged under this ground.
 - Ground 3 (inadequate allowances) concerned the amount of money allowed to SONI for certain activities. We found that the price control failed to provide sufficient allowance to cover pension costs, or to cover certain information systems capital expenditure. We dismissed the appeal on 2 other alleged errors.

[Press release: £2 million flood scheme for Much Wenlock](#)

The scheme has seen the construction of 2 ponds which catch and store water that could otherwise flood properties, businesses and roads in the town. One pond is on the Sytche Brook to the north west of the town and the other is on the Shylte Brook to the south west.

The ponds, which will usually be empty, will fill during times of heavy rain. The collected water will then be released in a controlled manner so that flood risk downstream is reduced. The ponds, which are now fully operational, will drain down sufficiently quickly so that repeat rainfall events can be stored in a similar manner.

The scheme also includes the restoration of Westwood Quarry on Stretton Road.

The flood scheme was supported by the Environment Agency and funded through

Flood Defence Grant in Aid by the Severn and Wye Regional Flood and Coastal Committee, local developer contributions and Shropshire Council. Work was carried out by the contractor Griffiths.

Dave Edwards, Senior Adviser at the Environment Agency, said:

The Much Wenlock flood alleviation scheme is a fantastic example of what can be achieved through partnership working. Much Wenlock has a long history of flooding so it's great to see the finished project protecting properties, businesses and roads in the town. We'll continue to work closely with both the council and the community in the future.

Steve Davenport, Shropshire Council's Cabinet member for highways and transport, said:

I'm delighted that work on this important scheme has now been completed, and that dozens of homes and businesses in Much Wenlock are now at far less risk from flooding than they have been in the past.

Between 2015 to 2021, Government is investing £2.5 billion in flood and coastal erosion risk management projects which will reduce the risk of flooding from rivers, the sea, groundwater and surface water for at least 300,000 homes.

[News story: Correspondence from the Insolvency Service](#)

For information about the insolvency process contact the Insolvency Enquiry Line during office hours (9am to 5pm Monday to Friday). We can give you general information about: insolvency, what official receivers do and where you can go to get the information or advice you need.

We can't give you: legal or financial advice, information on specific insolvency cases, information or advice on matters directly relating to other government departments.