

Statement to Parliament: Secretary of State's Oral Statement on NI political situation

Mr Speaker,

With permission I would like to make a statement on recent events in Northern Ireland.

Since the Northern Ireland Assembly election on 2 March I have been engaged in intensive talks with the political parties and the Irish Government, in line with the well-established three-stranded approach.

There has been one clear purpose, to re-establish an inclusive, devolved administration at Stormont in accordance with the 1998 Belfast Agreement and its successors.

Progress has been made on a number of issues.

These include on a budget, a Programme for Government and ways of improving transparency and accountability.

We have seen further steps forward on agreeing a way to implement the Stormont House Agreement legacy bodies to help provide better outcomes for victims and survivors of the troubles.

In addition progress was made around how the parties might come together to represent Northern Ireland in our negotiations to leave the EU, which is so important in the context of Article 50 being triggered tomorrow.

That said, it is also clear that significant gaps remain between the parties, particularly over issues surrounding culture and identity.

Throughout this process the Government has been active in making positive proposals to try and bridge those gaps and help the parties to move things forward.

In law, the period allowed to form an Executive from the date of the first sitting of the Assembly after an election is fourteen days.

That fourteen day period expired at 4pm yesterday with no agreement and therefore no Executive.

This is a source of deep disappointment and regret to me and many and I know there is widespread dismay across the country.

From all my extensive engagement across Northern Ireland with business, civil society and members of the public, I am in no doubt inclusive devolved government is what the overwhelming majority of the people want to see.

Working for them, delivering on their priorities and continuing the positive progress we have seen in Northern Ireland over recent years.

Devolved institutions up and running and serving the whole community.

Yet following the passing of yesterday's legal deadline, Northern Ireland has no devolved administration.

This also means that other elements of the Belfast Agreement, including the North-South Bodies, cannot operate properly.

The consequences of all of this are potentially extremely serious.

And the most immediate is the fact that we are rapidly approaching the point at which Northern Ireland will not have an agreed budget.

From tomorrow a civil servant, the Department of Finance Permanent Secretary, will exercise powers to allocate cash to Northern Ireland departments.

This is an interim measure designed to ensure services are maintained until such time as a budget is agreed.

We are keeping in close contact with the Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service on these matters and I understand that the Department of Finance will be setting out more details today.

But let me be very clear.

This situation is not sustainable and beyond a short period of time will have an impact on public service.

What we are talking about here is the health service, schools, voluntary groups and services for the most vulnerable in society.

This isn't what people voted for on 2 March.

During the course of the past twenty four hours I have spoken to the leaders of the five main Northern Ireland parties and the Irish Government.

I am encouraged that there remains a strong willingness to continue engaging in dialogue with a view to resolving outstanding issues and forming an Executive and that must absolutely remain a priority.

But the window of opportunity is short.

It is essential therefore that the intensity of discussions is stepped up with renewed intent and focus and I believe a positive outcome remains possible.

To that end I will continue over coming days to work closely with the Northern Ireland parties and the Irish Government as appropriate.

I will need to keep the situation under review.

But if these talks are successful, it would be my intention quickly to bring forward legislation after the Easter recess to allow an executive to be formed, avoiding a second Assembly election, for which I detect little public appetite.

I am also determined to take forward the legacy bodies in the Stormont House Agreement in accordance with our manifesto commitments.

I will be involving a range of interested parties, including the Victims Commissioner.

But in the absence of devolved government it is ultimately for the UK Government to provide for political stability and good governance.

We do not want to see a return to direct rule.

As our manifesto at the last election stated 'local policies and local services should be determined by locally elected politicians through locally accountable institutions'.

But should the talks fail in their objectives the Government will have to consider all options.

I therefore want to give the House notice that following the Easter recess as a minimum it would be my intention to bring forward legislation to set a regional rate to enable local councils to carry out their functions and to provide further assurance around the budget for Northern Ireland.

Mr Speaker,

It is vital that devolved government, and all of the institutions under the successive agreements, is returned to Northern Ireland as soon as possible.

And the Government's unrelenting focus is on achieving that objective.

Northern Ireland needs strong devolved government.

To deliver for teachers, doctors and nurses, business, industry and the wider community.

To ensure that it plays a full role in the affairs of our United Kingdom, while retaining its strong relationship with Ireland.

And to continue the work of the past two decades to build stronger, peaceful and prosperous future for all.

That needs to be the focus of everyone as we approach the crucial next few days and weeks.

And I commend this statement to the House.

News story: UK government ministers attend first maritime trade mission in China

A first of its kind, 27 of the UK's leading maritime companies, including MJM Group and Survitec Group are expected to attend the forum which will include a UK maritime showcase.

With the UK maritime industry directly supporting 500,000 jobs and contributing £22.2 billion to UK GDP the visit will be an opportunity for the UK government to strengthen maritime trade links between the UK and China and establish new partnerships between UK and Chinese companies.

As the government's champion for the maritime sector, Shipping and Ports Minister John Hayes will lead a number of events at the forum including the visit on board RMS Queen Mary 2 which is in Shanghai and promoting UK excellence in the maritime industry.

The Department for International Trade is working with Maritime UK and Pudong local government to identify new maritime trade and investment opportunities for both the UK and China and, in partnership with Maritime UK, the Maritime Minister will take the opportunity to highlight the UK as the world's maritime centre providing a complete package for the industry's businesses.

Maritime trade is central to the Belt and Road Initiative and the UK strongly supports its vision of a more interconnected world. UK companies are already working with their Chinese counterparts to deliver Belt and Road Initiative projects in third countries.

International Trade Minister, Mark Garnier, said:

The UK's maritime industry is world leading, generating an impressive £22 billion for our economy. China has ambitious plans to develop its marine sector and UK businesses have the skills, expertise, people and infrastructure to help them achieve their objectives.

As the UK leaves the EU, we are determined to take advantage of the opportunities opening up and will work with our thriving marine sector to develop stronger trade links with China and secure our place as a global trading nation.

Maritime Minister, John Hayes, said:

The UK is a world class maritime centre that provides a strong and resilient backbone to our economy. We are excited about continuing our strong trading relationship with China and to celebrate the growing link between our 2 nations.

This week will again highlight that the UK is a fantastic location for Chinese maritime firms to invest in, while also highlighting our world-leading expertise.

The International Trade Minister will also visit the International Investment and Trade Fair in Zhengzhou, Henan. Henan is China's third most populous province and aspires to become Asia's largest rail transport hub.

Over 400 delegates and groups visited the trade fair last year with more than 20,000 domestic and foreign exhibitors in attendance. The local government has invited the UK to be the 'Country of Honour' at the trade fair providing an opportunity for government and businesses to strengthen UK-Henan links.

Press release: Government launches company to create more free schools

[LocatED](#) has been established to acquire land and buildings across the country to help the government build 500 new free schools by 2020 and create 600,000 new school places by 2021.

Free schools are providing more good school places in more parts of the country. Recent analysis of Ofsted inspections shows 29% of free school inspected have been rated 'outstanding' – which means as a proportion free schools are the highest-performing group of non-selective state schools.

More than 9 in 10 free schools have been approved in areas where a need for more school places has already been identified, and the remainder have been created by local communities deciding they wanted more choice. Free schools are ensuring more parents have access to a good local school place for their children.

LocatED will act on behalf of the government to secure the right sites, at the right price, to ensure hundreds more free schools can open.

Schools Systems Minister Lord Nash said:

Part of the government's plan for Britain is building a fairer society, with a good school place for every child. Free schools are playing a vital role in creating those school places. They are popular with parents, ensuring thousands more families have the

choice of a good local school.

We need to secure hundreds of new free schools in order to keep pace in creating 600,000 new school places by 2021. LocatED has the skills and expertise to find and secure land and buildings to ensure our free schools ambition becomes a reality.

With 29% of free schools inspected rated 'outstanding' by Ofsted – LocatED will play a vital role in helping us create thousands more good and outstanding school places for future generations of children.

LocatED's Chief Executive Lara Newman MBE said:

We understand the scale of the challenge and the property landscape. LocatED has the expertise and will operate at pace to negotiate with multiple partners across the private and public sector. We work directly with landowners, agents and developers to secure sites for new free schools, whilst ensuring the best value for the taxpayer.

Chief Executive of the Education Funding Agency Peter Lauener said:

LocatED will improve the experience for free school trusts, for many of whom finding a site is the main challenge to opening a school. The establishment of LocatED places this challenge in the hands of a specialist team of commercial property professionals.

LocatED is a government-owned property company and will operate with a £2 billion budget, making it one of largest purchasers of land in the UK. Working directly with landowners, agents and developers across Britain, LocatED has been established to help overcome some of the challenges of securing sites and land for new free schools.

LocatED will also secure sites to help deliver the additional 110 free schools announced in the budget (Wednesday 8 March).

LocatED has a multidisciplinary team with specialist skills and extensive property sector experience who will negotiate complex deals with multiple partners across the private and public sector to get the best possible value for money for the taxpayer.

Alongside the launch, the distinguished LocatED board with a range of private and public sector property acquisition and development experience has been announced.

Lara Newman MBE, Chief Executive of LocatED – with over 20 years of property experience, Lara has operated at the heart of the free schools policy since

its introduction. Previously a Board Director at Cleanslate Ltd, a development and property consulting company, Lara worked with many of the UK's biggest landowners, agents and developers. Prior to that, Miss Newman was Managing Director at Navigant Consulting, where she specialised in property deals and complex capital investment projects for government education capital programmes.

Michael Strong, Board Chairman – 15 years as Chairman of CBRE, previously CEO of CBRE. Non-executive Director: NHS Property Services Ltd, The Osborne Group and Waterman Group.

Phil Ellis, Non-executive Board Member – Previously Client Portfolio Director at Aviva Investors, 33 years institutional property investment management, investor relations and business development experience through all business cycles.

Jayne MacLennan, Non-executive Board Member – Group Director of Property FirstGroup plc. Non-executive Board Member and Chair of Remuneration Committee for Glasgow Prestwick Airport. Non-executive Director Aberdeen Harbour Board.

Julian Rudd-Jones, Non-executive Board Member – Managing Director of Kajima Partnerships and Kajima Properties, the two principal UK operating businesses of Kajima Corporation, with extensive experience in commercial property development and the funding, delivery and management of social infrastructure.

Caroline Tolhurst, Non-executive Board Member – Executive career as a Chartered Surveyor, Compliance Officer and Chartered Secretary. Operated at board level for 20 years including 10 years as Company Secretary to Grosvenor. Current, Board and Audit Committee member and Chair of Governance & Remuneration Committee at A2Dominion Housing Group.

[Speech: Liam Fox's speech at the Qatar-UK Trade and Investment Conference, Birmingham](#)

Your Excellences, ladies and Gentlemen, welcome to Birmingham, and to the second part of the Qatar-UK Trade and Investment Conference.

Following our hugely successful day in London yesterday, it is a pleasure to welcome today so many distinguished figures from Qatar's government and business community to Britain's second city.

I would especially like to thank His Excellency the Prime Minister for leading

such a senior delegation. I would like to thank Minister Rumaihi and all the distinguished visitors who have travelled here today. I would also like to thank the University of Birmingham, our sponsors and all who have helped create this spectacular showcase.

It is a welcome show of confidence in the United Kingdom, and in the strength of our future relationship.

Both our nations are reaching out to embrace global opportunities, forging new partnerships abroad and working to rebalance our domestic economies, building a better nation for all our citizens.

So there is no more fitting moment to renew the bonds of friendship and co-operation that link Qatar and the UK.

When Prime Minister Theresa May came to power in July last year, she did so with a commitment to build a truly Global Britain, a nation firmly at the heart of global trade.

The vote to leave the European Union has given this country a golden opportunity. For the first time in over 40 years, we will have an independent trade policy – the self-determination to forge closer trading links with old friends and new allies.

It is our task to build these links, safeguarding Britain's prosperity as we open a new chapter in our history.

In this, we have 3 priorities; exports, investment and trade policy.

We will work to increase exports by offering financial and operational support to potential exporters.

We will promote the UK abroad to attract foreign direct investment, showcasing all that this dynamic, innovative country has to offer to investors around the world.

And we will deliver a policy programme that supports British businesses overseas and makes this country the champion of global free trade.

Qatar is our partner in all of these goals.

We are gathered today in Birmingham, a city which was at the centre of Britain's Industrial Revolution.

Its iron foundries were the beating heart of the global economy for centuries, and its products crossed oceans and continents – not for nothing was it known as 'the city of a thousand trades'.

And Birmingham will soon be at the forefront of our economy once again. This city is the heart of the government's Midlands Engine which, together with the Northern Powerhouse, is a vast scheme of investment and regeneration which will bring new economic life to some of the most diverse and dynamic regions of the United Kingdom.

The development of these regions is already gathering pace. In 2015/16 the Midlands attracted hundreds of inward investment projects.

My own department has a team dedicated to driving FDI in key sectors, including capital projects, right here in Birmingham.

Already, this city is brimming with opportunities. The £1 billion redevelopment of Curzon Street Station will soon be underway, as will the £500 million Birmingham Smithfields regeneration scheme.

Birmingham is attracting dozens of new development projects, that will transform the city over the next decade.

The dynamism of the region can only increase. The government's Industrial Strategy will devolve decisions over public transport and roads to the UK's largest cities, including Birmingham, giving them the tools to improve transport networks and stimulate the economy.

By holding today's session of the conference in this great city, we are welcoming you not only to the home not only of Britain's economic and industrial past, but also of its future.

For our Industrial Strategy is an ambitious programme that will bring the UK's regions, including the midlands, to the forefront of our economy.

By investing in skills, research and infrastructure, the British economy can rise to meet the challenges of the future.

We want Qatar to join us on this journey.

Fortunately, we are starting from a position of great strength in our bilateral trading relationship.

Last year, our trade was worth over £5.3 billion – a remarkable 98% increase since 2014.

Energy has long been a mainstay of our partnership – you supply around a quarter of our natural gas, heating millions of homes across the UK.

But while natural resources are of course important, our trading relationship is diversifying as fast as Qatar's economy.

Qatar has invested over £35 billion in the UK, in everything from hotels to ports. Some of our most iconic buildings – the Shard, the Savoy Hotel and the Olympic Park are part of that investment.

But it is not just this size of the investment that matters – it is the consistent and often visionary nature of that investment.

It is solid. It is dependable.

It focuses on the long term value of the UK economy, undeterred by economic cycles.

Such investment is based in the same trust that has allowed personal connections between our 2 countries to flourish.

Over 5,000 Qatari students come to study in the UK every year, and over 60,000 others come for business or tourism.

Many own property in London, or have friends and family who do.

Most importantly, though, our diplomatic relationship continues to go from strength to strength.

Shortly after she became Prime Minister, His Highness the Emir called Theresa May to express his continued faith in the UK economy, and his desire to continue investing in this country.

This message was reiterated when they met at the GCC conference in December.

The Emir's message was a strong vote of confidence, and an act of friendship that did not go unnoticed in the UK.

That message, of confidence, of faith, and of investment, is why we are here today.

We are a country of vast opportunities, in almost every industry and sector.

We are the fastest growing economy in Europe.

We continue to attract more foreign direct investment than any other European nation, and have recently become the continent's most popular destination for investment from developing economies.

Our expertise and experience spreads across every sector, from financial services to technology to construction.

It is no wonder that last year, my department recorded a record number of new FDI projects landing here in the UK – some 2,213.

Across the world, investors are keen to take advantage of all this nation has to offer, yet none have yet been offered a dedicated trade and investment conference, such as this. It is a mark of the high esteem in which UK businesses and government hold Qatar and Qatari investors.

As our industrial Strategy works to expand our capacity in energy and infrastructure, the UK has a wide variety of offerings that would suit Qatari investors.

In December last year, the government published a National Infrastructure and Construction Pipeline which set out over £500 billion worth of planned private and public investment opportunities in the sector.

In infrastructure, as in other sectors the UK's robust legal, regulatory and planning framework makes opportunities particularly attractive.

Since the privatisation of infrastructure monopolies under Margaret Thatcher,

successive UK governments have developed a political and economic environment that is particularly well disposed towards private involvement in capital projects.

We have a well-established and effective track record of public-private partnerships, a model that has been successfully replicated around the world.

The UK has a long track record as one of the safest places in the world to invest, and as investors, you will have the full support of government.

We are working to drive Britain's economy forward, boosting our regions, rebalancing our commercial centres, and spreading opportunity and prosperity across our nation.

We want Qatar to be our partner in realising this vision.

After all, what we are seeking to achieve with the Midlands Engine and the Northern Powerhouse is the same as your own 2030 National Vision.

Investment in the UK is, of course, about financial success. But that success creates jobs and pays salaries, offering security to people in Qatar and the UK.

Every penny invested strengthens the bonds of commerce and friendship that link the UK and Qatar, bonds that we will continue to build at this conference today.

And as our countries go from strength to strength, we can be assured that this bond is stronger than ever.

You will not only be investing in the UK, but in the shared future of our 2 nations.

That is the greatest opportunity of all.

Thank you.

[News story: 'Brain' for driverless cars: Oxford spin-out wins FT award](#)

[Oxbotica: imagine the future](#)

A company spun out from the [University of Oxford](#) in 2014 to develop a 'brain' for driverless cars has won a Financial Times ArcelorMittal [Boldness in Business](#) award.

[Oxbotica](#) carried off the 'Smaller Company' award for its achievements in

creating artificial intelligence software for the next generation of autonomous road vehicles.

Creating an autonomous control system

With support from Innovate UK, Oxbotica has developed an autonomous control system called Selenium. It can work on any vehicle, including forklifts and cargo pods.

The software uses data from laser and camera sensors mounted on the vehicle to find out where it is, what's around it, and to calculate a safe and efficient route.

The technology is already running on Oxbotica's fleet of vehicles, including a last-mile delivery van, the ESA Mars Rover, and the £8 million [GATEway](#) (Greenwich Automated Transport Environment) project in London.

Creating value through intellectual property

Originating from the university's [Oxford Robotics Institute](#) (ORI) research group, the company has spurned conventional financing through external investment.

Dr Graeme Smith, CEO of Oxbotica, said:

We didn't take the easy money. We've got very specific methodology to creating value through intellectual property and opportunities to license that. We stuck steadfastly to that approach. It's nice to have a big investor but we didn't want that to change our focus or direction.

Oxbotica began with 4 employees and has now grown to 30, with the intention of doubling that number this year.

Dr Smith added:

We've opened up a third office in Oxford, a full fleet of autonomous vehicles, and a dedicated test track and workshop. Our customer base is expanding rapidly and we're growing fast to meet this demand. This award is a major deal to a small company like us.

Oxbotica's success was recognised alongside other winners, including Google's [Deepmind](#), [Dollar Shave Club](#), [Dong Energy](#) and [Preferred Networks](#).