

# 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."