

News story: David Mundell announces new Scottish business taskforce ahead of trip to Paraguay and Argentina

Former UK Government minister Andrew Dunlop has been commissioned by the Scottish Secretary to chair a group made up of leading figures with expert knowledge of Scotland's business and economy. The group's membership will be announced shortly.

David Mundell said:

The UK Government's new Scottish business taskforce will provide expert advice and guidance on how best to strengthen Scotland's economy. We know that Scotland's economic performance lags behind the rest of UK, and we need to close that gap. As we develop our ambitious industrial strategy and negotiate new trade deals with Europe and around the world, this expert panel will provide insight from a range of Scottish business sectors.

The Scottish Secretary made the announcement ahead of a trip this week to Paraguay and Argentina. He will use his visit to promote Scottish business interests and build cultural and educational links. Scottish firms already do substantial business in South America – Scotch whisky, for example, exports more than £14 million and £12 million a year to Paraguay and Argentina respectively. Scottish agritech companies are also keen to create opportunities in Paraguay's dynamic agricultural sector.

Speaking ahead of his visit Mr Mundell said:

As we are prepare to leave the EU, we want to build and strengthen our trade relationships with friends and partners old and new, and I am certain Scottish companies will be at the forefront of this. Scotland's skills, products and services are highly regarded globally, and we can build on that as we strike ambitious new trade deals around the world. I am travelling to South America this week to bang the drum for Scottish businesses, taking the message to these markets that Scotland's companies have the skills, products and expertise they need.

There are strong historic links between Scotland and Paraguay, going back nearly 200 years, and I hope to further strengthen the relationship between our two countries. I will be promoting Scottish businesses, including looking at opportunities in Paraguay's agricultural sector and for Scottish exports – building on the success of whisky sales to Paraguay.

UK companies have an extensive presence in Argentina, with enormous scope to expand, particularly in new technology and in oil and gas, areas where Scottish firms are among the best in the world. There are also strong cultural links between Scotland and Argentina, including through the Edinburgh Festivals, and I very much look forward to cementing these links.

In Paraguay, Mr Mundell will meet prominent senior political and business figures, and make a keynote speech about the place of the UK in a post-Brexit world. He will also host a reception to promote Scottish produce and meet local civil society organisations working to combat discrimination .

In Argentina, Mr Mundell will meet cultural organisations, host a whisky tasting for business leaders and community groups, and meet a number of local businesses. He will also visit San Andrés University to hear about their links with St Andrew's University, and attend a commemoration to mark Argentinian pilots' contribution to the Battle of Britain.

Press release: Voter ID pilot to launch in local elections

Voters in five local authorities will need to show ID before they can vote next May in a move to tackle electoral fraud, the Minister for the Constitution Chris Skidmore will announce today (Saturday, 16 September).

The move comes after reports of alleged electoral fraud through voter impersonation more than doubled between 2014 and 2016, according to figures from the Electoral Commission.

Any reports of fraud undermine democracy and weaken the United Kingdom's strong tradition of holding free and fair elections.

In the May 2018 local elections Woking, Gosport, Bromley, Watford and Slough have volunteered to take part in a trial, which will require voters to produce ID before being issued with a ballot paper.

In addition, Tower Hamlets will also run a separate postal voting pilot, looking at the security of postal votes and providing additional guidance in postal vote packs.

The form of identification to be used will be set by the councils, but the pilot will involve trialling both photo ID and non-photo ID to see what is most effective and efficient.

Next year's trial is likely to be the first in a series of pilots to allow

the Electoral Commission and Cabinet Office to evaluate the impact of asking for ID before a decision is taken on whether or not to roll it out nationally.

Minister for the Constitution, Chris Skidmore said:

For people to have confidence in our democratic processes we need to ensure that our elections are safeguarded against any threat or perception of electoral fraud.

The current situation of people simply pointing out their name without having to prove who they are feels out of date when considering other safeguards to protect people's identity. It is harder to take out a library book or collect a parcel at a post office than it is to vote in someone's name.

I am very hopeful that by taking a careful evidence-based approach in these pilots we will be able to roll out ID in polling stations at future elections.

Many countries around the world have already made it a requirement to prove identity at a polling station

And it is already a requirement in Northern Ireland, where ID has been requested since 1985. There have been no reports of voter impersonation since 2003.

Voter ID was raised in a report on voting fraud by Sir Eric Pickles, published in August last year.

The Electoral Commission has called for it for its introduction and the international election watchdog the Organisation for Security and Co-operation has said it should be "seriously considered".

Claire Bassett, Chief Executive of the Electoral Commission, said:

We welcome the Minister's announcement today as a positive first step towards implementing our 2014 recommendation that an accessible, proportionate voter identification scheme should be introduced in Great Britain.

Voters in Northern Ireland have been required to show photographic proof of identity since 2003, and we have the opportunity to learn from that experience. The Electoral Commission is responsible for carrying out an independent, statutory evaluation of the pilot schemes and we will publish our findings following the May elections, in the summer of 2018.

Press release: PM statement following London terror attack: 15 September 2017

I have just been updated on the investigation into this morning's cowardly terrorist attack in London.

A major covert and overt investigation is taking place, involving police and security officials.

I said earlier today that the national threat level was being kept under review.

The Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre – that's the independent organisation which is responsible for setting the threat level on the basis of available intelligence – has now decided to raise the national threat level from severe to critical.

This means that their assessment is that a further attack may be imminent.

Following JTAC's decision, the police have asked for authorisation from the Secretary of State for Defence to enact part of the first phase of Operation Temperer.

This is a well-established plan to provide military support to the police and for this period military personnel will replace police officers on guard at certain protected sites which are not accessible to the public. The public will see more armed police on the transport network and on our streets providing extra protection.

This is a proportionate and sensible step which will provide extra reassurance and protection while the investigation progresses.

The public should go about their business in the normal way and as usual be vigilant and co-operate with the police.

I said earlier that terrorism is a great challenge of our times. But by standing together we will defeat it.

News story: Hurricane Irma: Overseas Territories Minister visits the Turks and Caicos Islands

Visiting Grand Turk today, the Minister for the Overseas Territories, Lord Ahmad said:

I'm in Grand Turk which is the capital of Turks and Caicos and I'm seeing first-hand, with the Premier, with the Governor, the devastation of Hurricane Irma.

There's parts of Turks and Caicos where it's really heartening to see that the community spirit has kicked in, and already reconstruction has started. But as you can see around me here in the capital, in some of the more challenged parts of Turks and Caicos right here in Grand Turk, there's plenty of work to be done. And that means that the military support we've been giving, and also more importantly the reconstruction effort needs to kick in straight away.

And that's the kind of things I've been seeing, so thank you for all those who are doing what they're doing, the military, the DFID teams, but also the government here in Turks and Caicos and the excellent team around the Governor, but equally it's important that we underline the importance of what's next, the reconstruction of what is the capital of a great island.

Press release: Environment Secretary meets Scottish industry leaders on the future of UK farming and fishing

Environment Secretary Michael Gove met Scottish farming and fishing leaders today to discuss the future of their industries outside the EU.

Representatives from across the Scottish farming and fish processing sectors attended the meetings with the Secretary of State at Aberdeen's James Hutton Institute, a hub for environmental and farming innovation.

The meetings focused on the specific opportunities and challenges facing Scottish farmers and fishing businesses as we prepare to leave the EU.

Farming groups including NFU Scotland, the Scottish Food and Drink Federation

and the Scottish Tenant Farmers Association attended to share their ambitions and expectations for future farming policy.

And in a further meeting, representatives from the Scottish Seafood Association, Associated Seafoods and a wealth of processing companies set out their desires for future trade and the needs of the Scottish supply chain.

The meetings also focused on how Scotland's entrepreneurial farmers and fishermen can make the best use of innovation and new technology to boost productivity.

Speaking after the meetings, Environment Secretary Michael Gove said:

Aberdeen is a city extremely close to my heart and one with proud traditions in both farming and fishing. Both industries are part of the fabric of daily life for so many people in the North East, but they are also vitally important for the local and national economies, together contributing over £10 billion. I'm determined to see them go from strength to strength outside the EU.

Today's discussions were very productive and helpful as we take forward this once in a lifetime opportunity to design a new approach that can deliver a brighter future for Scottish farmers and fishermen.

There are undoubtedly challenges ahead, but if we work together I believe there can be great rewards. I'm committed to working with the Scottish farming and fishing industries to make sure we secure a smooth transition and grasp the opportunities that leaving the EU presents.

The roundtables held today are part of a series of ongoing engagements across all parts of the UK ahead of EU exit.