

Joint Communiqué of the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference

The Government of Ireland was represented by the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr Simon Coveney TD. The Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland was represented by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, The Rt Hon Brandon Lewis CBE MP, and the Minister of State for Northern Ireland, The Rt Hon Conor Burns MP.

The Conference was established under Strand Three of the Belfast / Good Friday Agreement to “promote bilateral co-operation at all levels on all matters of mutual interest within the competence of the UK and Irish Governments”.

The Conference discussed the following:

British- Irish Cooperation

The Irish and UK Governments discussed how the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference can contribute to the development of the broader British-Irish relationship over the coming years. There was agreement on the need for close collaboration between our two countries, as we address current and future challenges, as was discussed at the recent meeting between An Taoiseach Micheál Martin and Prime Minister Boris Johnson.

The Conference discussed potential synergies between the UK Levelling Up initiatives in Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and Ireland’s National Development Plan 2021-2030. The Conference also discussed the ongoing economic cooperation which is taking place at national and regional levels.

Political Stability

The Conference noted, with regret, the developments at Stormont since it last met in December. The UK and Irish Governments reaffirmed their commitment to the full functioning of all of the political institutions established by the Belfast / Good Friday Agreement, including the North South Ministerial Council, and the importance of respecting the Agreement in all of its strands.

The Conference noted the importance of addressing the outstanding issues in the context of the Northern Ireland Protocol which is currently subject to continuing engagement between the EU and the UK.

The Irish Government and the UK Government provided an update on their respective commitments under the New Decade, New Approach agreement, which restored the institutions in January 2020.

The Conference agreed to continue close co-operation in accordance with the three-stranded approach established in the Belfast / Good Friday Agreement.

Security Co-operation

The Conference examined the current security situation in both jurisdictions. Both the UK Government and the Irish Government noted the importance of the ongoing high level of co-operation in tackling terrorism, paramilitarism and associated criminality. They considered the fourth report of the Independent Reporting Commission (IRC) and its recommendations. The Irish Government and UK Government confirmed the intention to renominate Mitchell Reiss and Tim O'Connor to the Commission for a further period of appointment, and noted the NI Executive's renomination of John McBurney and Monica McWilliams.

Legacy

The Conference discussed the legacy of Northern Ireland's past, reflecting on views provided during the engagement process and next steps.

The UK and Irish Governments also discussed issues of concern in respect to a number of individual legacy cases.

Rights and Citizenship Matters

The Conference discussed the vital importance of the Common Travel Area arrangements and the need for the Irish Government and the UK Government to continue to work together on CTA immigration matters and to uphold the reciprocal rights and privileges British and Irish citizens have long enjoyed.

The Conference also discussed recent developments and legislation relevant to the implementation of the rights and citizenship provisions of the Belfast / Good Friday Agreement.

Future Meetings

It was agreed that the Conference should meet again in the coming months.

Chancellor announces tax cuts to ease cost of living pressures in Scotland

- Chancellor announces Spring Statement tax cut for 2.4 million Scottish workers through rise in National Insurance thresholds – saving the typical employee over £330 a year
- Unveiling plans to give families further help with the cost of living, Rishi Sunak also slashes fuel duty on petrol and diesel by 5p per litre

for the next 12 months

- Spring Statement also sets out measures to help businesses boost investment, innovation, and growth – including a £1,000 increase to Employment Allowance to benefit around half a million SMEs across the UK
- The UK Government is providing an additional £45 million to the Scottish Government next year as a result of measures announced by the Chancellor today.

Rishi Sunak announced that National Insurance starting thresholds will rise to £12,570 from July, meaning hard-working people across the UK will keep more of what they earn before they start paying personal taxes.

The cut, worth over £6 billion, will benefit 2.4 million working people in Scotland with a typical employee saving over £330 a year, whilst the typical self-employed person will save over £250. This means the UK now has some of the most generous tax thresholds in the world.

Mr Sunak also announced that fuel duty for petrol and diesel will be cut by 5p per litre from 6pm tonight (23 March) to help drivers across the UK with rising costs. Worth £2.4 billion, this is the biggest cut ever on all fuel duty rates and means a one-car family will now save on average £100.

As a result of a cut to the basic rate of income tax for savings income, taxpayers in Scotland will see benefits worth £3 million. As other income tax rates are devolved in Scotland, the Scottish Government's funding is automatically increased as a result of this tax cut as set out in the agreed Fiscal Framework. This is initially worth £350 million in 2024-25.

The Chancellor also set out a series of measures to help businesses boost investment, innovation, and growth – including a £1,000 increase to Employment Allowance to benefit around half a million businesses.

As a result of measures in this Spring Statement the UK Government is providing the Scottish Government with an additional £45 million through the Barnett formula next year.

Chancellor Rishi Sunak said:

We're slashing taxes for millions of hard-working people in Scotland, getting pounds in people's pockets and helping pay cheques to stretch further – from July more than 2.4 million in Scotland will get a tax cut with the typical employee keeping £330 more each year.

By cutting fuel duty, we're making it cheaper for people in Scotland every time they go to the pump, which together with the freeze means people save £100 per car on average a year.

We're boosting small business growth by increasing the Employment Allowance – a tax cut worth up to £1,000 for thousands of businesses.

Scottish Secretary Alister Jack said:

Measures announced by the Chancellor will help address the big issues facing people in Scotland and right across the UK.

Families across the country are struggling with the cost of living. The reduction in fuel duty, zero VAT on green home improvements, and a tax cut for low and middle earners will help them with these growing pressures.

And an extra £45 million for the Scottish Government will allow them to provide additional support to the most vulnerable families over the coming months.

The Chancellor also reiterated our steadfast support for the people of Ukraine. I know people across Scotland will stand with him on that.

These are undoubtedly challenging times, but action taken by the Chancellor in the Spring Statement will help the UK Government build a stronger, more secure economy for everyone.

To grow the world's very best talent in AI, the Government will partner with industry and academia to create 1,000 new AI PhDs. The Government will invest £117m to create PHDs across the UK at Centres for Doctoral Training, building on the existing three sites in Scotland. This will train a new generation of AI researchers who will develop and use AI in areas such as healthcare, climate change and creating new commercial opportunities.

Delivering the statement, the Chancellor made clear that our sanctions against Russia will not be cost-free for people at home, and that Putin's invasion presents a risk to our economic recovery – as it does to countries all around the world.

However, announcing the further measures to help people deal with rising costs, he said the extra support could only be provided because of the UK's strong economy and the tough but responsible decisions taken to rebuild our fiscal resilience.

The immediate financial support for people and businesses comes as part of a wider tax plan announced by the Chancellor that will create better conditions for growth and will share proceeds from growth more fairly – ensuring people can keep more of what they earn.

Mr Sunak also announced that the Scottish Government will receive £41 million more funding as there will be an extra £500 million for the Household Support

Fund, which doubles its total amount to £1 billion to support the most vulnerable families with their essentials over the coming months. The Chancellor also reduced the VAT on energy saving materials such as solar panels, heating pumps and roof insulation from 5% to zero, helping families become more energy-efficient.

This cost of living support comes on top of the measures that the Chancellor has already announced over the recent months to support families. This includes an over £9 billion energy bill rebate package, worth up to £350 each for around 28 million households, an increase to the National Living Wage, worth £1,000 for full time workers, and a cut to the Universal Credit taper, worth £1,000 for 2 million families.

Further announcements

The Spring Statement also confirms that:

- A new Efficiency and Value for Money Committee will be set up to cut £5.5 billion worth of cross-Whitehall waste – with savings to be used to fund public services.
- £50 million new funding to create a Public Sector Fraud Authority to hold departments to account for their counter-fraud performance and to help them identify, seize and recover fraudsters money.
- Local residents across the UK will benefit from a fresh set of infrastructure projects as we open the second round of the £4.8 billion Levelling Up Fund. It will continue to focus on regeneration, transport and cultural investments.

Further information

[Scottish Secretary responds to Chancellor's Spring Statement](#)

News story

Alister Jack welcomes measures to ease the rising cost of living, cut tax for lower earners and reduce fuel duty.



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[Education Secretary delivers speech at BETT show](#)

Good morning everyone...

I am delighted to be joining you today and I'm only sorry that parliamentary business has meant that I can't be there in person. I was very much looking forward, just like you, to seeing BETT's fabulous showcase of the very latest technology for myself...

I want to start by saying some thank yous.

The past two years have been really challenging for everyone working in education.

So I particularly want to thank every leader and teacher who helped colleagues deliver learning and lessons online, especially those who weren't used to using the tools to do this...

And thank you to every school who supported other schools and to our EdTech Demonstrators who were brilliant in showing how to make technology work...

We also owe a huge debt to the many EdTech company that gave free trials or offered free licences to schools and colleges.

We already had an EdTech market to be proud of but the pandemic has shown just why we are so well regarded around the world.

You have all been a real inspiration...

All of us have learnt and achieved so much in the past two years.

But pivoting to remote learning didn't magically happen overnight, it was hard earned.

Some of these new ways of working have become incredible success stories. Remote parents' evenings for example, seem to be here to stay...

Digital technology, and the data and infrastructure that underpins it, is changing the way we live and work and learn.

So thank you everyone, for being tech pioneers and leaders, and coming today to BETT to continue this exciting journey.

We need to build on what we learnt in the pandemic to embed and spread new and better ways of doing things for the benefit of all.

One thing we definitely have to do is keep up this momentum... what one of my predecessors called the restless spirit of technological innovation...

I want to see an environment where it is easy for tried and trusted digital products to be taken up by our teachers, as part of their teaching toolkit, and used by families at home too.

It needs to be hassle free.

I mean, let's take passwords for starters. Is anyone else here driven to distraction by passwords?

I can tell you that the Zahawi household becomes a much less tranquil place when our nine-year-old daughter needs to log in and Dad has to get the right password. Apparently, overseeing the UK's vaccine rollout did NOT count as a good enough excuse for her.

There has to be a simpler way than this.

I want to create an ecosystem where good tools can spread quickly across and between families of schools and colleges.

... Where data can be shared effortlessly in a system that is safe and secure and that enables the right people to see the right things at the right time.

I want teachers and leaders to have easy access to the information they need, in formats that are easy to digest.

And I want the DfE to be the most data-driven department in government because young people's learning depends on it.

Any child or student – or teacher for that matter – has to be able to walk into any classroom totally confident that everything in it works.

My vision is for the UK to be a science and technology superpower, and for our schools, colleges and world-class universities to develop the next generation of UK and global talent to make this happen.

But we can't get to this point if schools are working in isolation. Everyone needs to work together. And when I say 'we' here I mean, all of us, including you and your schools and the EdTech sector – to make sure we have the right technology at every level of the system.

There is no getting away from the fact that school systems are complex. The logistics of running a school or college, as any head will tell you, is an incredibly challenging business. I can't promise to make it easier, but I do want to make it simpler.

We need a level playing field, so that schools all have access to tech that does what they need it to. As teachers progress through their careers, they should be able to develop their own expertise using technology that is proven and reliable.

We cannot make sure tech is delivering for every school if the infrastructure can't support it.

So we will invest to fix the basics. Every school has to have a decent broadband connection and we are going to upgrade networks as a priority. My department will work with DCMS and with our broadband providers to enable every school to have access to a high-speed connection by 2025.

We are going to set clear standards so that schools know technology they should have in place and we will provide support to help meet these standards for schools that need it.

We will build on the success of our Connect the Classroom programme and invest a further £150 million to upgrade schools that are struggling to reach the minimum WiFi standards.

The first of these standards are being published today, so all leaders will shortly know what the tech set up should look like in their school.

As part of these standards, we are going to issue more concrete help on how schools can keep themselves secure and safe from cyber crime.

Once we've got those basics in place everywhere, technology can help all of us make better decisions

I'm not a believer in taking chances myself. Imagine, in my previous job as vaccines minister... if I'd been given an option to roll out something that wasn't 100% backed by evidence but scientists thought it would 'probably' do the trick.

It doesn't bear thinking about.

So I'd like to talk in more detail about how schools can roll out technology in ways where the 'probably' becomes a 'definitely'.

I want to modernise our data systems across the board. For example, I am sure you would be happier if there was a way to reduce the data you report to DfE.

The way forward has to be for schools and families of schools to start using data from cloud-based systems that are linked together to make better, more timely decisions.

Data and evidence, shared transparently, are key to improving complex systems. For example. Let's go back to Covid for a second. Every day computers were crunching enormous quantities of data to give up-to-date pictures of infection and hospitalisation rates.

That data was key to helping the government plan its next move but it was also key to keeping people safe. Take the BBC's coronavirus website... thanks to the charts and the graphs and the analysis, it gave people at home the ability to follow the latest medical data to protect themselves and their families.

We've started this journey in education already. In January we launched a national trial to automate pupil attendance data returns to the department. Having better, more consistent attendance data at national, regional and local levels is vital in helping us to spot where problems are occurring, as well as identifying what solutions are working well.

Another area I'm keen to explore in more detail, together with Ofqual and the Standards and Testing Agency, is digital assessment. Other countries have been experimenting in this area and it's possible we can learn from what they are doing.

We have already made some progress in our primary assessments with our multiplication tables check and I have asked the STA to continue this work.

We have also made progress in vocational and technical qualifications.

It's possible that more digital assessment could bring significant benefits to students, teachers and schools and I want to start carefully considering the potential opportunities in this area.

The potential for what we can do with the right tools is so exciting.

But while data can give us the flight plan, it is evidence that will show whether we travel by hot air balloon or helicopter or plane.

When anyone tells me that something is a must-have, my first reaction is to ask why? What makes it so good?

When it comes to any school resources, from textbooks to white boards to AV units, teachers need to know that they work and that they'll help pupils learn. In the past we know that schools have invested precious cash in buying tools that were either not fit for purpose or not what they needed.

So in the same way as data will be our ally, evidence must be our watchword.

Teachers need to be able to critically assess digital products.

I want to see a new culture of evidence-based use of technology embedded in every school. In this way it will be easy for schools and families to use the right products at the right time for their learners.

This extends to Assistive Technology too – making sure that technology improves access to learning as part of targeted support.

But let me be clear. I am not going to wade in and start telling schools which bits of kit to use or when. Nor will you see my department suddenly start buying EdTech companies or interfering in the marketplace.

My role is to make sure schools get the guidance and information they need to make informed decisions for the benefit of all their pupils and staff.

So I would like to challenge the EdTech providers... to build that evidence base ... What is the impact of your product on learning outcomes? And then to share it openly.

I couldn't finish today without reassuring our tech partners where their future programmers and coders are coming from.

It would be a far braver Education Secretary than me to forecast what the technology landscape will look like five years or even a year from now.

One thing I can say with absolute confidence is that we are going to need more and better STEM skills... The Prime Minister is committed to building up the UK's position as a 'Science Superpower'. He has said that "the STEM subjects will be key components in steering us through the great challenges the world faces today and tomorrow".

We need teachers to be totally comfortable and adept with technology and we need children to be tech-literate from a young age.

There is a growing hunger in the young to learn about technology and we need to be able to satisfy that. Between 2013 and 2019, computer science was one of the fastest growing GCSE subjects. Entries are roughly 19 times higher in

2021 than they were in 2013.

And computer science was also the fastest growing STEM A Level.

Digital T levels are now in their second year with students progressing on to apprenticeships or degrees or into the workplace.

As part of our mission to level up the UK, we want to make sure that everyone has the opportunity to improve their STEM skills and not just in school but throughout their lives.

The National Centre for Computing Education backed by £84 million of government funding, will help to keep teachers' subject knowledge up to speed.

And as part of our mission to attract the best and the brightest to become STEM teachers, we are offering scholarships of up to £26,000 and the Levelling Up Premium of up to £3,000.

So with a strong technology infrastructure for every school, data working effectively to support decision making, an evidence-based market for EdTech tools, and digital skills developing at pace, we'll be in pole position for whatever technological revolution is just around the corner.

It won't be the same for all of you... For some it might be seeing literacy outcomes leap for year 6, for others it will be a new tool to add to your existing kit. The changes could be small or totally transformative but they have got to be take us closer to our goal of a world-class education for all.

Despite the pandemic, I really think that this is the most exciting time to be in education. I cannot wait to see how far or how fast we're going to travel together. Thank you for coming on the journey too.

[Chancellor announces tax cuts to support families with cost of living](#)

- Chancellor announces tax cut for nearly 30 million UK workers through rise in National Insurance thresholds – saving the typical employee over £330 in the year from July.
- Unveiling a Tax Plan to give families further help with the cost of living, Rishi Sunak reduces fuel duty on petrol and diesel by 5p per litre for the next year – and announces a £5 billion income tax cut from 2024.
- Spring Statement also sets out measures to boost investment, innovation, and growth – including a £1,000 increase to Employment Allowance to benefit around half a million SMEs.

Rishi Sunak announced that National Insurance starting thresholds will rise to £12,570 from July, meaning hard-working people across the UK will keep more of what they earn before they start paying personal taxes.

The cut, worth over £6 billion, will benefit almost 30 million working people with a typical employee saving over £330 in the year from July. This means the UK now has some of the most generous tax thresholds in the world.

Mr Sunak also announced that fuel duty for petrol and diesel will be cut by 5p per litre from 6pm tonight (23 March) to help drivers across the UK with rising costs – a tax cut worth £2.4 billion. This is the biggest cut ever on all fuel duty rates and means a one-car family will now save on average £100.

To let people keep more of what they earn, the basic rate of income tax will also be cut by 1p in the pound in 2024, when the OBR expect inflation to be back under control, debt falling sustainably and the economy growing. The cut is worth £5 billion for workers, savers and pensioners and will be the first cut to the basic rate in 16 years.

The Chancellor also set out a series of measures to help businesses boost investment, innovation, and growth – including a £1,000 increase to Employment Allowance to benefit around half a million smaller firms.

Delivering the Spring Statement, Chancellor Rishi Sunak said:

This statement puts billions back into the pockets of people across the UK and delivers the biggest net cut to personal taxes in over a quarter of a century.

Like our actions against Russia, I have been able to do this because of our strong economy and the difficult but responsible decisions I have had to make to rebuild our finances following the pandemic.

Cutting taxes means people have immediate help with the rising cost of living, businesses have better conditions to invest and grow tomorrow, and people keep more of what they earn for years to come.

Delivering the statement, the Chancellor made clear that our sanctions against Russia will not be cost-free for people at home, and that Putin's invasion presents a risk to our economic recovery – as it does to countries all around the world.

However, announcing the further measures to help people deal with rising costs, he said the extra support could only be provided because of the UK's strong economy and the tough but responsible decisions taken to rebuild our fiscal resilience.

The immediate help for people with the cost of living and support for businesses comes as part of a wider Tax Plan announced by the Chancellor that will also create better conditions for growth and will share proceeds from

growth more fairly – ensuring people can keep more of what they earn.

Help with the cost of living

The Chancellor said that global supply chain issues following the pandemic, as well as Russia's invasion of Ukraine, are driving up the cost of living for families across the UK.

To combat this, he announced that from 6pm this evening (23 March) fuel duty will be cut by 5p per litre for 12 months – worth £2.4 billion for hard-working families across the UK.

To ease cost of living pressures for almost 30 million employees, the Chancellor announced that from July 2022, National Insurance thresholds will rise to £12,570 to align with the income tax personal allowance. This simplification means that, from July, 70% of workers who pay NICs will pay less of it, even after accounting for the Health and Social Care Levy. Of those who benefit from the threshold increase, 2.2 million people will be taken out of paying NICs altogether.

To ensure more people can keep more of what they earn for years to come, the Chancellor also announced plans to cut the basic rate of income tax from 20p to 19p from 2024. The historic £5 billion tax cut for workers, pensioners and savers will be worth £175 on average for 30 million people and will be the first cut to the basic rate in 16 years. This will be delivered in a responsible and affordable way, while continuing to meet our fiscal rules.

Mr Sunak also announced that there will be an extra £500 million for the Household Support Fund, which doubles its total amount to £1 billion to support the most vulnerable families with their essentials over the coming months. The Chancellor also reduced the VAT on energy saving materials such as solar panels, heating pumps and roof insulation from 5% to zero for five years, helping families become more energy-efficient. This cost of living support comes on top of the measures that the Chancellor has already announced over the recent months to support families. This includes a £9 billion energy bill rebate package, worth up to £350 each for around 28 million households, an increase to the National Living Wage, worth £1,000 for full time workers, and a cut to the Universal Credit taper, worth £1,000 for two million families.

Boosting Investment, Innovation and Growth

To lift growth and productivity among UK businesses, Mr Sunak set out plans to boost private sector investment and innovation and bring in a new culture of enterprise.

He increased the Employment Allowance – a relief which allows smaller businesses to reduce their employers National Insurance contributions bills each year – from £4,000 to £5,000. The cut is worth up to £1,000 for half a million smaller businesses and starts in two weeks' time, on 6 April. As a result, 50,000 of these businesses will be taken out of paying NICs and the Health and Social Care Levy, taking the total number of firms not paying NICs

and the Levy to 670,000.

The Chancellor also announced two new business rates reliefs will be brought forward by a year to come into effect in April 2022. There will be no business rates due on a range of green technology used to decarbonise buildings, including solar panels and batteries, whilst eligible heat networks will also receive 100% relief. Together these will save businesses more than £200 million over the next five years.

Ahead of the end of the super-deduction, the government will work with businesses and other stakeholders to consider cuts and reforms to best support future investment. And with UK employers spending just half the European average on training their employees, the Chancellor said he will examine how the tax system – including the operation of the Apprenticeship Levy – can be used to encourage employers to invest in adult training.

The Chancellor committed to improving R&D reliefs too. UK business R&D investment is less than half of the OECD's average as a percentage of GDP, so R&D tax reliefs will be reformed to deliver better value for money for the taxpayer while being more generous where they can make the most difference. The scope of reliefs will also be expanded to cover data, cloud computing and pure maths.

The support for SMEs comes on top of 50% business rates relief for eligible retail, hospitality, and leisure properties, also coming in this April and worth £1.7 billion for small businesses. The Help to Grow Management and Digital schemes, worth thousands of pounds per business, and the £1 million Annual Investment Allowance are also available to continue supporting UK businesses.

Further announcements

The Spring Statement also confirms that:

- A new Efficiency and Value for Money Committee will be set up to cut £5.5 billion worth of cross-Whitehall waste – with savings to be used to fund public services.
- £50 million new funding will be provided to create a Public Sector Fraud Authority to hold departments account for their counter-fraud performance and to help them identify, seize and recover fraudsters money.
- Local residents across the UK will benefit from a fresh set of infrastructure projects as we open the second round of the £4.8 billion Levelling Up Fund. It will continue to focus on regeneration, transport and cultural investments.

Further information