

The Irish border

I look forward to the government pressing ahead with a solution to the issues over the Irish border that preserves an open border on the UK side. The government has set out in papers how this can be done. It would be good if the EU bought into the UK solution, or provided an acceptable alternative.

Some people who claim there has to be a hard border once we leave the EU need to understand the nature of the current border. Whilst it is true there are no custom dues to levy on products within the EU crossing the border, it is still a currency, VAT, Income and Corporation tax border. It does require processing the right paperwork or electronic information to ensure the correct authorities levy the appropriate VAT, Income Tax, Corporation tax and the rest, and the right exchange rate is applied to transactions.

The Republic of Ireland has a standard rate of VAT of 23% compared to the UK 20%, but also has three lower rates and a zero levy depending on products. The Republic only charges Corporation Tax on trading Income at 12.5% compared to the UK 19%. All of these differences are handled without needing a physical barrier and checks at the border, so it would also be possible to levy customs duties in the same way without a customs post and delay for trucks. Registered importers and exporters can notify electronically and pay electronically. Small trade activities by locals crossing the border regularly could be exempt.

Both sides to the negotiations say they wish to keep the Common Travel area, so there is no need for new border barriers to deal with people. The UK and the Irish authorities already have in place methods for dealing with illegal migrants and criminals seeking entry.

How many more times do we have to go over this well trodden ground? The UK government should just press ahead with its plans for leaving in March 2019

UK Housebuilding and property is doing fine

One of the many wrong forecasts by official bodies before the referendum was a likely fall in house prices and in housebuilding after a No vote. Almost a year and half later, house prices are up modestly and housebuilding has expanded by around 15%.

The latest house price survey from Nationwide shows prices up 2.5% over the last year. The rate of price growth rose to 5.6% after the vote in August 2016 and has since calmed down a bit. The movements post the vote are not

very different from before the vote. The February 2017 level of 4.5% growth was the same as the growth rate in December 2015, as an example. The recent cooling in house price rises reflects the Bank's decision to slow credit growth a bit.

In 2016-17 the UK added 217,350 dwellings to the stock, a rise of 15%. Housebuilding numbers are continuing to expand. The biggest source of growth by far is new construction. Conversions from commercial property are also making a growing and useful contribution. The decision to allow conversion of office space to residential with simplified planning has helped. There will also be shops on the edges of retail areas that will be suitable for conversion as the public switches to more on line and main centre shopping. 37,190 new homes have come from change of use over the last year.

The previous high for new homes came in 2007-8 just before the crash, when the UK produced 223,530. There was then a 44% fall in numbers as a result of the banking slump.

Meanwhile main commercial property companies still report good tenant demand. British Land is the latest company to report sales of properties at 13% above their valuations, showing that valuers continue to be unduly cautious about values.

[More seats on trains on Reading to Waterloo line](#)

I have been told by South Western trains that they are responding to our lobbying for more seats at peak times on the Reading-Waterloo line. They are planning to run 10 carriage trains instead of the present 8 carriage trains on the following services:

Reading to Waterloo morning 06.12, 06.23, 06.42, 06.54, 07.12, 07.24

Waterloo to Reading evening 16.05, 16.20, 16.35, 17.35, 17.50, 18.05, 18.35, 18.50

[Autism and Mental Health Services](#)

Autism is a condition which affects around 700,000 children and adults. It can also be associated with mental health disorders. I have been a keen supporter of the Government's wish to do more to improve our mental health

services.

The Government has made great strides with their Think Autism Strategy, and the accompanying statutory guidance. It sets out best-practice for providing high-quality care, and clarifies that local authorities and CCGs should work together to provide post-diagnostic services for people with autism and co-existing mental health problems.

I am aware that challenges still remain, particularly for young people who can be excluded from accessing mental health services because of their autism.

The Government wants to achieve “parity of esteem” between mental and physical health, in terms of access to services, quality of care and allocation of resources. The Secretary of State has promised that an extra £1.3bn will be invested annually in mental health services by 2021.

With this in mind I have written to the Secretary of State to ask him what can be done to provide autism specific mental health services. I shall post his reply when I receive it.

In the meantime I would ask any constituents who are having difficulties in obtaining services to contact me.

No deal is better than a bad deal

I attended the Urgent Question on the Brexit discussions yesterday.

The government made clear that they still believe No deal is better than a bad deal. They confirmed to me that they are continuing to plan for a No Deal exit. They need to do this as No Deal is still a possible outcome. They also need to do so as the government will have no capacity to resist a bad deal at the last minute if we are not ready to leave without an Agreement.

The government believes they can secure a good deal. This would embrace a full free trade agreement and various other features of a comprehensive economic partnership. It is important it leaves the UK free to negotiate our own trade deals with the rest of the world, settle our own borders, make our own laws and no longer be under the ECJ. The government states they have not offered any specific sums of money, but have indicated areas where they will consider making ex gratia payments in return for a good deal.

Some contributors to this website want me to write all the time about Brexit and respond daily to the false rumours, stories and comments that abound in this area. I have no intention of doing so. Any likely Agreement is probably a year away. It will only be possible to decide whether the Deal is better than No Deal when we know what it is. The discussions will get very repetitious, and my attitude will not change daily as the news flows. In the

meantime I do have other constituency interests to pursue. I will continue to engage on the many matters that do not relate to Brexit that affect the lives of my constituents.

No Deal ticks four of the five boxes of what we want from Brexit. It gives us control of our borders, our laws and our money. It means no special divorce bill. It means we are free to negotiate our own trade agreements around the world. It does not deliver us a free trade agreement with the EU, though later after we have left the EU might want one after all. Any Agreement needs to improve on this to be worthwhile.