



Northern
Ireland
Office

Ms S Wylie
Chief Executive
Belfast City Council
City Hall
Belfast
BT1 5GS

wylies@belfastcity.gov.uk

Northern Ireland Office
1 Horse Guards Road
London
SW1 2HQ
T 020 7210 0206

Stormont House
Belfast
BT4 3SH
T 028 9052 7021
E sos@nio.gov.uk

www.gov.uk/nio
[@niopressoffice](https://twitter.com/niopressoffice)

16 January 2020

Dear Ms Wylie,

Thank you for your letter of the 17th December to the Secretary of State regarding the issue of a referendum in Northern Ireland on its constitutional future and on the impact to Northern Ireland of the UK's withdrawal from the European Union. I have been asked to reply.

This Government fully recognises and respects the fact that a significant section of society in Northern Ireland legitimately regards itself as Irish and aspires to a united Ireland. The Belfast Agreement itself allows for people living in Northern Ireland to identify as British, Irish or both. This Government's clear preference is for Northern Ireland to remain part of the United Kingdom. We have always made clear that, in accordance with the 1998 Agreement, it is for the people of Northern Ireland to decide and we will always back their democratic wishes.

It remains the Secretary of State's view that a majority of the people of Northern Ireland continue to support Northern Ireland's place in the United Kingdom and that this is unlikely to change for at least the foreseeable future. The circumstances set out in the Belfast Agreement that require the Secretary of State to hold a referendum on Irish unification are therefore not satisfied.

Turning to the concerns you have expressed regarding the UK's exit from the EU and the impact on Northern Ireland, the new deal we have agreed with the EU has a special arrangement for Northern Ireland, reflecting the unique circumstances there.

The Protocol sets out the relationship that Northern Ireland, and the rest of the UK in relation to Northern Ireland, will have with the EU at the end of the transition period in December 2020. It avoids a hard border on the island of Ireland, maintains north-south cooperation, and protects the Belfast Agreement. Northern Ireland will have access to the Single Market, but can also be part of UK trade deals negotiated around the world. Crucially, this arrangement will be underpinned by the principle of democratic consent.

This Government has been clear that the result of the 2016 referendum must be respected and as such we will leave the EU on 31 January 2020 as one United Kingdom, with a deal that protects Northern Ireland's constitutional status as part of the UK.

Yours sincerely,

Matthew Ellesmere
Political Strategy and Implementation Team

Oifig an Tánaiste
Aire Gnóthaí Eachtracha agus Trádála
Office of the Tánaiste
Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade



Ms. Suzanne Wylie
Chief Executive
Belfast City Council
City Hall
Belfast BT1 5GS

27 January 2020

Our Reference: DFAT-TO-00604-2019
Your Ref: SW/c

Dear Ms. Wylie,

The Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Mr. Simon Coveney T.D., has asked me to refer to your correspondence of 17 December to the Taoiseach which he conveyed to the Tánaiste for attention.

The Tánaiste has asked me to thank you for this correspondence conveying details of the resolution adopted by Belfast City Council on 2 December 2019 regarding the impacts of Brexit and call for a New Ireland Forum for the 21st century.

The full implementation of the Good Friday Agreement and subsequent agreements is a priority for the Government. The approach of the Government in relation to Irish unity is of course guided by Article 3 of the Constitution, as amended by the people in 1998.

Under the Good Friday Agreement, the Irish and British Governments “recognise the legitimacy of whatever choice is freely exercised by a majority of the people of Northern Ireland with regard to its status, whether they prefer to continue to support the Union with Britain or a sovereign united Ireland” and should such a choice be made in the future, it will be a binding obligation on both Governments to introduce and support in their respective Parliaments legislation to give effect to that wish.

The holding of a referendum in this jurisdiction is connected with the calling of a border poll, under the terms of the Good Friday Agreement, in Northern Ireland. Under the Good Friday Agreement, the Secretary of State shall exercise this power “if at any time it appears likely...that a majority of those voting would express a wish that Northern Ireland should cease to be part of the United Kingdom and form part of a united Ireland”.

In the event of a future referendum within the consent provisions of the Good Friday Agreement, the Government has confirmed that it would make all necessary preparations in accordance with the terms of the Constitution and the principles and procedures of the Agreement.

It is recognised that the course of Brexit in recent years has led to more civic discussion and engagement, North and South, about constitutional change as provided for under the Good Friday Agreement.

The Taoiseach has stated that the Government will continue to listen to and engage with the views of everyone on this island, both on rights issues and on the constitutional future that they wish to see for Northern Ireland – whether nationalist, unionist or neither.

These are extremely important issues which naturally require very careful and serious consideration and the Government will continue to engage and reflect on them.

In the near term, the Government is focused on securing ratification and implementation of the Withdrawal Agreement to allow for an ordered Brexit, including a smooth transition period; preparing for the next phase of Brexit negotiations dealing with the future EU-UK relationship; ensuring the sustained and effective functioning of the devolved institutions and the North South Ministerial Council and ensuring the protection of the Good Friday Agreement and the achievements of the Peace Process, as the UK leaves the EU.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Clare Brosnan". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Clare Brosnan
Private Secretary