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Dear Joan

Following my appearance before the Committee on 29th June, I wanted to write to you with some more information about the questions raised.

The need for a flexible immigration system

As the Committee will be aware, the Scottish Government has long pressed the UK Government to deliver a flexible immigration system that meets Scotland’s needs. That is because controlled migration is important to Scotland’s future, both in terms of contributing to sustainable economic growth and mitigating the effects of demographic change. We have opposed the UK’s target to reduce immigration ‘to the tens of thousands’, an arbitrary target which takes no account of the valuable contribution migrants make to our society and economy. Our efforts to attract and retain people are hampered by an overly restrictive and inflexible immigration system that creates barriers to business and industry in Scotland accessing the talent it needs to grow.

We have called, and continue to call, for the UK immigration system to provide for regional and national differences. For example, since the Migration Advisory Committee was established, we have submitted evidence to their calls for evidence on the UK Immigration Rules, including on the UK Points Based System and the Shortage Occupation List, consistently calling for Scotland’s specific needs to be taken into account. Scottish Ministers have made repeated representations to UK Government Ministers for greater flexibility in the Immigration system, to reflect regional differences, including responding to Home Office consultations on planned changes to the Immigration Rules.

There is already a precedent for different immigration arrangements in Scotland. I refer the Committee to the Fresh Talent scheme (2005 – 2008) which previously enabled international graduates of Scottish institutions to remain in Scotland for two years to work after their studies ended. This scheme was viewed across sectors as a success and the UK Government took the decision to mainstream the scheme across the UK, by first launching the International Graduate Scheme, and then by mainstreaming both schemes into the UK Government’s Points Based System as the Tier 1(Post-study Work) visa route. The visa was abolished by the UK Government in 2012, but the Scottish Government, the Scottish Parliament, Scotland’s Universities and Scottish business have since pressed the UK Government to re-introduce a dedicated post study work route in Scotland.
And of course, as the Committee will be aware, and as highlighted in Dr Eve Hepburn’s report, there are successful examples of differentiated immigration systems in other countries. Canada is a good example of where there is political will, all areas of a country can be empowered to have systems in place that meet their needs. It demonstrates that you can successfully operate a differentiated immigration model within a single country. I have read Eve Hepburn’s report with interest and we will be responding to this Committee’s Inquiry into Immigration, which I understand closes next month.

Scotland’s immigration needs

In terms of evidencing Scotland specific needs, and how migration can meet those needs, Scottish Government analysts have been taking forward work to coordinate and assess the latest evidence on the benefits of migration to Scotland. This has included a wide range of analysis to understand the contribution of EU nationals to Scotland’s demographic resilience, the economic contribution of EU nationals, the regional impacts of EU migration, the impacts on communities and services, as well as public attitudes to migration and factors influencing public attitudes. This will enable us to continue to develop our position and ensure that we are able to make the best, evidence-based, case for a flexible immigration system that recognises and meets Scotland’s needs.

National Records of Scotland (NRS) are also working with the Office for National Statistics (ONS) to agree the assumptions on future levels of fertility, mortality and migration to feed into the next set of 2016-based national population projections to be released in October/November 2017. These projections will provide important evidence on the future size and age structure of the population in Scotland and the rest of the UK. We already know from the last set of 2014-based projections that Scotland has a markedly different demographic profile to the rest of the UK and if current trends continue, net inward migration is projected to be the main contributor to Scotland’s population growth. For example, in Scotland 90% of our population increase over the next ten years is projected to come from migration (57% from net international migration and 32% from net migration from the rest of the UK), whereas in the UK as a whole only 49% of the projected population growth is due to international migration. Also given our ageing population, EU nationals can play an important role in helping Scotland maintain a healthy working age population, support the growing number of older people and boost population growth.

UK Immigration Bill

We have made representations to the UK Government at official level, seeking more clarity around the timescales and the scope of the Immigration Bill as announced in the Queen’s speech last month. We understand that it will be published over the next few months, and while we believe the scope will be wide ranging, we know nothing of the detail. It is vital that any rules that are put in place for future EU migration, meet the needs of all of the nations of the UK and it is essential that all four countries of the UK are closely involved in its development.

In conclusion, I would like to thank the members for the continued important work the Committee is undertaking on this issue.

ALASDAIR ALLAN