

UK Government's response to the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee Inquiry into 'Transparency of Intergovernmental Activity and its Implications for Parliamentary Scrutiny'

Introduction

The UK Government is committed to promoting the understanding of intergovernmental relations and recognises the important role that parliamentary scrutiny plays in their transparency. We welcome this opportunity to provide written evidence to inform the Committee's inquiry into 'Transparency of Intergovernmental activity and its implications for parliamentary scrutiny'.

Governance of the United Kingdom is complex and multifaceted, especially in the evolving, shared intergovernmental space. The UK Government believes in making devolution in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland work effectively to deliver on the issues people care about most. We therefore agree with the Committee on the importance of scrutinising how the governments work together across all UK legislatures. This written evidence evaluates the current state of intergovernmental relations and assesses how this activity is currently scrutinised by the UK Parliament, before considering how inter-parliamentary work can aid the scrutiny of intergovernmental relations.

1. UK Government Perspective on the Current State of Intergovernmental Relations

We have reset the relationship with the devolved governments in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. This work began right at the beginning of the new Government, with the Prime Minister visiting each nation to meet with First Ministers within the first few days of coming into office. This early and proactive action from the Prime Minister has carried across the rest of the Government. Ministers across departments similarly prioritised early calls with their counterparts in the devolved governments and have continued to meet with them regularly. This has led to a high level of ongoing ministerial engagement between the governments, which will continue. This includes:

- Two multilateral meetings of the 'top tier' structure of the 2022 Intergovernmental Relations Review (October 2024 and May 2025);
- Three meetings of the Interministerial Standing Committee (3 October 2024, 27 February 2025, 26 June 2025);
- Four meetings of the Finance: Interministerial Standing Committee (3 October 2024, 27 February 2025, 26 June 2025, 17 October 2025); and
- Meetings of all sixteen of the Interministerial Groups, which have discussed a wide range of matters, from economic growth and investment, to trade barriers and migration. These discussions actively ensure the consideration of citizens across the whole of the United Kingdom in policy development and implementation.

However, it is the quality of engagement - not just its volume - that is important. We understand it is vital to bring the devolved governments, and other stakeholders across Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, into the policymaking process and to actively seek their input, where appropriate. We acknowledge that there will always be room for disagreement in specific policy areas and will continue to engage and collaborate with the

devolved governments to work through shared challenges. Over the past year the devolved governments have recognised the UK Government's significant tonal shift. This is evidenced by daily contact between officials in the UK and devolved governments who are working together on policy and legislation that delivers for people in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. Ultimately, good intergovernmental relations and ensuring that there are effective working relationships across governments is a joint responsibility shared across all four governments. Examples include:

- Department for Business and Trade ministers spoke with their devolved government counterparts on a number of occasions ahead of the announcement of the General Terms for the UK-US Economic Prosperity Deal and have conducted further engagement following the announcement. Relevant information and materials on trade discussions with the US have been shared with the devolved governments in advance of and during discussions with the US, including legal text.
- During the development of the UK Trade Strategy, we engaged with the devolved governments through the Department for Business and Trade Senior Officials Group, shared chapter skeletons, updated devolved government ministers at the Interministerial Group for Trade, and shared a copy of the Trade Strategy under embargo ahead of its publication.
- Similar engagement was seen during the development of the Industrial Strategy. HM Treasury and devolved government finance ministers meet throughout the year to collaborate, including through the Finance: Interministerial Standing Committee. The former Chief Secretary to the Treasury also separately met with devolved government finance ministers to discuss Spending Review priorities. We will continue to work closely with the devolved governments as we move to implementation, respecting devolved arrangements, and coordinating with their economic strategies.

2. UK Government Parliamentary Engagement

The Government is restoring trust between the public and politics. Important to this is ministerial accountability to Parliament. As reiterated in the Ministerial Code, updated in October this year, UK ministers must also comply at all times with the requirements that Parliament itself has laid down in relation to the accountability and responsibility of ministers.

Members of both Houses within the UK Parliament can table questions – for oral or written answer – to UK Government ministers. In response to these questions, ministers are obliged to explain and account for the work, policy decisions, and actions of their departments. Accordingly, the UK Parliament regularly scrutinises the UK Government's work in the intergovernmental space. For example, over the past year:

- There have been 2 debates in the House of Lords wholly, or in part, scrutinising intergovernmental relations, following inquiries by the Constitution Committee.
- There have been several oral questions in both Houses, including in departmental oral question sessions in the Commons.
- The former Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster gave oral evidence regarding intergovernmental relations to the Commons' Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee and the Lords' Constitution Committee. The

Secretaries of State for Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland routinely provide evidence to the Scottish, Welsh, and Northern Ireland Affairs Committees.

- UK Government ministers announced the review of the UK Internal Market Act (UKIM) in December 2024. During the consultation, the UK Government listened carefully to the views of a wide range of stakeholders, including the devolved governments, whose views informed the review's conclusion that Common Frameworks should be the preferred mechanism for managing the UK internal market. In July 2025, the UK Government wrote to the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee and the Constitution Committee in the UK Parliament to advise them about publication of the review response. The review strikes the right balance between devolved governments exercising their powers and ensuring that unnecessary barriers to trade do not emerge within the UK.
- 24 of the Common Frameworks have been scrutinised by all four legislatures, with 4 awaiting completion of the scrutiny process by the Northern Ireland Assembly. There are 2 unpublished Common Frameworks that are ready for ministerial sign off, to be provisionally published and scrutinised by each legislature, and one Framework is at an earlier stage of development. We are currently working with the devolved governments to develop a reporting mechanism to all four legislatures across all the Frameworks and are looking forward to updating the UK Parliament on this.

Reporting of intergovernmental relations activity by all four governments and the independent secretariat is vital to support this existing scrutiny and accountability. In line with the commitment made by all governments in the 2022 Review of Intergovernmental Relations, the UK Government has recently published its intergovernmental relations engagement dashboard on gov.uk. This data covers the period from July 2024 to March 2025. The dashboard will be updated as data is finalised.

In addition to the UK Government's accountability to and scrutiny by the UK Parliament, we have been prioritising early and effective engagement on legislation with the devolved governments since the General Election. UK Government ministers work closely with their devolved government counterparts to find solutions to their concerns on individual bills. To date, this co-operation has resulted in the devolved legislatures passing 37 Legislative Consent Motions for UK Bills and Acts. Devolved government ministers have observed and appreciated the improvement in engagement since we were elected. Officials are currently engaging with their devolved government counterparts on a new Memorandum of Understanding regarding legislation, and we hope to agree a final version in the months ahead.

UK Government ministers can also use certain regulation-making powers to legislate on devolved matters. The Sewel Convention only applies to primary legislation and there is no similar convention governing the use of secondary legislation. However, UK Government departments are encouraged to work with colleagues in the devolved governments on the content of regulations in devolved areas and, for some powers, there have been commitments to seek the agreement of, or to consult, the devolved governments before using them. In the year following the General Election, the Government laid 92 Statutory Instruments covering devolved topics. For 43 of these Statutory Instruments, a UK minister sought the agreement of ministers in the devolved governments and for a further 23 Statutory Instruments, a UK minister formally consulted devolved government ministers.

3. Parliamentary Scrutiny of the Shared Intergovernmental Relations Space

More than a quarter of a century has passed since the establishment of modern devolution. During this time, the territorial constitution has shifted and evolved, understandably giving rise to the questions posed in the Committee's inquiry. It is incumbent upon all four governments and all four legislatures to work together to ensure transparency, where appropriate. Of course, it is for each respective legislature to determine how they believe their executive should be scrutinised and held to account at an individual level. As we have laid out above, the UK Parliament already exercises a high level of scrutiny of the UK Government in the intergovernmental space.

The UK Government also engages with the devolved legislatures to enable better scrutiny of cross-cutting work, where possible. If invited to appear before a devolved legislature committee, UK ministers will consider whether the subject of the inquiry relates closely to their portfolio in deciding whether to accept. Some of the considerations UK Government ministers may make are set out in Devolution Guidance Note 12. Indeed, for this current inquiry the current Parliamentary Secretary in the Cabinet Office will meet with the Committee. Similarly, the current Secretary of State for Scotland met with the Committee earlier in the year in his then-role as a Minister of State in the Cabinet Office.

With the already existing high level of scrutiny of individual governments in their respective legislatures, the question is then how can all four governments and all four legislatures bring this together to aid the scrutiny of intergovernmental activity across the United Kingdom to enhance transparency and accountability. The Government is committed to continuing to support the role and remit of the Interparliamentary Forum to advance this scrutiny.

At the November 2024 meeting of the Forum in Belfast, a senior official from the Cabinet Office attended one of the sessions alongside counterparts from the Northern Ireland Executive to discuss how intergovernmental relations had evolved with the change of government. The Interparliamentary Forum welcomed the UK Government's renewed approach. Following this engagement, the current Secretary of State for Scotland met with the Forum in June 2025 in his then-role as a Minister of State in the Cabinet Office to maintain the momentum of interparliamentary cooperation that was established in Belfast.

The UK Government believes that the Interparliamentary Forum is the appropriate place to bring together the high level of scrutiny that already takes place in all four legislatures.