

12<sup>th</sup> April 2021

Dear Minister,

I am writing to you as President of Ballymena Area Chamber of Commerce and Industry on behalf of our members, other local businesses, and the wider community in the Ballymena Area.

Firstly, can I take this opportunity to thank you and your colleagues across the Executive for the work you have collectively undertaken during what has been one of the most challenging periods anyone can remember. So many individuals, families and businesses have suffered and been faced with unprecedented difficulties, however together we appear to have some *'light at the end of a long tunnel'*.

That said we have conducted a survey of our members and a number of themes have been evident which centre around increased assistance from both the Executive and Central Government. The following is a list of the main issues which have arisen during our consultation period –

1. **Further grant schemes are required, particularly to support SMEs and those sectors which have seen significant disruption to their business such as hospitality and the retail sector. It is imperative that the support received during the height of the pandemic is not simply 'switched off' and that targeted and timely support is directed to those businesses in greatest need to help them survive the next number of months and to re-establish their market position.**
2. **Extension of the Stamp Duty 'holiday'. We fully understand that this is not a devolved power but would hope that you would lobby the UK Government to have this 'holiday' extended beyond the current deadline of June 30th. This would create a significant stimulus across the housing market.**
3. **The Executive should release 'capital' projects at the earliest opportunity. This will again help stimulate the local construction industry and the knock-on effect will see those who supply this sector enjoying a significant boost to their smaller businesses.**
4. **Supply chain issues associated with Brexit require to be addressed. In particular the issues which result in the 'slow down' of the supply chain and the increased costs to businesses and consumers.**



5. A reduction in Business Rates would also provide businesses with some relief and allow them to target their finances towards sustaining and developing their businesses.
6. In addition, the Executive should work closely with our banks to ensure they are sympathetic to their customers difficulties and provide assistance and support to businesses through the next number of months whilst they attempt to move back towards normality and profitability.

Whilst each issue requires to be addressed, they should form part of a comprehensive plan which clearer sets out how the Northern Ireland economy will be facilitated to recover and maintain sustained growth as the pandemic effects recede. This plan should also include initiatives to help revitalise town centres and ensure that our retailers can compete with online competition.

As I have said, we are grateful to the work of the Executive to date and the support for business which has been provided both by the Executive and the UK Government. However, even though we are moving to what we hope will be more favourable economic conditions many businesses have sustained considerable losses, and many will find it difficult to re-establish their customer base. *It is therefore imperative that targeted and timely support is made available to assist our businesses take advantage of the expected 'economic recovery'.*

Should you wish to discuss these issues in more depth myself and my Management Committee would be delighted to discuss the matters with you either in person or via Zoom.

I look forward to your early reply.

Yours Sincerely



President

Ballymena Area Chamber of Commerce and Industry