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Diana Johnson MP
House of Commons
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12 December 2017

Dear Diana,


Thank you for your letter of 16 November. Like you, I am deeply moved by the plight of all those affected by contaminated blood, and the establishment of an inquiry is an important step to provide those affected with the answers they deserve. You mention the implications of the absence of an Executive for that work.

As the First Secretary set out in his recent Written Statement, a further announcement will be made before the end of the year on its establishment. The specific Terms of Reference and manner of operation for the inquiry will therefore be a matter for further consideration by Cabinet Office Ministers and the Chair. But my officials, as well as those in the Northern Ireland Civil Service, have been engaged and updated on the process thus far and that will certainly continue. As you make clear, the outcome in the best interests of those in Northern Ireland would be the re-establishment of an inclusive, devolved government able to make decisions in the interests of the whole community. In its continued absence, my officials and those in the Cabinet Office will certainly continue to engage counterparts in the NICS as the establishment process continues. I shall ensure that the questions you have raised are considered carefully in those discussions.

You asked about the *ex gratia* system of support in Northern Ireland. As you identify, following the decision in England for the NHS Business Services Authority to administer the scheme for English beneficiaries, on 1 November 2017 the Infected Blood Support Scheme for Northern Ireland was established by the Regional Business Services Organisation (RBSO). The beneficiaries that are eligible under that scheme have been notified of these changes and have received their first payments from the new scheme administrator. Full details are available on the RBSO website: <http://www.hscbusiness.hscni.net/services/2876.htm>. That includes the contact details for those interested.

Finally, as to the funding provided by the Northern Ireland Budget Act 2017, I note that the Act did no more than provide broad spending limits and ambitions for NI departments.

Detailed decisions on devolved spending remain for the NICS, such as the *ex gratia* system of support. So as I set out in my recent Written Answer to you, I have asked if they will respond to you directly on this point. I have copied Richard Pengelly, Permanent Secretary of the Northern Ireland Department of Health, to repeat that request.

Yours ever,


RT HON JAMES BROKESHIRE MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND