

The Joint Ministerial Committee and British- Irish Council

14. To the best of my recollection, the Joint Ministerial Committee (“JMC”) was not used during my period in office to facilitate intergovernmental relations.
15. I do recall that a British-Irish Council Summit took place in November 2021. Edwin Poots, Minister for Agriculture, the Environment and Rural Affairs to represent Northern Ireland. The topics to be discussed were the economy, ongoing relations with the EU and the 26th UK Climate Change Conference, as well as the continuing impact of the Covid-19 pandemic (PG/11 [INQ000104455]).
16. These bodies promote good diplomatic relations and high-level discussion on issues of importance to the participating nations but I do not consider them to be ‘decision-making bodies’ as such. They each meet infrequently by design and would not have been fit for the purpose of coordinating the response to the pandemic. Meetings of these structures generally took weeks, if not months, to plan and required significant pre-engagement between officials. It would simply have been too administratively burdensome, without significant amendment or adjustment to their mode of operation, to use these pre-existing structures in the context of a pandemic.

The UK Governance Group

17. I do not believe the UK Governance Group is a structure that could be used to facilitate intergovernmental relations. My understanding is that this Group leads the UK Government’s work on constitutional and devolution issues and provides advice to the UK Government on this area, rather than being a structure in which the devolved administrations participate on wider issues.

Effectiveness of the 4 nations approach

18. In terms of the effectiveness of the 4 nations approach to the Covid-19 response, the first thing to say is that while there was a broadly similar approach taken by the four nations to the response, when considered to, for example, the approaches taken by countries such as Sweden, or New Zealand, each devolved administration was making its own decisions as to the imposition and easing of restrictions during my period in office. There was not a ‘one size fits all’ approach. While it may therefore have been respectful to devolution and the devolved administrations to have had a jointly owned structure within which to discuss each jurisdiction’s strategy, I do not believe this would have led to any greater consensus between the devolved administrations. Each