

Northern Ireland business tells UK and EU to resolve their differences, urgently

An umbrella group representing the bulk of businesses in Northern Ireland has said the latest standoff between the UK and European Union is a “matter of deep regret” and called for urgent talks between the two governing bodies.

In a carefully worded statement, the Northern Ireland Business Brexit Working Group (NIBBWG) said that both businesses and consumers in the province are at risk if an agreement is not reached quickly to resolve differences around the protocol.

It follows the publication earlier this week of a bill by the UK government which sought to rip up parts of the protocol which it said were disrupting the flow of goods and jeopardising the power sharing government.

The EU responded, taking legal actions against Boris Johnston’s government and threatening the implementation of new checks, this time on parcels and luggage moving from Great Britain to Northern Ireland. EU Vice President Maroš Šefčovič, meanwhile, has warned that Northern Ireland businesses will lose access to the single market if the plans go ahead.

The NIBBWG said both the economy and society in Northern Ireland needs a quick resolution to the issues, pointing out that consumers here are struggling with the cost-of-living crisis and businesses are becoming more pessimistic.

It said there is some merit in some of the suggestions put forward by both the EU and UK when it comes to simplifying trade between the two regions and pointed to the fact latest data suggests Northern Ireland’s unique position with access to both markets has borne fruit.

The latter follows latest jobs data which showed the manufacturing sector is creating jobs at a greater rate than the rest of the UK, a factor which some have suggested is down to its single market access.

Meanwhile, Bank of London, a new clearing house, has announced it has set up a new base in Belfast because of its access to both European and UK markets.

NIBBWG, which is made up of 14 of the main business groups in Northern Ireland, said talks must begin urgently.

“Unilateral action is not at our request, and in these times, the parties have a responsibility to reach an agreement with a sense of urgency.” It said. “We need to see the UK and EU engage in substantive talks on resolving issues raised by stakeholders in Northern Ireland.

“We also need the UK and the EU to engage with those stakeholders in finding workable solutions. We remain confident an agreed way forward can be found but that starts by putting Northern Ireland, its people and its business at the centre of the debate.”