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**Northern Ireland
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Dr Sarah Main
Campaign for Science and Engineering
Gordon House
29 Gordon Square
London
WC1H 0PP

Our Ref: 170515-pmc

Date: 31 May 2017

Dear Sarah,

I am writing to you in response to your letter, dated 3 May 2017, regarding my support for Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) within Northern Ireland.

Alliance believe that Northern Ireland has suffered from a deeply unbalanced economy within the U.K. To address this we must ensure that our economy is competitive, ambitious and innovative. We recognise STEM subjects will be the future of the Northern Irish economy and we must have a skilled work force in place.

Alliance already has a strong track record of promoting the sustainable provision of STEM subjects and, indeed, increasing that provision. Whilst in the Executive, an Alliance Minister delivered over 1,400 additional university places in Science and Technology. He also provided a stronger focus around STEM Skills across all skills interventions, with a particular focus on encouraging greater female participation in STEM. Additionally, Alliance has been the main supporter of the first Northern Ireland Science Festival.

We intend to continue this engagement going forward. For example, we have called for an additional £85 million investment in skills and the promotion of STEM subjects within all levels of education.

We fully acknowledge the role that migration plays in supporting STEM research and innovation. As a party, we want to ensure that any migration policy following Brexit both enables those who are highly skilled in science, technology, engineering, mathematics, and related disciplines to continue to migrate to the UK to work, and exempts international students from being counted as migrants during the course of their studies.

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In relation to your third question, Alliance is proud of the work done on research and innovation in Northern Ireland. Therefore, we are keen to ensure that Brexit does not unduly affect this. This is particular challenge for university and other academic research as some of this funding is directly from the EU. However, we are also concerned that private sector research could be affected by variations in regulatory regimes.

In relation to your fourth question, there is a clear link globally between state investment in science and economic prosperity. We have called for increased investment in science and research through the UK Research Councils. We also want to see an audit of how scientific infrastructure is lacking in the UK and ensure this is considered as part of the UK's scientific investment programmes.

The Alliance party is proud of its record on delivering evidence-based policy-making. When we had Ministers in the Executive, we listened to scientific advice on issues such as abortion, mitochondrial replacement therapy and drugs treatment in prisons. We have also relied on scientific advice when voting on issues relating to the environment and health.

As a result, we believe that it is possible to ensure the NI Assembly and Executive both reflect scientific advice in their work.

We would seek to ensure this goes much wider throughout any reformed Executive. For example, we would like to see more specific laying out of evidence by Ministers in their consultations and proposals. It would also require a much wider use of external scientific advisors.

In relation to your final question; we are aware that the post-Brexit trading environment for the UK is likely to change dramatically. We are convinced that the best offer that the UK, and NI more specifically, has to offer the world can be more than simply low-regulation, low-wage economy. We have a strong history of support for promoting innovation and to assist innovators to trade their products. We intend to continue this.

I hope I have demonstrated the passion that my party and colleagues feel towards STEM and their importance for Northern Ireland. As well as the above, I will continue to promote STEM as the Chair of the All Party Group on STEM in the Assembly.

Best Regards,

Naomi Long MLA

Naomi Long MLA

*East Belfast Alliance Assembly Member
Leader of the Alliance Party*