

2023 UK and Overseas Territories Joint Ministerial Council

Communiqué

We, the Minister for the Overseas Territories and elected leaders and representatives of the Overseas Territories, met as the Joint Ministerial Council (JMC) on 11-12 May 2023. Ministers and representatives from across the UK Government, including the Home Office, Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, Department of Transport, HM Treasury, Department of Health and Social Care, and the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero joined. We also welcomed the newly elected leaders of the British Virgin Islands.

The JMC provided an opportunity to reflect on the Coronation of His Majesty The King and pay tribute to her late Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. We also reflected on successes of the year such as working together to respond to global events like COVID-19 and Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine, and challenges of the year including rising crime and irregular migration in some Territories. The partnership between the UK and the Overseas Territories has helped us deliver these successes and meet these challenges.

PARTNERSHIP AND PRINCIPLES

1. The Foreign Secretary reaffirmed that the Overseas Territories are an integral part of the undivided realm. The longstanding and deep partnerships give us strength in this rapidly changing world. We are family, under one realm. United by shared values and pushing in the same direction to overcome shared challenges.
2. In keeping with the founding intentions of the JMC, as the highest forum for political dialogue and consultation between the UK and the Overseas Territories, we approached these discussions with the purpose of promoting cooperation in areas of mutual interest. We discussed key priorities with an aim to: promote the security and good governance of the Territories; their sustainable development, economic and social progress; and to agree priorities, develop plans and review implementation.
3. We welcomed the Foreign Secretary's announcement of a new UK Government strategy on the Overseas Territories. We look forward to collaborating in its development, setting the direction for a relationship firmly based on the principles of collaboration and mutual interest. The Overseas Territories further welcome that each Government Department will have an assigned Minister responsible for their Department's relationship with the Territories. These Ministers will meet as a group chaired by the Minister for the Overseas Territories.
4. The principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples, as enshrined in the UN Charter, applies to the peoples of the Overseas Territories. The UK and Overseas Territories reaffirmed the importance of promoting the right of self-determination for the peoples of the Territories, which is a collective responsibility of all parts of the UK Government. We will continue to explore ways in which the Overseas Territories can maintain international support in countering hostile sovereignty claims. For those Territories with permanent populations who wish it, the UK will continue to support requests for the removal of the Territory from the United Nations list of non-self-governing Territories.

LAW ENFORCEMENT AND IRREGULAR MIGRATION

5. The UK and Overseas Territories note the shared responsibility for ensuring the protection of our citizens across the Territories through the work of multiple agencies within and across jurisdictions. The Overseas Territories welcome the ongoing work by the UK Government through the UK Integrated Security Fund (formerly Conflict, Stability and Security Fund), Justice and Border Security Programmes to help strengthen and modernise law enforcement and border control capabilities. We recognise the importance of taking a holistic approach to crime prevention and border security, which is why in 23/24 the UK Government is committing over £10m to support OT law enforcement and border security capability and capacity building.
6. Both the UK and Overseas Territories recognise that security challenges are often complex and reaffirm the joint commitment to build upon multi-agency models (e.g. through Multi-Agency Gold Incident Command and Joint Emergency Services Interoperability Programme) to enhance co-operation and increase effectiveness within the Territories. We commit to sharing our experiences, challenges and lessons learned by upholding our close partnership on areas of security and law enforcement. The UK undertakes in collaboration with affected Territories to strengthen their security and law enforcement regimes.
7. We acknowledge the irregular-migration challenges that some Overseas Territories are facing, including as a result of the current situation in Haiti, and note that these challenges vary across the Territories. The UK commits to exploring options to increase support for impacted Territories and to continue to work together on these issues of shared importance.

ECONOMIC AND FINANCIAL RESILIENCE

8. The Overseas Territories are building successful and resilient economies. We recognise that external shocks, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine and natural disasters, can result in significant fiscal and economic challenges and we are working to mitigate the impacts of these shocks.
9. The UK remains committed to meeting the reasonable needs of Territories where financial self-sufficiency is not possible, as the Overseas Territories continue to have the first call on the aid budget. The UK and Overseas Territories will work in partnership to develop and deliver successful programmes in the Territories.
10. We acknowledge the challenges posed by rising global inflation, particularly for the most vulnerable in our societies. We shared lessons learned from our experience of introducing new infrastructure investments in a context of rising global interest rates. We discussed access to concessional financing, including the appropriateness of broader vulnerability indices for determining ODA eligibility. We resolve to promote and encourage trade as an engine of prosperity. The UK will continue to work with the Overseas Territories to explore opportunities for diversification of economies and building economic resilience.

11. The Overseas Territories and the UK are pleased to announce that we have launched a new ministerial-level annual dialogue focused on tackling illicit finance, demonstrating our enhanced commitment to working together as partners to defend our financial systems against illicit actors. The British Virgin Islands offered to host the inaugural meeting of this dialogue, or part of it, later this year. We will deepen our partnership to tackle shared illicit-finance threats. We continue to meet the highest international financial standards, including those set by the Financial Action Task Force and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. The Overseas Territories and the UK will continue to cooperate, including through technical forums on anti-money laundering, sanctions enforcement, counter-terrorist financing and foreign bribery.
12. Furthermore, the Overseas Territories and the UK are pleased to announce that we will be establishing a technical working group on beneficial ownership transparency to share expertise on, and consider issues around, the implementation of publicly accessible registers of company beneficial ownership that contain the necessary safeguards to protect the right to privacy.
13. We condemn the ongoing illegal Russian invasion of Ukraine and note this has created new challenges for the Overseas Territories. The UK Government welcomes the Overseas Territories' continued strong commitment and actions in implementing and enforcing sanctions against Russia.

ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE CHANGE

14. The Overseas Territories are spread across all seven major oceans and seas, and support the Earth's major ecosystem types, from polar tundra to mangrove forests. The Overseas Territories are leading on policies to protect unique environments and to address climate change including energy transition. The UK Government recognises that the Territories are vulnerable to the impacts of climate change and we are working with Territory Governments to prioritise climate change actions in UK funding.
15. We remain committed to keeping a limit of 1.5C temperature rise within reach and to implementing and building on the Glasgow Climate Pact. We welcomed the extension of the UK's ratification of the Paris Agreement to Gibraltar in 2022 – bringing them into scope of the UK's Nationally Determined Contribution to reduce all greenhouse emissions by at least 68% of 1990 levels by 2030. While recognising the efforts of all Overseas Territories in reducing emissions, the UK Government will continue to support Overseas Territories with appropriate technical support.
16. The UK Government is supporting biodiversity and conservation projects in the Overseas Territories. For each year until 2025, the UK Government will continue to make available £10 million for applicants to Darwin Plus. This year, Darwin Plus has been expanded to include a new local scheme aimed at building capacity and growing local economies; and a new strategic scheme for fostering greater innovation and collaboration between Territories. With improvements to the Darwin Plus Fellowships scheme also underway, UK Government is pleased to be enhancing the full Darwin Plus offer and will keep the structure of the programme under review, with a focus on suitability and practical conservation. The UK Government will explore ways that funding for the Overseas Territories is not cut short as a result of loss of access to EU environment funding.

17. The UK Government and Overseas Territories are developing a new joint UK Overseas Territories Biodiversity Strategy, expected to be published in 2024. Building on the success of the Darwin Plus and Blue Belt Programmes, the Strategy will set out the priorities of individual Territories, our ambition to protect and restore biodiversity, and the approach to long-term investment for sustaining the Territories' biodiversity.
18. The UK Government reiterates its commitment to the longevity of the established Blue Belt Programme, whilst continuing to welcome new Territories to the programme where they are committing to enhancing the protection and sustainable management of their marine environments. We welcome the Turks and Caicos Islands and Anguilla as the newest members of the Blue Belt family, and we welcome Bermuda's participation in the Blue Belt Ocean Shield initiative.
19. We welcomed the active participation of the Overseas Territories in international fora including the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP27) and the fifteenth meeting of the Convention on Biological Diversity. The UK Government and the Overseas Territories will work in partnership at upcoming climate change and biodiversity summits, including COP28 in the United Arab Emirates and at the Convention on Biological Diversity in 2024.

HEALTHCARE

20. The Overseas Territories welcomed progress in implementing the long-awaited reforms to the NHS Quota system, which now offers greater flexibility and access and for the first time includes Ascension, Tristan da Cunha, Pitcairn, Cayman and Bermuda. Territories also welcomed the commitment to regular reviews to ensure that the reforms meet individual Territory needs including mental health support.
21. Leaders of the Overseas Territories also set out their thanks to the UK Government for its provision of COVID-19 vaccines and commitment to protecting the people of the Territories.

MARITIME STRATEGY

22. The Overseas Territories form part of the prestigious group of Shipping Registers, the Red Ensign Group, who collectively have the ninth largest fleet in the world and whose ships fly the most recognised flag in shipping, the Red Ensign. Our commitment to continually improving safety and security for anyone who works at sea or utilises the sea for recreation purposes, and minimising the risks to marine environments from shipping, is acknowledged globally and our reputation and standards are world leading.
23. With over 90% of world-wide traded goods being transported by sea and the reliance on shipping to provide key lifeline services, support tourism and the wider economy, we recognise the profound importance of shipping and related maritime industries to our small islands. The UK and Overseas Territories reaffirm our joint commitment to strengthening maritime capabilities in the territories and recognise the need for future investment by promoting defined career pathways and supporting those wishing to work in this essential industry.

24. We welcome the inclusion of those Overseas Territories who do not currently have maritime administrations to bring their unique experiences as coastal States to the Red Ensign Group.
25. We agree to explore a joint long-term maritime strategy in recognition of the wide-reaching impacts of maritime and to maximise opportunities for decarbonising within the maritime sector and supporting blue economies.
26. Maintaining the security of shipping and port facilities is an important part of maintaining economic security through ensuring the continued flow of goods and supporting essential industries like tourism. The UK and the Overseas Territories agree on the need to continue to work collaboratively on ensuring effective maritime security within the Territories in compliance with the 1974 International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS).

EDUCATION AND PENSIONS

27. In addition to the main topics discussed at the Council, the Overseas Territories expressed disappointment at the ongoing issue with the process for issuing visas for students with British Overseas Territories Citizenship to study in the UK. The Overseas Territories welcome the UK Government commitment to resolving the issue.
28. While welcoming the access to tuition fee loans in England for Overseas Territories students, The UK and the Overseas Territories acknowledge a concern that students from the Overseas Territories do not currently have access to maintenance loans.
29. The UK acknowledge a concern raised by some Overseas Territories on the uprating of State Pensions for residents who worked in the UK and then return to their Territory on retirement.

The UK Government and the Overseas Territories welcome the opportunity to come together as a Joint Ministerial Council. We reiterate our joint commitment to deepening our unique and modern partnership.