1. Mid and East Antrim Borough Council is a leading Northern Ireland local authority. Covering the main towns of Ballymena, Carrickfergus and Larne, the area is filled with natural beauty and rich cultural sites, as well as strategic links to air, sea and road networks. Our vision is ‘working together to create a better future for all’, as we strive to deliver for our citizens, with priorities of growing the economy, leading the corporate planning process and improving service delivery.

2. Councils have, and continue, to play a key role in the devolved government of Northern Ireland. Councils have been described as acting as the “only other sources of elected legitimacy to the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive, and act as checks and balances on the domestic concentration of power”.¹

3. Our concern is that if direct rule is implemented, the oversight for key public services e.g. health, housing, education and transport will transfer to Westminster and further distance accountability from our citizens. Indeed, there is a risk that the working relationships developed between Northern Ireland’s central and local government will suffer as the “vast majority of Westminster MPs lack experience in, or any strong incentive to understand, local governance in Northern Ireland”.²

4. Local government in Northern Ireland has undergone extensive reform, enabling Councils to be more efficient, innovative and cost effective. Mid and East Antrim Borough Council is well equipped to deliver services such as planning, local economic development, off-street car parking and community investment, previously delivered by central government. We believe that we can, and should, have a greater role in mitigating any democratic deficit.

5. The continuing political impasse is directly impacting on budget setting, delivery of community planning objectives and investment initiatives and urgent action is required to mitigate the constraints created by the absence of the Assembly.

6. A review of administrative, legislative and statutory processes, including the legislation required to complete the reform of local government in Northern Ireland has been recommended. ¹

¹ James Pow, Audit 2017: How democratic is local government in Northern Ireland?, June 2017
² n1
Ireland is necessary. We agree with Alderman Hatch, President of the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) that this review must include a look at the Regeneration Bill, which would see the Northern Ireland Department for Communities’ statutory powers for urban regeneration and community development extended to district councils.

7. Greater budgetary certainty is also essential to support local government’s longer term investment decisions, in order to enable us to realise our potential. Mid and East Antrim Borough Council is individually, and collectively with the 10 other councils in Northern Ireland, working effectively and able to deliver economic growth and co-ordinate and deliver public services.

8. Whilst Mid and East Antrim Borough Council fully supports devolved administration in Northern Ireland, local government must be prepared and supported through adequate legislation and resources to mitigate the democratic definition.

9. The passing of additional responsibilities to local government is a compelling alternative to full-blown direct rule, with Councils delivering some of those services currently provided by regional departments.

10. Mid and East Antrim Borough Council is also deeply concerned at the lack of local government in Brexit negotiations. Clive Betts, chair of the House of Commons and Local Government (CLG) Committee has commented “…local government must be represented in the negotiations on the terms of the UK’s exit from the EU…. the role of local authorities post Brexit is still unclear”.

11. As the EU is currently an important source of local regeneration and economic development funding and is imperative that we work with Westminster, in the absence of the Assembly, to develop a “fully funded and locally-driven successor (Local Government Association).

12. Northern Ireland local government must have a seat at the table. Mid and East Antrim Borough Council has taken a positive, can-do attitude to Brexit and is keen to make the most of the opportunities it offers. We believe this positive representation will be of benefit at a local, regional and national level.

13. Mid and East Antrim Borough Council would welcome the opportunity to further engage with the committee to explore how we can mitigate the democratic deficit, restore accountability and fill any gaps left in EU negotiations through the strengthening of local government.

29 December 2017