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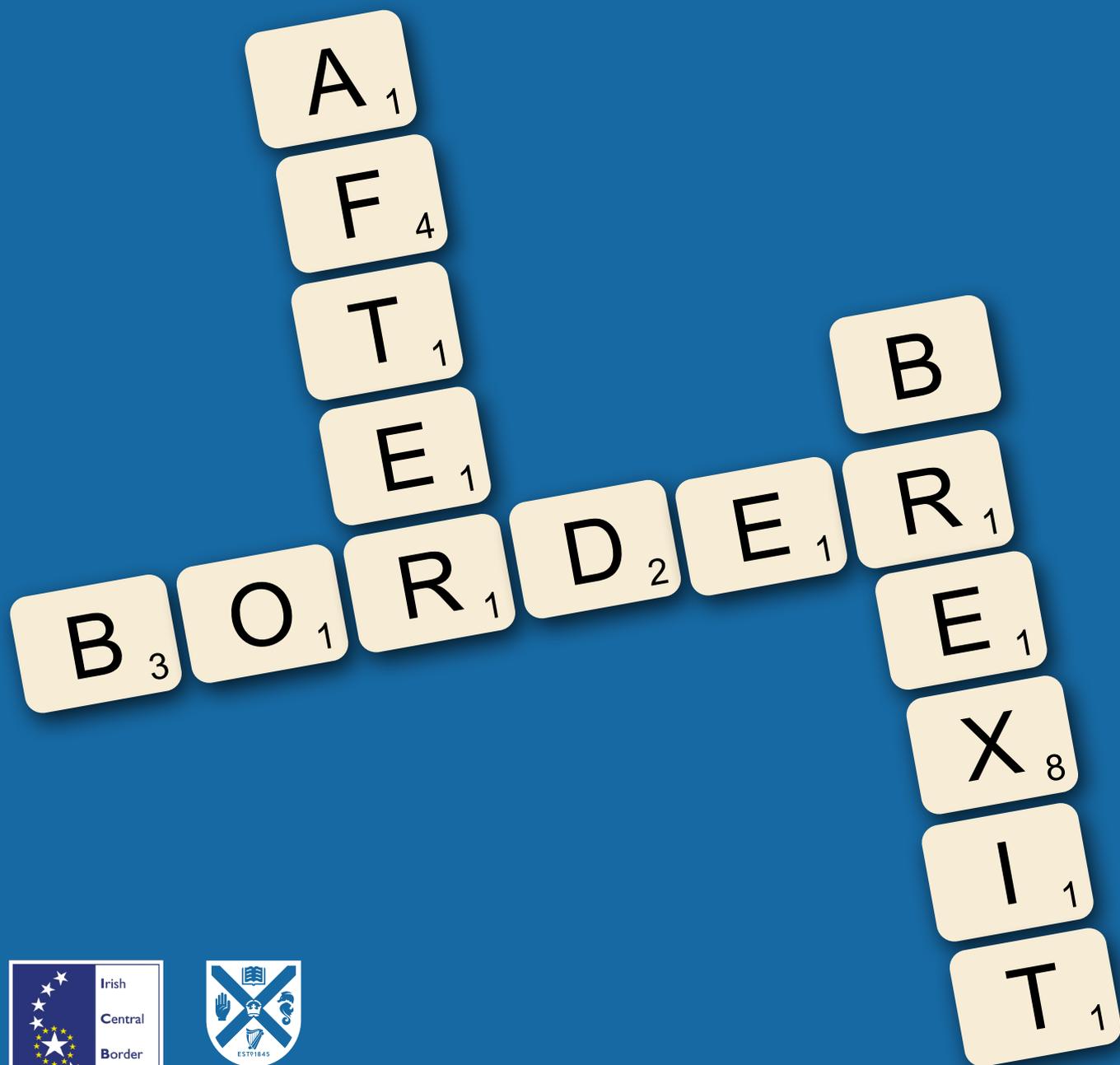
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THE BORDER AFTER BREXIT:

Experiences of Local Communities in the
Central Border Region of Ireland / Northern Ireland



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This ICBAN initiative is part of the 'Border Catalyst' Project, working with Queen's University Belfast and enabled through funding from the Department of Foreign Affairs' Reconciliation Fund.

THE BORDER AFTER BREXIT:
Experiences of Local Communities in the
Central Border Region of Ireland / Northern Ireland

A report prepared for the Irish Central Border Area Network

By

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Executive Summary

The project

- ▶ These are results from the ‘The Border after Brexit’ project run by Queen’s University Belfast in conjunction with the Irish Central Border Area Network (ICBAN) of 8 local authorities in the Central Border Region of Ireland/Northern Ireland: Armagh City Banbridge and Craigavon; Cavan; Donegal; Fermanagh and Omagh; Leitrim; Mid Ulster; Monaghan; and Sligo.
- ▶ The research consisted of three parts – a large online survey of 394 unique responses, two focus groups and five individual interviews with stakeholders across the region, from both sides of the border.
- ▶ From the first week in January to the end of June, we also conducted a ‘temperature gauge’ on Brexit and the Protocol in which we kept track of relevant media stories and events across these islands. This formed the basis of a blog every six weeks, which summarised the main stories and occurrences. These were published on the QUB and ICBAN websites.
- ▶ The research is a follow-on from three previous reports: *Bordering on Brexit*, which was completed in late 2017 (found at <https://go.qub.ac.uk/bordering>); *Brexit at the Border*, the results from which were published in 2018 (found at <https://go.qub.ac.uk/brexitborder>); and *The Border into Brexit*, which was published in December 2019 (<https://tinyurl.com/TheBorderIntoBrexitFull>), just before the UK exited the EU.
- ▶ With the end of the transition period and the Withdrawal Agreement (including the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland) and the UK-EU Trade and Cooperation Agreement coming into effect, this research sought to discover the experiences of people living and working in the border region. The purpose of the study has been to create an opportunity for the voices of local people on both sides of the border to be heard.
- ▶ Two years after the Protocol was negotiated in order to ‘avoid a hard border on the island of Ireland’, the future of relations across the island of Ireland, within Northern Ireland and between Britain and Ireland feels very much tied to the nature of the UK-EU relationship.
- ▶ The challenges and opportunities for cross-border cooperation need to be understood in light of the post-Brexit, post-Protocol conditions, which are currently in embryonic form.

Saliency of Brexit

- ▶ The level of interest and engagement in the subject of Brexit has only grown since the UK withdrew from the EU. This is not just so for those in Northern Ireland but also for those in the border counties of the Republic of Ireland. The effects of Brexit are 'live' cross-border concerns.
- ▶ Even though we might have anticipated a weariness with Brexit at this point, 85% of our survey respondents say that Brexit is important to them; indeed, 6 out of 10 say that it is very much so.
- ▶ We asked how the weight of importance given to Brexit had changed in the course of the past year. Almost half of our respondents (48%) say that Brexit has increased as a matter of importance for them in this time. Only 9% said it had decreased in importance for them.
- ▶ The overwhelming number of responses stress negative or problematic aspects of Brexit as being the main reason why they consider it to be more important than ever before to them.
- ▶ It is the negative *societal*, rather than economic, impact of Brexit that appears to have been the biggest reason for it growing in importance in people's minds in the past year.

Impact of Brexit

- ▶ Just under half of our respondents say that the actual impact of Brexit on their lives since 1 January 2021 has been significant or very significant.
- ▶ Over half our respondents (53%) say that the impact of Brexit has been worse or much worse than they had expected, with only 13% saying it has been better than they feared.
- ▶ Only 17% say that Brexit has been insignificant. The respondents who report this are disproportionately from the border counties in the Republic of Ireland, which has remained in the EU. Those based in Northern Ireland who say that the impact of Brexit has been insignificant are both Leavers and Remainers.
- ▶ The most reported experiences of the impact of Brexit are economic. Around half of respondents point to problems with the supply, delivery, delays in delivery, and general availability of goods.

- ▶ However, qualitative data we gathered suggest that concerns with societal divisions and community relations are at the forefront of people's minds when thinking generally of the significance of Brexit.
- ▶ The 'Leavers' among our respondents tended to point out that what had been delivered in terms of Brexit, either politically or in purely economic terms, was not what they felt they had voted for.

Uncertainty worsened by lack of information

- ▶ Although not quite as pervasive as they were in 2019, uncertainty and lack of clarity continue to be of serious concern. Persistent uncertainty is the reason given by many of our respondents for the increased importance of Brexit to them since the end of the transition period.
- ▶ There are new and varied causes for post-Brexit uncertainty, such as the consequence of the pandemic and difficulties in finding information on practical matters for which the terms have changed, e.g. cross-border healthcare entitlements.
- ▶ Accessing information is particularly difficult in the border region and adds to the uncertainty. As one person in a focus group commented, 'You're getting two different... sets of information from the north and the south. You don't know what applies to you.'
- ▶ The challenge for maintaining good community and cross-border relations has been exacerbated by the poor communication caused by difficulties in contact during the Covid-19 pandemic as well as the political sensitivities around Brexit and the Protocol.

Continued concerns

- ▶ Among a set of concerns we enquired about, people in the Central Border Region are most concerned about political stability in Northern Ireland (81%) and about north-south cooperation (79%).

- ▶ There are solid levels of concern for both practical and general issues relating to Brexit, including inadvertent mobile phone roaming charges, decreased choice/ increased price of consumer goods, and the economy of Northern Ireland.
- ▶ Levels of concerns for NI's place in the UK internal market and its constitutional position in the UK (around 4/10) are perhaps higher than we might expect given the proportion of respondents who live in the Republic of Ireland (over 4 in 10) and who hold British citizenship (1 in 8).
- ▶ Although around a third have been reassured (possibly by the Protocol and the TCA) that a hard border is now not a possibility, well over half (57%) remain concerned that there could yet be a hard Irish land border in the future.
- ▶ This shows overall that there is a real sense of flux and, with it, anxiety when it comes to the post-Brexit conditions, and that this exists on both sides of the border from people of various backgrounds and identities.

Importance of cross-border cooperation

- ▶ The Covid-19 pandemic brought considerable new difficulties for cross-border movement, living and cooperation.
- ▶ Overall, three-quarters of respondents consider the impact of Covid-19 measures to have restricted their cross-border access to services. This is bound to have an impact that will last at least into the medium term in terms of opportunities lost etc.
- ▶ The differential in the timing and scale of the Covid-19 vaccine rollout on either side of the border are seen to have caused practical difficulties.
- ▶ 9 out of 10 of our respondents consider cross-border cooperation to be important across a range of issues (with 7 out of 10 saying it is very much so), including for community relations, cross-border projects between Councils, and business development.
- ▶ Respondents stress the importance of cross-border cooperation and integration as the only way forward to address the present challenges of both Brexit and Covid.
- ▶ The risk of political instability and societal unrest is one that is identified as a post-Brexit and post-Protocol concern for people on both sides of the border.
- ▶ Half of respondents say that the experience of the past 12 months has made them less optimistic about the future in light of Brexit.

After Brexit: positives and opportunities

- ▶ Respondents express an awareness that for any opportunities from Brexit or the Protocol to be realised, social stability and political certainty are essential.
- ▶ Neither the positives, nor the negatives of either Brexit or the Protocol are exclusively associated with those who voted Leave or Remain. Instead, benefits and opportunities are pointed out from across the spectrum, although the prevalent view of Remainers is that there are no positives from Brexit and the prevalent view of Leavers is that the Protocol has negative consequences.
- ▶ Those who see positives from Brexit tend to do so in terms of economic advantage (for both parts of the island of Ireland) or strengthening sovereignty.
- ▶ Altogether, the Protocol is viewed slightly more positively than Brexit. Again, positives are articulated mostly in economic terms, particularly in allowing N. Ireland to benefit from its 'unique' position and 'derive the best of both worlds'. The Protocol is also appreciated for having mitigated against the worst consequences of Brexit and avoided a hard land border. Leavers sharing positive views of the Protocol see these mostly as potentials unlikely to be realised in practice. Most Leavers, however, see the Protocol as a threat to UK sovereignty and British identity.

Foreword

On behalf of the management board of the Irish Central Border Area Network (ICBAN) Ltd. I wish to commend to you 'The Border after Brexit' report.

ICBAN is the cross-border network for the area known as the Central Border Region of Ireland / Northern Ireland. The members of the organisation are the eight local authorities who together make up the Region and ICBAN has been working since 1995 to help address common issues of cross-border cooperation to the area.

This is the fourth report of this type which ICBAN and Queen's University Belfast (QUB) have completed. In 2017 the Management Board of ICBAN had identified an absence of local community consultation on the impacts of the Brexit process on both sides of the border. Together with QUB we have sought to give voice to the people from our Border Region, and to provide a means to record and report on these opinions. Through the four reports, c.2000 responses have been gathered in total. We have also endeavoured to ensure that the findings are brought to the attention of those involved in the high level discussions on the subject and to this end we have ensured that the UK government, the Irish government, NI politicians, and those centrally involved in the EU, have received the reports and been made aware of the findings through media coverage, various fora, consultation processes and mechanisms. The reports serve as a timely reminder of what is tangibly involved in this process, and how it impacts on the people and businesses of this border region.

Brexit is the latest challenge to cooperation in the area; indeed, the border which runs through our Region has been central to the debate. The Management Board of ICBAN, which comprises 27 elected representatives from this border region, believe it is incumbent upon the likes of our organisation to highlight any opportunities or concerns for the communities and businesses of the area. We respect the differing political opinions within our Board, our member Councils and communities on the subject, and thus have been careful to ensure that this is a non-political and non-partisan initiative.

As a Board we hope and trust that this initiative adds value to the public discourse on the subject at this time. We are aware of the various important and valuable reports which have been delivered previously on the subject, and thus we have sought to not duplicate this good work, but to complement it.

The Brexit process has been constantly developing and this latest report provides a reference guide on the latest research on key discussion topics, such as how the

withdrawal of UK and Northern Ireland from the EU, and the Protocol for Ireland / Northern Ireland, are impacting on communities here.

I wish to record our thanks and appreciation to Prof. Katy Hayward, ably assisted by Dr. Milena Komarova and Mr. Ben Rosher and to Queen's University Belfast for their diligence, professionalism and commitment to the initiative. Also to our staff, our member Councils and everyone who has helped promote the initiative and to seek contributions. This initiative would not have been realised without the time and effort of everyone who completed the online survey, attended the focus group meetings and participated in the stakeholder interviews. Many thanks to you all again. And finally, our sincere thanks to the project's funders, the Reconciliation Fund of the Department of Foreign Affairs, without whose support we would have been unable to undertake this worthwhile initiative.

Councillor Eamon Mc Neill,
ICBAN Chair, October 2021

Acknowledgements

This report was co-authored by Professor Katy Hayward and Dr. Milena Komarova (Queen's University Belfast). We are extremely grateful to Shane Campbell, CEO of the Irish Central Border Area Network (ICBAN) for his leadership and facilitation of this project, and to Joanne Breen and Andy Hallewell in ICBAN for their invaluable assistance from the early days of the project to the conclusion of this report.

We also wish to pay special tribute to Ben Rosher, whose meticulous research for the 'Temperature Gauge' aspect of the Border Catalyst project not only helped ensure we were fully briefed on the evolving and complex context for the impact of Brexit and the Protocol, but also served as an invaluable record of key events and debates during the first six months after the ending of the transition period.

We would like to thank each of the eight local authorities represented in the ICBAN cross-border partnership for their support for this initiative and helping to publicise the survey, and especially those Councillors and staff who 'went the extra mile' in supporting the project and the work of ICBAN in this regard.

This initiative is part of the wider 'Border Catalyst project and has been made possible through assistance from the Reconciliation Fund of the Department of Foreign Affairs, which has been invaluable. The authors' work on the project is also supported by the Economic and Social Research Council (UK), which funds the authors' fellowships through 'The UK in a Changing Europe', enabling them to work full-time on the research topic of 'The Future and Status of Northern Ireland after Brexit'. The funders have had no influence in the design or conduct of this report, which has been performed independently by the researchers, with the facilitating role of ICBAN staff in the distribution and promotion of the survey and the organisation of the focus groups and stakeholder interviews.

We extend sincerest thanks to all the respondents to the online survey for taking the time to complete the survey on a topic that has been so well-worn by now but which remains of pressing concern. We also wish to express particular gratitude to each one of the participants of the online focus groups and the five individual stakeholder interviews. Unfortunately, again, only a small fraction of the discussions could be included in the final report. We have, however, read and analysed them in their entirety and will continue to draw upon our participants' insights in other publications and presentations.

In this report, as with the previous three, we wanted to give as much space as possible to people in the region who are not often given the opportunity to be listened to on this topic. Our analysis has been confined primarily to categorisation of data and finding the predominant themes and common issues. As such, we have kept interpretation of the data and subsequent recommendations to a minimum. The report is, first and foremost, a presentation of perspectives of people from a range of backgrounds, age, occupation and viewpoints in the Central Border Region of Ireland/Northern Ireland.

Introduction

The project

These are the latest findings of a project on the impact of Brexit on the Central Border Region of Ireland/Northern Ireland. This research has been conducted by a small team at Queen's University Belfast in conjunction with the Irish Central Border Area Network (ICBAN), the cross-border partnership of eight local authorities in the area known as the Central Border Region (Figure 1).



Figure 1. A map of the local council areas covered by ICBAN

This work has been funded as part of ICBAN's 'Border Catalyst' project (<http://icban.com/border-compass/>) by the Department of Foreign Affairs Reconciliation Fund. Additional financial support for the process of research analysis has been provided by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council through the 'UK in a Changing Europe' (<https://ukandeu.ac.uk/>).

This is the fourth of a series of reports we have conducted on Brexit and the Central Border Region.

The first report, *Bordering on Brexit*, was published in November 2017 (<https://go.qub.ac.uk/bordering>) and found that people in the region felt uninformed about Brexit, unrepresented in the process, and had deep fears about the consequences of it.

The second report, *Brexit at the Border*, published in June 2018 (<https://go.qub.ac.uk/brexitborder>), showed that ease of access to transport, health, education and other services was greatly valued by the majority of people on both sides of the border in this region. It also revealed that Leave and Remain voters in the region share a common priority for the border to remain as 'seamless' and 'frictionless' as it is today.

The third report, *The Border into Brexit* was published in December 2019 (<https://tinyurl.com/TheBorderIntoBrexitFull>), just before the UK exited the EU. That report found that the revised Withdrawal Agreement negotiated by Prime Minister Boris Johnson appeared not to have wholly reassured people in the Central Border Region about avoiding a hard border. People still expected disruption from Brexit, were still wary of the information they received on the topic, and still felt uncertain about the future impact of Brexit on daily life in the border region.

The research behind this report was conducted in three phases: an online survey (May-June 2021), Focus Groups (June 2021), and Stakeholder Interviews (August-September 2021). The research was as similar as possible in design to that of the previous studies, but we were affected by the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and so all our focus groups and interviews were conducted online this time. The focus groups and interviews were recorded and transcribed.

There was an additional dimension to this study: the 'Temperature Gauge' that was conducted on a weekly basis for the first six months after the end of the transition period (January-June 2021). The purpose of this research was to monitor what was happening with respect to the impact of Brexit and the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland. We published regular blogs with Queen's and ICBAN which summarised the events and debates of the past six weeks which helped create the post-Brexit, post-Protocol environment in which this research was being conducted (<https://icban.com/border-compass/>).

The context of the study

This research was conducted around half-way through the first year after the ending of the transition period. From the UK leaving the EU on 31st January to the end of the transition period on 31st December 2020 the UK was *de facto* still considered as if it were in the EU, in order to allow time to adjust to the new post-Brexit conditions. That year was dominated by speculation about whether the UK and EU would be able to come up with a trade agreement at all. As such, the concerns about a ‘no deal’ Brexit that had dogged the withdrawal negotiations and given rise to much anxiety in the border region (as we reported in previous studies) continued for another year, albeit this time in different form.

So tense were UK-EU relations over the topic of Northern Ireland that, in September 2020, the EU began legal proceedings against the UK for infringing the terms of the Withdrawal Agreement in its threat to give its ministers the powers to breach the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland. This was stepped down in December 2020 when the UK retracted such a move, and the UK and EU agreed the terms of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement.¹

However, tension was soon to come back to the fore once the Protocol came into effect. From the early days, it was evident that the Protocol was being viewed and interpreted quite differently by the UK and the EU.

The Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland in the Withdrawal Agreement puts in place arrangements agreed by the UK and EU in late 2019 to meet their shared objectives:

‘to address the unique circumstances on the island of Ireland, to maintain the necessary conditions for continued North-South cooperation, to avoid a hard border and to protect the 1998 Agreement in all its dimensions.’ (Article 1.3)²

The Protocol avoids having checks and controls on the Irish land border by having distinct arrangements post-Brexit.

1 Trade and Cooperation Agreement between the European Union and United Kingdom, 24 December 2020, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/948119/EU-UK_Trade_and_Cooperation_Agreement_24.12.2020.pdf

2 Revised Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland, 17 October 2019, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/new-Protocol-on-irelandnorthern-ireland-and-political-declaration>

It sees Northern Ireland continue to follow some EU rules and apply checks and controls on goods coming into it from across the Irish Sea. This allows Britain to have an independent trade policy, and it also allows the EU to be confident that nothing will come into its single market that doesn’t meet its criteria. However, it does mean a significant adjustment for trade within the UK. The Protocol came into force on 1st January 2021. There are new customs and regulatory procedures for goods entering from Britain. This involves more paperwork and costs, and many businesses were not prepared for it.

The systems intended to help with such processes are also new. There have been teething problems with many of them, including in recruiting and training staff. All this is before the full force of the Protocol really comes into play, given the existence of ‘grace periods’ on the full implementation of the customs and regulatory controls on goods entering Northern Ireland from Britain. The unilateral extension of these grace periods was another source of disagreement between the UK and EU in Spring 2021.

The near-continual tension in UK-EU relations over the Protocol in 2021 also saw increasing manifestation closer to home, in British-Irish, north-south and inter-community relations. The increased checks and controls across the Irish Sea was, simply put, the price paid for avoiding them at the Irish land border. As such a very clear win/lose narrative around the post-Brexit Irish border was becoming apparent by early 2021. There was also a strong push-back to the idea that the Protocol protected the 1998 Agreement, with unionists making the argument that the new GB/NI trading relationship undermined the conditions for peace. Public opinion over the Protocol was divided, as was the Northern Ireland Executive. The DUP’s five point plan to bring down the Protocol included not participating ‘in any north-south political engagements on issues relating to the Protocol’.³ By the summer of 2021, the UK explicitly sought a ‘renegotiation’ of the Protocol and UK-EU talks began in August 2021.⁴

Although media attention and political debate has focused on the Irish Sea ‘border’ in 2021, the Irish land border has also significantly changed post-Brexit. Northern Ireland is now outside the European Union (EU) and the Irish border is an external border of the EU.

3 Arlene Foster ‘astounded’ at claims DUP stoking tensions over NI Protocol, Belfast Telegraph, 3 February 2021, <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/arlene-foster-astounded-at-claims-dup-stoking-tensions-over-ni-Protocol-40045897.html>

4 Northern Ireland Protocol – Next steps, 21 July 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/northern-ireland-Protocol-next-steps>

British citizens in Northern Ireland are no longer EU citizens and non-Irish citizens living and working in Northern Ireland no longer enjoy an automatic right to do so. The UK-EU Trade and Cooperation Agreement forms the new basis for the trading relationship between Britain and Ireland, but also the legal basis for north/south relations that are not covered by the Protocol. As such there is no automatic free movement of services across the Irish land border. Article 11 of the Protocol states that it:

‘shall be implemented and applied so as to maintain the necessary conditions for continued North-South cooperation, including in the areas of environment, health, agriculture, transport, education and tourism, as well as in the areas of energy, telecommunications, broadcasting, inland fisheries, justice and security, higher education and sport.’

However, this has become much more difficult than before given that Northern Ireland is outside the EU.⁵ This study – and the temperature gauge that goes along side it – is therefore of particular interest as an indication of the experience of Brexit in the border region that was the focus of much attention during the withdrawal negotiations. It is also a test of the conditions for cross-border cooperation created by the UK-EU Withdrawal Agreement (including the Protocol) and Trade and Cooperation Agreement, not to mention the Memorandum of Understanding between the British and Irish Governments on the Common Travel Area and the New Decade, New Approach document which also have relevance for movement, funding and cooperation across the Irish border post-Brexit.⁶

Whilst political, economic and legal conditions for cross-border cooperation may be shaped by agreements (or lack of them) at intergovernmental level, it is at the level of local authorities, local services and community organisations that the real impact of big changes are felt and adjusted to. This is why a report of this nature is timely and worthwhile.

5 As noted, for example, by results of the Centre for Cross Border Studies' quarterly surveys in 2021 on the conditions for cross-border cooperation, see: <https://crossborder.ie/events/presentation-of-the-results-of-the-2nd-quarterly-survey-on-the-conditions-for-north-south-and-east-west-cooperation/>

6 Memorandum of Understanding on the Common Travel Area, 8 May 2019, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/memorandum-of-understanding-between-the-uk-and-ireland-on-the-cta>
New Decade, New Approach, 9 January 2020, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/856998/2020-01-08_a_new_decade_a_new_approach.pdf

The study

The survey

A total of 403 responses were received for the online survey, which was open for 8 weeks up to the end of June 2021. We discovered that there were 9 duplicate responses to the survey, so the actual number of unique responses that were analysed for this study stands at 394.

The survey consisted of 3 substantive sections, which covered the topics of the importance and impact of Brexit, the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland, and cross-border cooperation today (in light of such challenges as Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic). The survey was publicised through the local authorities and participating institutions, mainly through the use of social media. Respondents were self-selecting and we make no claim that the cohort is a representative sample. The purpose was to enable people who live or work in the region, on either side of the border, to comment on these topics and share their experiences and perspectives.

The respondents

In similar proportions to the previous survey, 57.3% of our respondents are male and 41.9% female, with 0.7% preferring not to say. Also similarly to the 2019 survey, the majority of our respondents could be described as middle aged, with an underrepresentation of younger and older cohorts. Just over half (53.6%) were in the 46-65 age group, 29.3% were 31-45, 9.2% were over 66 and 7.7% were 18-30 [those under 18, who constitute nearly a quarter of the population, were not sought in this study].⁷

The largest proportion of respondents come from Armagh City Banbridge and Craigavon (ABC) Borough Council district (21.3%), with the fewest coming from Cavan (4.2%).

7 An approximate calculation based on figures from the NI Statistics and Research Agency (<https://www.nisra.gov.uk/publications/2020-mid-year-population-estimates-northern-ireland>) and the Central Statistics Office of Ireland (<https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cp3oy/cp3/assr/>).

In this study, at least 52.8% of our respondents are working or living in the council areas in Northern Ireland, with at least 38.7% coming from council areas south/west of the border. When we consider that in the previous study in 2019, approximately 55% of the respondents came from Northern Ireland, we can see that **the level of interest and engagement in the subject of Brexit has not dramatically waned in the Republic of Ireland border counties.**

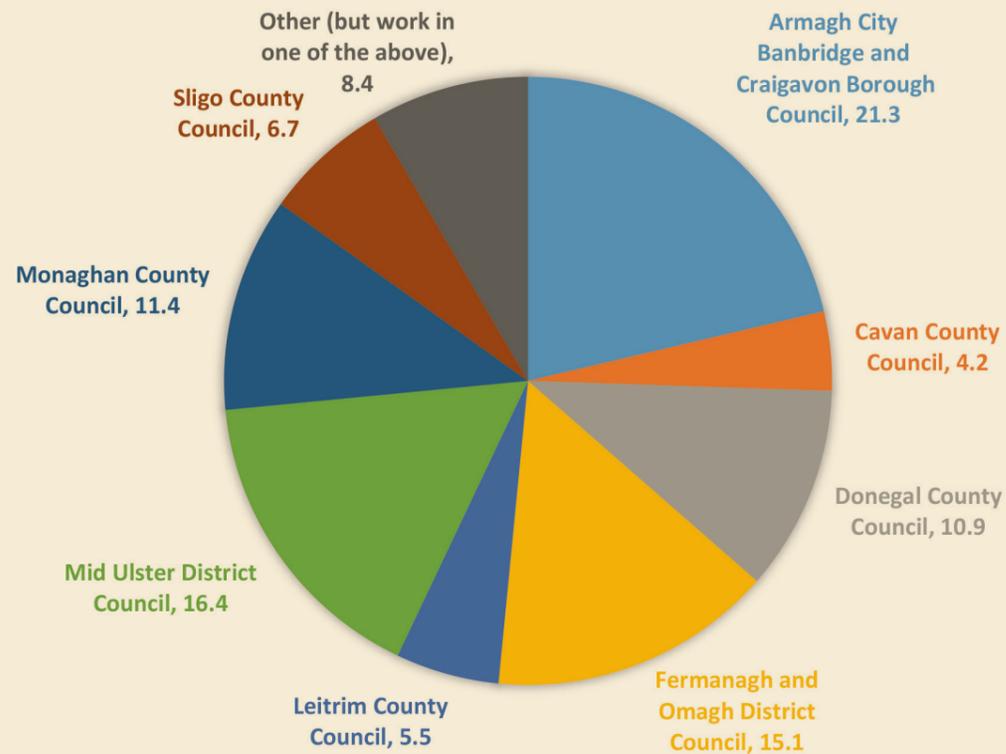


Figure 2. Place of residence of survey respondents, by local council area

One thing that has changed considerably from the previous surveys is the proportion of our respondents who hold exclusively Irish citizenship. This has risen from two-thirds in the 2019 survey to nearly three quarters (73.4%) in this one. That said, there was also a small rise in the proportion of respondents holding exclusively British citizenship (1 in 8). Only 11.4% say they hold dual British and Irish citizenship – a drop of 7 percentage points from the 2019 survey. 1.5% of our respondents hold other dual citizenships, with less than 1% holding another EU citizenship.

We have always asked our survey respondents how they voted in the Brexit referendum in 2016. This time, just under half (49.1%) say they voted Remain and 10.9% say they voted Leave – slightly lower and higher figures respectively than in the previous survey.

38% said that they had no vote in the referendum (broadly reflecting the proportion of respondents living in the Republic of Ireland). This means that approximately 1 in 6 of our respondents who voted in the referendum voted Leave.

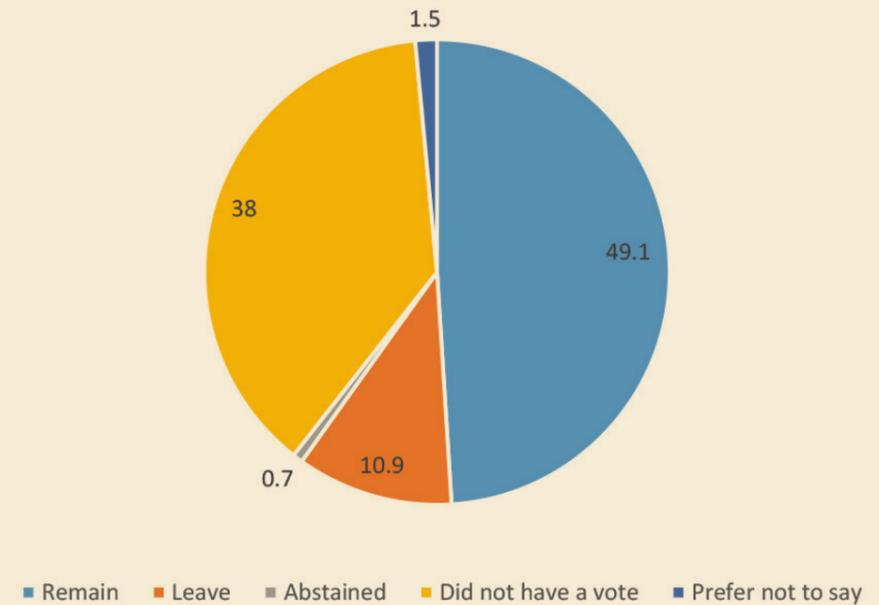


Figure 3. How survey respondents voted in the 2016 Brexit referendum



The importance of Brexit

Increasing importance

Although, given the self-selecting nature of our survey respondents, it is not surprising that only 2.2% say that Brexit has no importance to them, the weight of importance given to the topic is more than we might have anticipated, some five years after the referendum. **85% of our respondents say that Brexit is very or considerably important to them**, with 6 out of 10 giving it the highest importance.

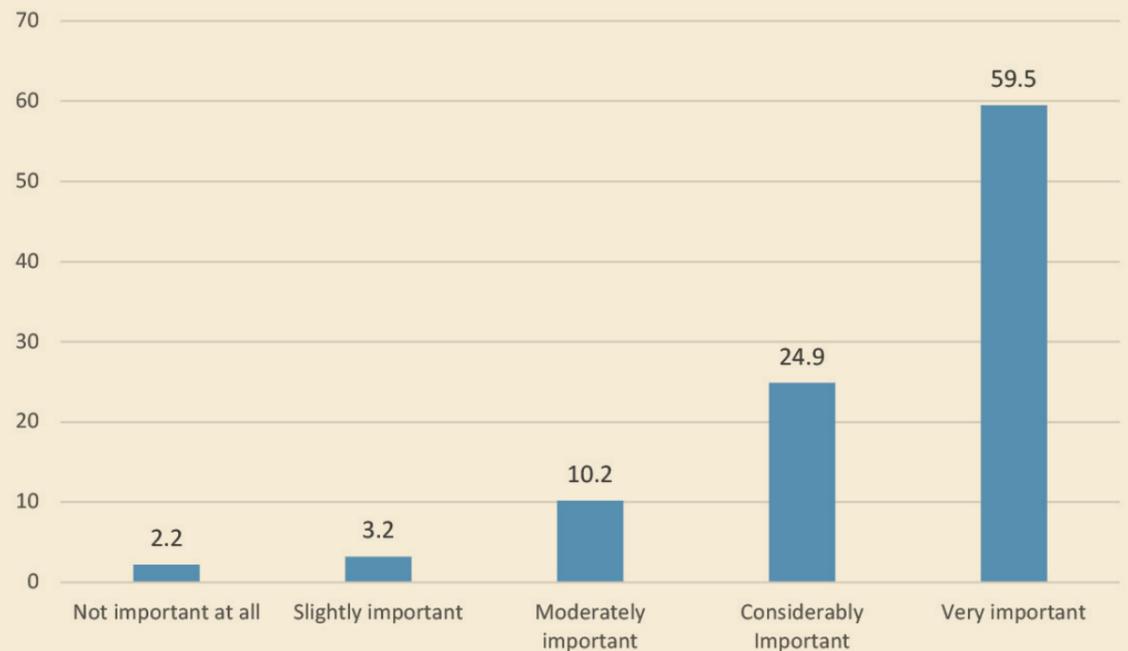


Figure 4. How important is the subject of Brexit to you now?

We wanted to assess the degree to which Brexit as a topic was seen to have been defused, if not resolved, in the border region post-Protocol and post-TCA. So we asked how the weight of importance given to Brexit had changed in the course of the past year. **Nearly half of our respondents (47.6%) say that Brexit has increased as a matter of importance for them in this time. Only 9.4% said it had decreased in importance for them.**

Why Brexit is growing in importance

In an open-ended question, we asked people to give reasons why Brexit had changed in importance for them, if it had. Approximately a third of our respondents answered this question. **The overwhelming number of responses stress the negative or problematic aspects of Brexit as the leading reason for its changing importance.**

Many such negatives are to do with its economic effects:

R37 'Dealing with repercussions of, and restrictions introduced as a result of, Brexit such as *lack of availability of goods, increased cost of services, change of suppliers* from Northern Ireland-based suppliers to Republic of Ireland-based suppliers and disruption of cross-border travel due to uncertainty in relation to insurance cover'

R66 'It is important to me as it is having a terrible effect on goods being delivered to my business from Europe and also increasing the time for parcels to be delivered from GB, as well as much *increased carriage charges.*'

Economic impacts exacerbate fears for peace

Another strong theme in the answers given points to the perception of damage to peace, stability and the potential for (or actual) return of violence. In fact, expressions of concern about rising or exacerbated societal divisions and damage to community relations indicate that it is **the negative societal, rather than economic, impact of Brexit that appears to have been the biggest reason for it growing in importance in people's minds in the past year.**

R88 'It has upset the ethos of Northern Ireland. We have had peaceful coexistence between all sectors. The undercurrents were still there under the surface, but all sides were working together for the common good. *Now the differences are brought to the fore again and each group is concentrating on its own agenda.* Hopefully peace will survive. There is enough trouble with the Covid and customs'

R176 'Serious threat to our delicate peace process'

R47 '[U]nrest in NI over the Protocol has led to fears of a resurgence of violence.'

As some of the above quotes suggest, the effects of Brexit on both social relations (and peace) and the economy appear entwined in people's concerns. This relationship, or at least co-occurrence, is very openly stated by a number of respondents.

R42 'As a consumer, it has made every day trade more difficult and more expensive. Range of products has decreased as well. Tensions within NI are higher than have been for years'

R10 'It has become clearer the damaging effect Brexit will, and is, having on our economy and peace process'

R49 'Concerns over restrictions in free trade between UK/EU. Stability of NI peace process. Possible restricted access to goods and services from NI.'

A businessman – a participant in one of our focus groups – articulated the relationship between the economic and the socio-political effects of the Protocol succinctly:

'Business wise – the Protocol, yes, I have found difficult. We're not so bad, because we do a lot of work in Dublin, a lot of work in London, a lot of work in Scotland. We work throughout the UK and Ireland, but we have an issue getting products into Northern Ireland and then we have to move them onto Dublin.'

He went on to express how this concerns him as a unionist:

The Protocol is really in there to deter people from buying from the UK. From a nationalist perspective, people might think that's a good thing, I don't know. But from a unionist perspective, I think it's crazy. It's actually driving a wedge between the two communities ...the introduction of the Protocol, another border, is really alienating a huge part of the community. From the Protestant community, it's an alienation.' **[FG2 business person]**

Indeed, one survey respondent, having voted 'leave' at the 2016 Referendum on leaving the European Union, briefly yet aptly, reflected the above position by stating simply:

R149 'Brexit is ok, the Protocol has had a hugely negative impact'.

The impact of Brexit

A significant impact

We then asked about the impact of Brexit on people's lives since the end of the transition period. We see from this why it is that respondents place such importance on the subject of Brexit. **Just under half of our respondents say that the impact of Brexit on their lives since 1 January 2021 has been significant or very significant.** Only 16.7% say that it has been insignificant and 7% say there has been no impact all.

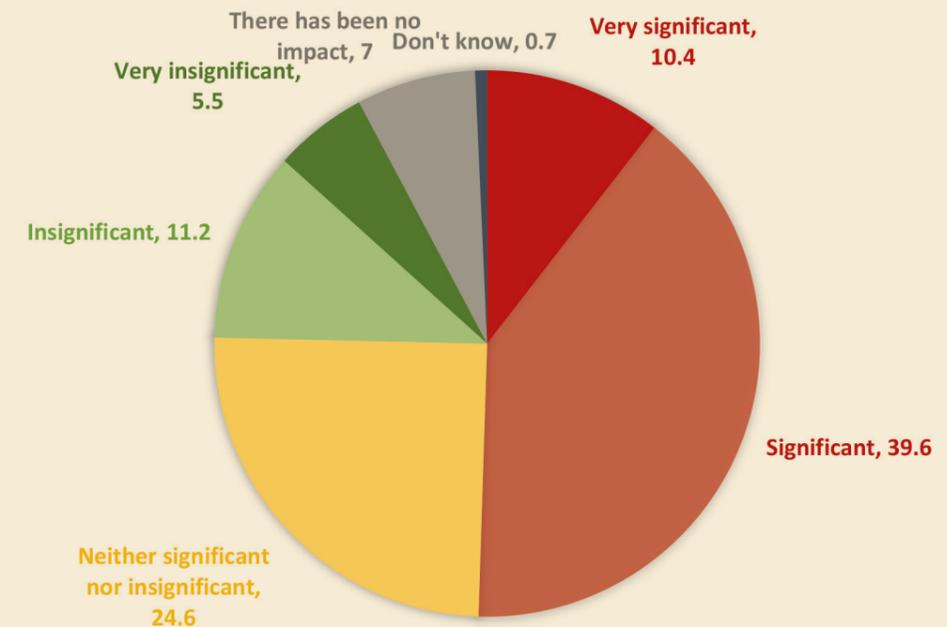


Figure 5. The impact of Brexit on life since the end of the transition period

Economic impacts are being felt

We asked an open-ended question to get more detail on the nature of this impact: 'Since the Brexit transition period ended in December 2020, what impact on your life (if any) have you felt from Brexit?'

This was the open-ended question which received by far the most responses (only a few respondents did not complete an answer). **The most reported experiences of Brexit are economic. Around half of respondents point to problems with the supply, delivery, delays in delivery, and general availability of goods.**

Many people experience the impact of Brexit in terms of online shopping:

R233 'There has not be a big difference to me personally, however I have noticed: 1/Online shopping- more suppliers not willing to ship here. 2/Additional surcharges for some of those that do'

R21 'Shortages on shelves in shops in Jan/Feb - price increases on some goods - online orders from UK now too expensive'

R96 'I have found it harder to get the fresh fruit and vegetables I would normally get. I have noticed when purchasing things online that some companies just won't send to NI and when challenged they have blamed Brexit and said it makes it too complicated to send to NI'

R124 'Delays in receiving parcel mail, less choice of food (e.g. French cheeses), inability to order certain goods as companies do not want to deliver in NI'

R145 'Reduced choice of foodstuffs in supermarket due to NI Protocol's Irish Sea Border. Delays on NI Protocol's Irish Sea Border mean shorter time to expiry date of many food products purchased. Three orders (of five in total) placed on Amazon since then have not been fulfilled because supplier says no longer sending to Northern Ireland due to NI Protocol's Irish Sea Border and all this before "grace" periods even expire.'

Other consumers point to different but related types of problems, and to some solutions too:

R39 'Work - have had to address issues of VAT and Customs duties and look at sourcing materials from suppliers within EU. On the farm - importation of plants, animals etc has become much more complicated. On-line shopping - switched to Irish & EU websites to avoid customs and taxes'

R232 'Not able to access goods from GB as before. Most firms don't send to NI now. Some goods missing from shops. Goods more expensive'

R131 'With the enforced Irish sea border it has made business with the UK a lot harder. Needless to say it's increased costs by around 15%. This is not necessary and our political representatives need to negotiate this away'

R246 'Money does not go very far. Less food in shops. Packages a lot smaller for same price'

R269 'I feel the cost of living is increasing and I cannot get the items I want in NI now due to import fees, I am worried that my euro will have no value now in Fermanagh.'

As is obvious from the above examples, many people specifically stress the experienced increase in prices of goods or cost of living generally, as well as the resulting complications to daily life which Brexit has brought to the border region. **The themes of practical (and often negative) changes in everyday life, were particularly emphasised in the responses of 'Leavers':**

R6 'Some items not deliverable to my address, increase in prices, greater hope for a United Ireland'

R79 'Can't get essential goods for my business into the country as easily as before'

R82 'Businesses will not ship to here. I can't get clothes, simple things off amazon. Plants etc. Postage from Royal Mail and other places have increased their parcel prices. Price of food and things has increased.'

Experiences of businesses in the border region

While for many the negative economic effects described above concern them as ordinary citizens and consumers, for some there is a real worry with how these changes are influencing their own businesses:

R79 'Can't get essential goods for my business into the country as easily as before'

R80 'It's stalled our business output because we couldn't get raw materials. We have been charged huge fees, some bigger than the value of the products, when buying from the UK'

R130 'Export business with Canada finished - 17% Duty applied on goods from UK.'

It is notable that some of these problems do not relate to the Protocol – indeed, some of them (e.g. access to EU products) should have been avoided through the Protocol. However, those which relate to getting goods from Great Britain do, and they of course affect businesses in the border region as much as anywhere else in Northern Ireland.

Taking this survey in summer 2021 is too early for much adjustment to have taken place with respect to the bedding-in of the new post-Brexit and post-Protocol conditions. At the same time, the full force of the Protocol has not yet come to pass (e.g. under the grace periods for facilitating the movement of certain products into NI from GB which otherwise would be more difficult, if not banned, under the Protocol). This all adds to the sense of uncertainty and a sense of flux.

This small business owner from our Focus Group 2 explained some of the impact that the post-Brexit and post-Protocol trade barriers between Britain and Ireland, north and south, have had.

'Is it affecting my business? – yes, hugely. I employ a girl at over £30k and all she does now is paperwork. **We still can't do enough paperwork to try and get the products in.** ... The other side of the coin as well, a lot of the suppliers...are now coming under such pressure... it's not worth the hassle. **They just don't sell to Ireland at all – north or south.** I'm actually being forced to find new suppliers because the UK companies simply won't sell because of the structures that have been put in place...that affects everybody.

I find the Protocol has been one of the most frustrating things that I have ever...I have heard of turkeys voting for Christmas, but that has to be as close to it as we'll ever get.

From a business perspective, **it was not business-minded, it was politically minded in a lot of our own imaginations. Maybe we're wrong, but that's the way it is perceived.** That it is a political influence, to try and force you from the UK. That's ok, just say it's political, if you know what I mean.

The harming of businesses is what I find to really, really struggle with... I employ both sides of the community, in fact we employ a huge different number of nationalities, not just Protestant and Catholic. That is really affecting businesses and why is it there? I don't know.' [FG2 business person]

Brexit impact worse than expected

When asked as to whether this real impact of Brexit has been better or worse than expected, we can see that **over half our respondents (52.5%) say that its impact has been worse or much worse, with only 13% saying it has been better than they feared.**

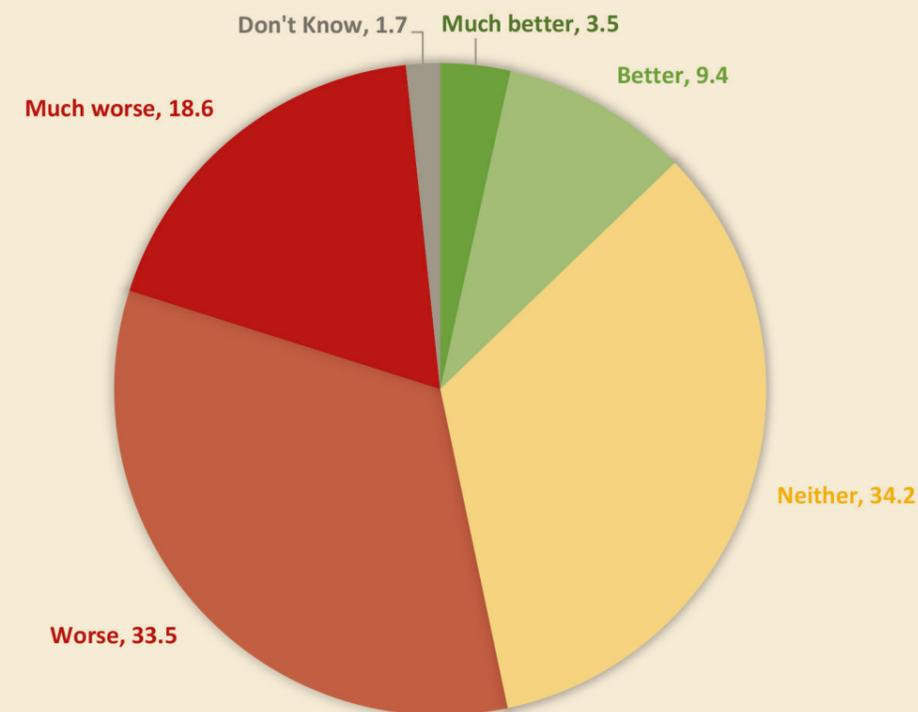


Figure 6. Experience of Brexit in practice compared to expectations

This is interesting because we know from our previous reports that respondents in the border region already held largely negative expectations about the likely impact of Brexit. The fact that it is felt to be worse than expected seems to come in relation to the economic impact – some of which felt a little unreal and speculative until the actual impact of adding customs requirements etc. to supply chains between these islands was felt. It also appears to relate to the sense of social and political tension around Brexit which, again, is now out of the realms of speculation and into the realities of everyday life and political decision-making.

Persistent Uncertainty

New causes of uncertainty

A central finding in our 2019 Report (*The Border Into Brexit*) was the overwhelming feeling of *uncertainty*, with exclusively negative connotations, which many of our respondents then shared. While uncertainty had characterised so much of the Brexit experience since 2016, the context of the 2019 General Elections and the long-stalling process of concluding an EU-UK Withdrawal Agreement served to exacerbate the pervading sense of insecurity at the time. Our present research shows that **uncertainty and lack of clarity continue to be a serious concern**, albeit perhaps not as pervasive as they were back in 2019.

One in every 10 respondents to the survey question of why the importance of Brexit has changed for them (if it had) specifically mentions some form of *uncertainty* arising from Brexit that is problematic for them – whether in a personal sense or with respect to the general political, social or economic situation in Northern Ireland:

R21 ‘Uncertainty about Irish sea border and instability of Stormont Executive’

R124 ‘A lot more uncertainty about living in NI as a non-British/Irish national’

R344 ‘Increased sense of uncertainty and loss of faith in political leadership in Northern Ireland’.

Some also pointed out practical issues with respect to a lack of information about, for example, cross-border rights and ability to travel, and ‘Cross-border illness entitlements’ (**R24**). Others pointed to a different type of uncertainty. For example, the role of media in exaggerating problems:

R240 ‘Misinformation & confusion are rife. Journalism is sensationalising the issues with no fact checking.’

Complicating factor of Covid-19

Some of this uncertainty can be attributed, at least indirectly, to the ‘interference’ of the Covid-19 pandemic which respondents suggested was temporarily decreasing the importance of, and concerns about, Brexit (e.g. **R93** ‘The impact of COVID-19 has been of more immediate concern to me.’). While a small number of respondents stated that Brexit has had no effects at all so far on their lives, another few noted that Covid has masked/delayed or even compounded the effects experienced:

R326 ‘Whereas the full negative effects of Brexit will not be fully realised until the present pandemic has subsided i.e. travel, trade and tourism, the isolation of our six counties has already begun in relation to health, education and well-being’

R270 ‘Given that life is dominated by Covid right now it is hard to say what impact Brexit has had because life is just not normal’

R363 ‘Pandemic has masked the real effects as nobody can travel. We are a traditional arts industry who performed to a live audience. We have yet to see the true long-term damage of Brexit with regard to public funding of the arts. We have lost 50% income from performance. Brexit and Covid are equally harmful but Covid will go away.’

Becoming informed in the border region

The above discussed sense of anxiety and uncertainty is very well reflected in our focus group discussions and is linked to the question of the influence of the various sources of information available to border residents on the changes affecting lives after Brexit. Sometimes the range of sources can be positive, but it can also add to the sense of confusion.

‘I think [people in the border region] are getting [information on Brexit] from a range of sources. Employers seem to get a lot from *InterTrade Ireland*. The government departments offer information as well, the information is on the government websites, north and south. ... and then obviously you have Citizens’ Advice and Citizens’ Information which are helping people with their benefits and so on [**FG1**]

‘There are a lot of sources of information out there, **if there was one focal point for people to go to, it would make things easier. You do hear a lot of different things from different sources, it can be hard to know what’s real and what’s not at times.** It would make things easier, to go to one reference point’. [FG1]

Another member of the Focus Group agreed about the need for ‘one point of contact’ and information. They highlighted by way of example the lack of awareness about the loss of the Cross-border Healthcare Directive, which was temporarily reinstated by the Minister for Health in Northern Ireland in order for NI patients to seek and pay for treatment in the private sector in Ireland and have the costs reimbursed by the Health and Social Care Board.⁸

‘You’re getting two different... sets of information from the north and the south. You don’t know what applies to you.’ [FG1]

Interestingly and by contrast, an interviewee from an organisation lobbying for the improvement of the conditions for cross-border work stressed a positive experience with the use of reliable sources of information:

‘Throughout the whole Brexit process since the 2016 referendum and until now, what has been your main source of information with respect to impact on cross-border workers like you?’

The Centre for Cross-Border Studies and EURES. Both of those would be good sources. It was very difficult at the start; I don’t think anybody knew! There’s obviously a lot of information in the media, but I don’t always take that at face value. But luckily there are some good sources for cross-border guidance from EURES and from the Centre for Cross-Border Studies. There is another place, but I normally get the links through EURES. They are very good’.

8 <http://www.hscboard.hscni.net/travelfortreatment/>

Influence of unreliable information sources

The discussion in both focus groups emphasised the importance of social media which can add to confusion and contribute to a sense of insecurity, exacerbating political tensions.

‘The other quite confusing point of information is Facebook. A woman contacted me a couple of weeks ago, that she needed a passport for her dog, to go from one side of the border to the other – which isn’t true, but she read on Facebook that she did. Obviously, the woman was very distressed, so it’s just things like that. If people had one reliable point of contact for information, I think it would have been useful’ [FG1]

‘Facebook and Twitter! I work in a rural area, but I live in a very loyalist area in [name of small town], so I live in an urban area. All of the protests and anything else were on the whole against the Protocol... [at the root] has been Facebook pages, has been Twitter feeds and it has been [roadside] signs and things. So, it’s faceless people who are writing stuff and then calling people out onto the streets or whatever’. [FG2]

Some discussion in the focus groups highlighted the extent to which the effects and influence of digital media and digital communication (with the associated inequalities of access) have been extended disproportionately by Covid-related restrictions on travel, movement and face-to-face contact.

This comment demonstrates how the border region is particularly badly affected by problems around lack of good quality and reliable information. It speaks well to how **Brexit-related uncertainty, mixed messages or conflicting information in the border region, rural disadvantage in access to broadband infrastructure, and the common difficulties of online communication have damaged the possibility for dialogue in the border region at a time of growing political pressure:**

‘But when you’re working from home and you’re in no direct contact with anyone else face-to-face, it’s very, very difficult to do this kind of [cross-border, cross-community] work.

We’ve tried to have difficult conversations...but even to try to deal with tensions in a virtual room is very difficult. People can leave a room, they can turn cameras

off, they can turn their microphone off... people can disengage very quickly if they don't want to get involved in a conversation...

So, even in terms of urban versus rural, and the digital divide for us has been a really major issue. We could have reached out to our 300 members in a normal society, in a normal world. Now we're very conscious that at least 30% of our members are not engaging, as they don't want to do virtual, or they can't. So, the digital divide and broadband has been a massive issue, about accessing people in rural communities about any of these conversations'. [FG2]

Such problems in communication at this critical time are likely to have long-term consequences.

Concerns around Brexit & the Protocol

Common concerns around political stability and cooperation

The subjects of Brexit and, with it, the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland in the UK-EU Withdrawal Agreement had been so much in the news from 1 January (as reported in our Temperature Gauge blogs <https://icban.com/library/>) that we were not surprised to find that 98% of our respondents have heard of the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland. There is a difference between being aware of something and having knowledge about it, of course. About half of our respondents say that they know a little about the Protocol, and an additional 40% say that they know a good deal about it. Only 9% confess to knowing nothing about it.

It is very difficult to differentiate between the impact of Brexit and that of the Protocol, both positive and negative. This is particularly true for a survey sample which crosses the Irish border and thus includes respondents who are still in the EU. Our tick-box answer questions do not attempt to do this, and instead just covered the range of issues that we know have been most significant and/or publicised since the end of the transition period. This is a set of questions that asks about levels of concern rather than experiences (those are left to the other type of questions).

We see from Figure 7 that the topics that **people in the Central Border Region are most concerned about (by far) are political stability in Northern Ireland (81% expressing concern about this), followed by north-south cooperation (79% are concerned for this)**. There are solid levels of concern (70-72%) for British-Irish relations, inadvertent mobile phone roaming charges, ability to access services across the border, the ability to work across the border, decreased choice/increased price of consumer goods, and the economy of Northern Ireland. There is middling concern (56%) for the economy of the Republic of Ireland.

Topics of least concern are NI's place in the UK internal market (44% concerned) and Northern Ireland's constitutional position in the UK (36% concerned). These levels of concern are perhaps higher than we might expect given the proportion of respondents who live in the Republic of Ireland (over 4 in 10) and who hold British citizenship (1 in 8). This shows overall that **there is a real sense of flux and, with it, anxiety when it comes to the post-Brexit conditions, and that this exists on both sides of the border from people of various backgrounds and identities.**

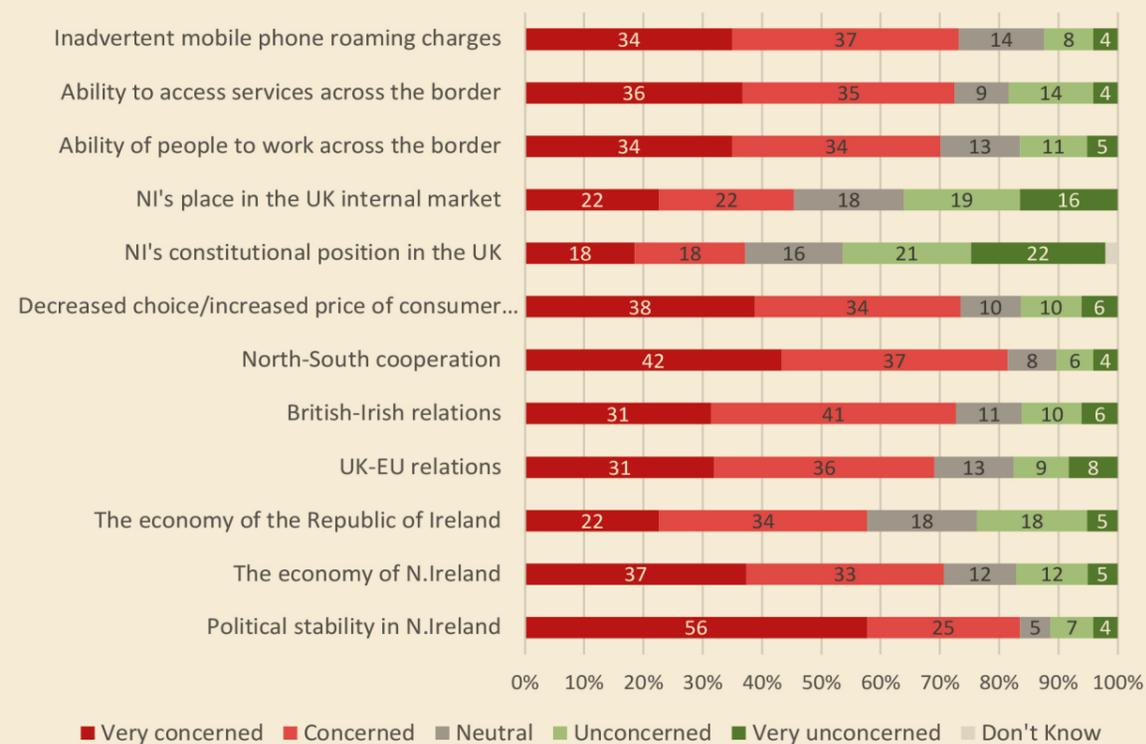


Figure 7. Levels of concern about areas of impact for Brexit and the Protocol

Rising concerns about social divisions and community tensions

The concerns for peace are reflected in a multitude of comments in response to the question about the already felt effects of Brexit. Observations of what had already become a reality on the ground include:

R11 '[Lessening] political stability in the North, outbreak of violence'

R10 'The increased threat of loyalist violence'

R48 'Feel less secure, particularly with political unease, violence. Feel the political system, particularly the Northern Ireland Executive has let people down by not working together to take the positive potential from Brexit.'

Multiple respondents discuss these problems in light of a sense of disappointment with political leadership. Such experiences are often interjected with concerned comments around the loss of general political stability:

R319 'It seems the right wing politicians and PUL community are using Brexit to ramp up tension'

R335 'Huge rise in community tensions. Disintegration of grown up politics across the world (including Britain, Ireland, EU and America)'

R67 'Destabilization of peace between both communities in N. Ireland. Tensions and violence resurrected and a return to N. Ireland's old community divides'.

A sense of vulnerability

There is a real sense of acute pressure for some respondents, feeling the effects of these wider political tensions – particularly so from the sense of vulnerability in the border region:

R68 'It is having a negative effect mentally and psychologically ... It is making it very hard to survive with the EU, the Protocol and the Irish sea border all affecting trade and supplies from entering Northern Ireland and England'

R14 ‘Suppliers will not send items to NI and if they do, costs are diabolic prices. Also, why the residents of NI had to obtain a green card to travel 2 yards across the so-called border is beyond me. Men/Women in suits in London/Belfast making decisions affecting the everyday lives of those living on the border county peripherals.’

Hardening views

Similar observations and experiences were shared at length in one of our focus groups. Examples offered in Focus Group 2 succinctly demonstrate the extent to which concerns with societal divisions and community relations are at the forefront of people’s minds when thinking of the effects of Brexit generally, and of its economic effects more specifically:

‘[C]ross-community relationships have lessened. Particularly during the pandemic and more so even since the Protocol in January, the impact has been negative on cross-community relations. *There has been a real drawback of community relations work in rural communities. Groups are now becoming so insular and there’s a worry that may even be more so around border communities*, where relationships very much depend on PEACE funding and all the other opportunities that came pre-Brexit’. **[FG2 community worker]**

‘*Especially with young people, there has been a hardening of views*. Maybe Brexit is a wee bit in the background of it, but the biggest and most divisive thing in our area has been the road signs... I think there’s a vast misunderstanding. Irish identity is Irish, and people will speak it and it’s not a threatening language, but I think in the way [the Irish language] is being used in our area, it’s being seen as threatening’. **[FG2 business person]**

The same participant stressed at length the consequences of the recent erecting of Irish language signs in their local area where unionist and Protestant communities live too:

‘There was no hassle in the community until they put these up. Immediately we go to hassle overnight over these last six months. I’m sure the Irish language people that really care about it, don’t need that either. It baffles me...I think there’s a huge lack of understanding of where the other side is coming from’. **[FG2]**

Our focus groups provided a forum for a more detailed discussion of the above emerging themes. A particular emphasis was put on the hardening of attitudes and behaviour, especially on the unionist side and among the younger generation. As this community worker put it:

‘My son is 20-odd, his immediate reaction was to join the flute band. When the DUP leadership came up, his words to me were ‘I hope they put in a good hardliner’. Now that’s the younger community, that’s coming from Irish signs at the end of my road. That is exactly where that is coming from. Why would he want that? ...

I know a lot of unionist people are following Jim Allister [Traditional Unionist Voice party leader] now, than they ever were before. There’s a branch, a couple of branches happening here in County Armagh. The TUV has just recently set up one in Lurgan, so that sort of stuff has never been heard of before – people are moving from the DUP or Ulster Unionist, mostly the DUP to TUV territory’. **[FG2]**

However, for another participant, a young person from a border town, what exercises a greater electoral or political pool for the people of her generation is the difference between liberal and conservative positions of the political parties in Northern Ireland, over and above the ethno-national divide:

‘I’m a part of the youth council [and] I know the general consensus is currently, Sinn Féin is a more appealing party, just because of their liberal ideologies. So, even things like, they’re just not homophobic ... I know one of my Protestant friends didn’t even know that Sinn Féin was for a united Ireland. He even said Sinn Féin was a more appealing party because of that, just because of the fact that they have those views that aren’t, that don’t exclude people being who they are or whatever’. **[FG2]**

Concerns for EU citizens

As a result of the United Kingdom leaving the European Union, the UK has set up an *EU Settlement Scheme* (EUSS).⁹ Under the scheme, (non-Irish) EU citizens and their family members living in the UK can apply to continue living there after 30 June 2021.

9 Source: UK Government, <https://www.gov.uk/settled-status-eu-citizens-families>

Furthermore, the entitlement of Irish citizens living in the Republic of Ireland to work in Northern Ireland and to access different UK benefits, is protected by the Common Travel Area. However, other EU citizens who live in the ROI but work in N Ireland must apply for the UK's *Frontier Workers Permit Scheme* to continue working there from 1 July 2021.¹⁰

Brexit Effects on EU citizens: A Case Study Interview

Over the past couple of decades EU citizens have gradually become an important part of social and economic life in the border region. Around 44% of EU26 and ROW¹¹ residents of Northern Ireland live in council areas located next to the border (DoE, 2018)¹². We enquired among NGOs who focus on supporting non-UK/Irish citizens in the border region about the effects of Brexit on this group so far. In the words of a key interviewee, Brexit has 'changed the feeling of belonging for many people and ... reminded people that they are not from here. And as time progressed, for example, **as the EUSS [EU Settlement Scheme] was introduced, the hostile environment was ramped up. It's changed and reminded people that it's not their right to be here and to live here but it has become a privilege.** So, that has been a **very big shift in how people feel about living here, emotionally... And this also translated into practical terms whereby people were asked to prove and evidence their rights** at a very basic level, especially since the end of the transition period.'

The practical aspects of evidencing one's rights which can be done by accessing one's status online, have proven tricky for many (residents, employers and service providers alike) and have meant that in practice a number of people, particularly from vulnerable groups, such as the elderly and children, have been put in a precarious situation:

'The whole application process was so complex really and labour intensive for so many that once it was applied for and submitted people were like 'it's done' and they forgot about it, and it only came to light again a few months or a year later **when they were required to prove their status and they did not know how to access it. ... So, keeping the status update or being able to access it is very difficult.**

10 Source: UK Government, <https://www.gov.uk/frontier-worker-permit>

11 E.g. Rest of the World

12 'Background Evidence on the Movement of People across the Northern Ireland – Ireland Border'. Report by the Department for the Economy, NI. Available at <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/economy/movement-people-northern-ireland-ireland-border.pdf>

Helping the elderly or children has been a huge part of our workload on the EUSS so how those children will be able to access their status 10 years down the line is ...I'm not sure. I'm concerned that will be very hard to keep track of. **I know now the government are saying that employers and service providers can check people's status without being given access codes so it's all very well not having to worry about your codes ... but that also means pretty much anybody can check your status without your consent** and the implications of that'.

For employers and service agencies there have also been difficulties in always appreciating the extent to which, and the kind of evidence of people's rights, that is now required, particularly since the EUSS closed in June 2021: 'And so, from the beginning of July we have definitely seen a surge of employers, recruitment agencies, healthcare providers insistence on proving the status and **a lot of our interventions were to make them aware that they don't need to have status as yet. It's enough that they can prove they've applied**'.¹³

The lack of a Home Office follow-up training or awareness campaign for service providers on the ways of checking people's rights is, according to our interviewee, part of the reason for such difficulties. As a result, **'we've definitely seen people's rights being denied – Universal Credit being cut off** until people can access or produce their certificate of application or until we've intervened and explained to them that certificate of application is proof enough. **The same with healthcare, where GP practices wouldn't register people who have not had their actual status as yet.** Or if people couldn't provide biometric cards [biometric cards are only issued to non-EU/EEA citizens] – wherever they got that information from. ... But the healthcare one is worrying – that they kind of ask for status first and treat later which really should not be the case.[and] **at the vaccination centres people were also asked to prove their status so that was very worrying** [that] people took it upon themselves – the providers, nurses and volunteers – ... to limit that, to screen people for their immigration status. ... **That, I think, is showing the things to come in the health service in general – that it might not be policy but somebody somewhere takes it upon themselves, you know, at a reception desk, to be proactive** in that not very helpful way'.

13 This is because the Withdrawal Agreement guarantees the protection of existing rights to all those with status or until they have been refused the status grant.

On the one hand, the above encountered emotional and practical difficulties for EU citizens after Brexit have had a particular impact on those among them living in the border region who **‘are more confused and are more acutely aware of actually crossing the border every day or every other day. Especially if they ... live in the south and work up here in the north then their life changed more because there’s more formalities that they have to go through to access services**, and there’s more worry in terms of the bilateral agreements, of whether they still have the same rights, and whether on the basis of their national insurance over there – can they access health services here and can they access benefits?’

On another hand, our interviewee sees a bigger structural problem in terms of providing advice and support for EU citizens in the future, since after the closure of the EUSS there are now **‘95,500 people that suddenly became subject to immigration control that were not subject to immigration control before and there really isn’t much provision for immigration advice in NI. ... That conversation needs to happen – to provide advice and mechanisms of how to go about living here’**.

Cross-border cooperation

The value of cooperation

Given that ICBAN is a cross-border network, we took the opportunity to test the degree to which people in the Central Border Region consider cross-border cooperation to be important. Given that many respondents were alerted to the survey through their local authority, rather than through ICBAN itself, we might not necessarily assume that cross-border cooperation is a priority for them.

Nevertheless, we can see that **9 out of 10 of our respondents consider cross-border cooperation to be important across a range of issues**; with 7 out of 10 saying it is very much so. From this we see that cross-border cooperation is seen as essential for business development, for high-level Executive / Irish government and for community relations in the border region more broadly. This is incentive to keep prioritising such cooperation, especially in light of the concerns noted in the earlier questions.

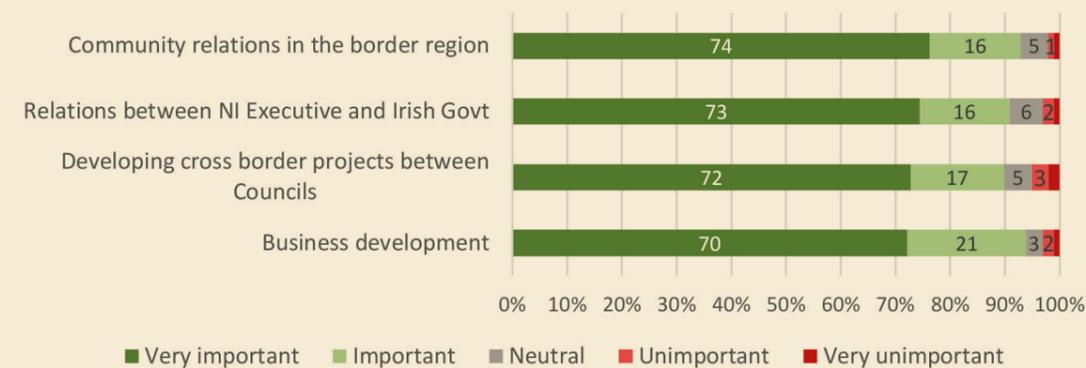


Figure 8. How important is cross-border co-operation for meeting common challenges?

Practical concerns for cross-border cooperation

The immediate economic repercussions and mitigations around Brexit on businesses and public bodies alike in the Republic of Ireland are different to those in Northern Ireland. This is confirmed by our interviewee from an educational institution from the southern side of the border for whom the effects were mostly potential rather than acutely present, and more so on their supply chain than in terms of the education process or relationships with students. He notes that he has been spared the full force of the UK exit from the EU as a benefit of the Protocol:

‘The main impact for us would be potentially on our supply chain. Our Estates, Service and the Faculties who are buying in products from the UK. It could have the impact of taking some of our normal suppliers out of the supply chain. Now, that hasn’t happened because of the Protocol....’

So, the impact there has been relatively mild but there will be some of our lab supply companies who source through the UK and I could anticipate that as the year goes by there will be a gradual broadening out or diversification of our supply chain’. [Educational institution interview]

When asked about any existing or emerging issues, among others, with cross-border access to services since the transition period, our focus group 1 participants elaborated on the complications arising from the divergent systems of benefits and the **difficulties with sourcing a single point of information for the systems either side of the border**, particularly by frontier workers:

‘From individuals... **a lot of queries we would get would be to do with tax and secondary benefits, Child Benefit and then the Universal Credits and tax credits and things like that – which is a minefield for cross-border workers.** And those thinking about taking jobs on the other side. A lot of queries regarding that, because Universal Credit...people are changing benefits and when you change you have to go on to Universal Credit...that makes it quite messy.’ [cross-border advisor, FG1]

A further question brought up was one about difficulties with **recognition of qualifications**:

‘I work in a local authority, and I work in health and safety in particular. We have had issues for the last few years, with recognition of certification skills. In particular, in the south we refer to it as CSCS [Construction Skills Certification Scheme]. It’s very difficult getting clarification of that from anywhere. The northern equivalent is a CSR. There used to be a mutual recognition, but that was removed a few years ago. We are having difficulty getting recognition on that. ... Our national training centre for construction skills is Solas, they have suggested that the cardholder contacts them, pays the administrative fee to get a southern equivalent, which is ridiculous really. ... It’s proving a difficulty’. [cross-border advisor, FG1]

Our interview with a representative of a cross-border work lobby group (see box below) fleshed out some of the issues relating to the impact of prohibitive tax legislation on ROI residents, who live in the south of Ireland but work for Northern Irish companies or organisations.

Cross-Border Work: Issues for ROI citizens living in the Republic of Ireland and working in N. Ireland

Such residents of the border region have been able to avail of the ‘trans-border workers’ relief’ designed to allow for the equalisation of tax, e.g. payment of taxes to the HMRC while submitting tax returns to ROI Revenue. This piece of legislation is seen as ‘very restrictive’ for being prohibitive of the flexible conducting of work outside of Northern Ireland and as such, negatively affecting appropriate work-life balance for thousands of cross-border workers. By contrast, remote working conditions are made accessible to UK residents who work in the Republic of Ireland.

The lobby group’s membership includes Northern Irish businesses and Chamber of Commerce groups who recognise that *such prohibitive conditions for cross-border work can directly impact foreign direct investment in the border region.* In the words of our interviewee, ‘It impacts ... businesses heavily in terms of their ability to attract talent. ... If you have told someone when they go for an interview [that] yes, we’ve got this attractive position, we’ve got this attractive salary and package, but you can’t work from home because we would have to set up a second payroll. We don’t allow it because the Irish government don’t allow it. That puts off talent. When companies are thinking about having a business along the border area, it puts them off as well’.

Effects of the Covid-19 Pandemic

As such, it is appreciated that *‘during the course of the pandemic the [Irish] government kindly waived the requirement or stipulation that all of the work had to be done outside of the State [through] a temporary waiver set to end at the end [on] 31st December 2021’*. The organisation has therefore *‘campaign[ed] for pragmatic solutions that would either change the legislation or allow some flexibility for remote working or for those ... claiming trans-border workers’ relief on the island of Ireland’*.

Effects of Brexit

Our interviewee does not see there being direct impacts of Brexit on the immediate conditions of work of Irish citizens living in ROI and working in N Ireland. They understand these conditions as protected by the Common Travel Area and the Good Friday Agreement but stipulate unknowns for future pension- and social security arrangements. Finally, the interviewee stresses the positive experience with support from across the political spectrum, north and south, for promoting resolution for the issues faced by cross-border workers.

The above discussion is perhaps a reminder, underscored by the extraordinary situation of a global pandemic, of the extent to which attention to preserving, and even extending, effective coordination in cross-border policy-making and delivery might be particularly necessary. Such a task is clearly made more complex by a post-Brexit environment where the legal frameworks across the island of Ireland will increasingly differ, while political sensitivities around cross-border cooperation at large have heightened. Our participants were all too cognisant of the political and pragmatic considerations informing any conversation around strengthening policy coordination between the two jurisdictions on the island of Ireland:

‘I’d like to see further cooperation. There are so many opportunities for more integration for people who live on the border especially. But generally, between the two jurisdictions, in terms of employment, housing, health, education; it’s just so disjointed. So, it’s more difficult than it needs to be. Life could be a lot easier, a lot more efficient and effective if more cooperation was to occur ...’

If you put the ideology aside, there are lots of logical, good reasons for further integration and development. Especially when you live at the border, and you have to cope with demands of two jurisdictions and things like that. I would personally like to see more cooperation in terms of travel and work and employment opportunities, qualifications, education, and the rest of it. There are more opportunities, than there are hindrances’. [FG1]

Effects on Cross-border Health and Social Care Services

A respondent from a cross-border health and social care partnership provided us with a ready statement stressing that no immediate negative effects for cross-border health and social care have been experienced, and that those expected are being mitigated against.

‘How do you see Brexit impacting cross-border health and social care provision?’

‘A significant proportion of the work of [the partnership] is funded under the EU Programmes. Our current programme the INTERREG VA programme is funded until April 2022, with match funding provided by both Depts. of Health. As part of Brexit arrangements, the UK and Irish government guaranteed funding to projects already approved so that they can continue to the end date as planned. So there is no risk to the committed project funding provided by the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB). [The partnership] is currently consulting with our partners in relation to the new EU Peace Plus Programme which has a budget of approximately €80m to support health and wellbeing across the statutory, community and voluntary sectors from 2022-2027. The new programme is a further endorsement of the importance placed on cross-border collaboration in healthcare by the governments of the UK and Ireland’.

‘So far, have you witnessed any impacts upon cross-border health and social care provision?’

‘To date there has been little to no disruption on the work of [the Partnership] as a consequence of Brexit. The Department’s EU exit priorities include maintaining cross-border collaboration and access to care, such as the all-island Congenital Heart Disease (CHD) Network and the North West Cancer Centre (NWCC) at Altnagelvin, which have been agreed and delivered through the NSMC structures established under the Good Friday Agreement. These two initiatives demonstrate the clear benefits of cross-border collaboration in healthcare in meeting population health needs, improving access to care and patient outcomes in ways that exceed the respective capacity of each jurisdiction’.

‘Are there any Brexit-related risks that you foresee as impacting upon the availability and quality of health and social care for the Central Border Region?’

‘The EU’s policy of freedom of movement and mutual recognition of professional qualifications within the EU means that many health and social care professionals currently working in the UK have come from other EU countries. This will also include frontier workers, of which there are many, workers routinely live in ROI and work in Northern Ireland and vis-versa.

Staff shortages is an increasing problem within health and social care systems and according to the NI DoH 'with the ending of free movement, EU citizens who move to the UK from 1st January 2021 for more than six months will be subject to immigration control and will be required to pay the immigration health surcharge as part of any visa application. However, certain groups, where a Member State continues to cover their healthcare costs in full, will be able to seek reimbursement of the surcharge'.

'Will emergency services still be able to cross the border to provide services?'

The National Ambulance Service and the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service work together in border areas. They provide support to each other for emergency and urgent calls. Both services will keep working together to make sure this continues'.

The impact of Covid-19

Movement curtailed, differences exacerbated

Needless to say, the experience of cross-border movement had been curtailed more considerably in the 18 months prior to this study than at any time beforehand due to the restrictive measures imposed by the Northern Ireland Executive and Irish Government in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Very strict rules about the distance people could travel from their homes and in what circumstances meant that border-crossing was simply not possible for many months between March 2020 and July 2021. At times, the infection rates were particularly high in border areas.¹⁴ The differences in rules applying on either side of the border caused some confusion, and the prospect of checks by An Garda Síochána on vehicles in the border region to clamp down on breaches of the restrictions on movement added to the sense that this was a particularly difficult time for cross-border cooperation in the region.

As such, the experience of Covid-19 cannot be ignored when it comes to assessing the environment for post-Brexit cooperation in the border region or the experience for cross-border workers in particular. **When the state comes to the fore in addressing a crisis, it is perhaps unsurprising that differences between policies either side of the border become most apparent.** One of our focus group participants noted the particular disadvantage experienced by cross-border workers when it came to government support to address the impact of the pandemic:

'I had several people mostly from Belleek, working in Bundoran. The issue was no money, they weren't getting the PU [Pandemic Unemployment] Payment, and I contacted several ministers in the south and nobody was willing to come forward.

¹⁴ This was true in the early days of the pandemic (e.g. Concerns raised as Covid-19 cases surge along Irish border, The Guardian, 29 April 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/29/concerns-raised-as-Covid-19-cases-surge-along-irish-border>) and in more recent times (e.g. The Sunday Times [Ireland edition], 'Overspill' from North raises Covid infections, 22 August 2021, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/overspill-from-north-raises-Covid-infections-tdpg6d5km>).

I thought it was a disgrace that these people are paying tax in the south, yet when they needed it, they weren't getting the benefit they deserved and rightly worked for. I'm still really annoyed about it.

I know that the subsidy was there then, but it's the people who are self-employed in the south but living in the north – got nothing. Some of them really, rightly concerned about their business. It's just really, really scary. ... So, **it definitely opened a lot of people's eyes to the border, cross-border workers, and the issues that they face**'. [cross-border advisor, FG1]

These are good examples of the ways in which cross-border workers 'fall between the cracks' – and how this has particularly damaging consequences in times of crisis.

Access to services across the border

We asked just one question on the topic (Figure 9) and found only 14% saying that Covid restrictions had no impact on their normal access to services on the other side of the border. Almost a quarter say that the experience had a profound impact on their normal cross-border access. **Overall, three quarters consider the impact of Covid-19 measures to have restricted their cross-border access to services.** This is bound to have an impact that will last at least into the medium term in terms of opportunities lost etc.

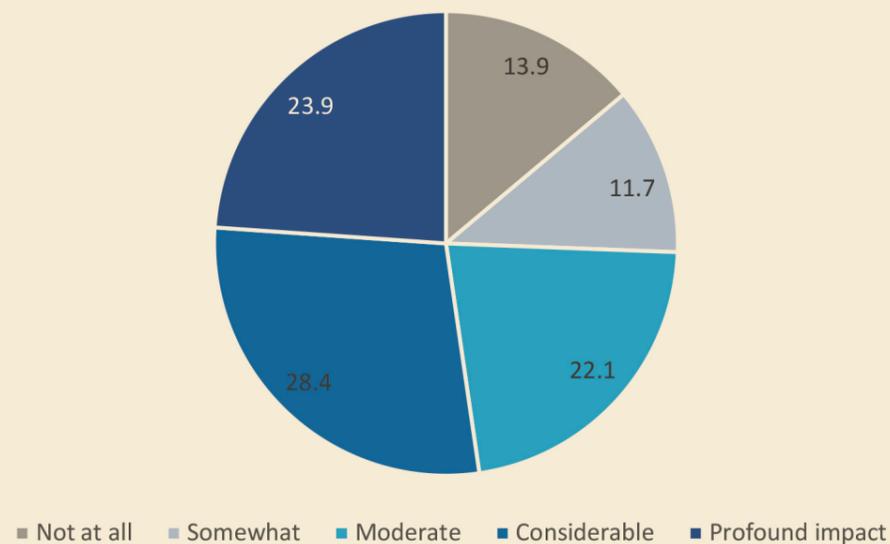


Figure 9. To what extent have Covid restrictions impacted on your normal access to services on the other side of the border?

Impact on behaviour

Respondents were also given the opportunity to include their own comments on the impact of Covid-19 restrictions on their normal access to services across the border. Only around a little less than half took that opportunity. Predictably perhaps, the impact pointed out by most was on their ability to travel – be it across the border or even out of their own area. Some form of a personally- experienced, observed in others, or generally anticipated restriction on travel was mentioned by many of those responding to this question. It has to be noted that such experiences were shared among 'Remainers' and 'Leavers' alike, showing that **the pandemic will have lingering effects on comfort and confidence in cross-border cooperation and movement across the board of political persuasions.**

As can be seen from the comments below, **restrictions on travel during the pandemic were often self-imposed**, stemming from the fear or expectation that people would be exposing themselves and others to a greater risk of infection.

R43 'We haven't been able to travel across the border since lockdown and previously would have done on a regular basis. It hasn't helped that the south is behind with the vaccination rollout and there is no alignment on the island, but that can be attributed to Brexit!'

R60 'Travel limits and fear of catching Covid and inconsistency of approach between the 2 jurisdictions particularly in early stages'

R80 'I haven't felt comfortable driving a southern reg [sic] car across the border since the restrictions happened. I'm vaccinated but I am afraid someone will question me'.

Many among those affected by travel restrictions also expressed a concern with their effect on **visiting and interacting with family members across the border**, or on personal relationships more broadly:

R141 'I have relatives who live in Louth so we often would have met up for a day or night out either side of the border. There has been no travel either way in over a year'

R202 'Couldn't visit my sister and her young family in the South (went for lunch most weekends pre-pandemic)'

R240 'Unable to visit family in nursing home care, unable to take same person to access healthcare in Sligo - had to arrange someone else to bring her'.

Others pointed out the effects on their ability to conduct usual shopping trips or even generally **access to goods**:

R53 'Covid restrictions have had a massive impact on how we can access services across the border. For example I previously done my weekly grocery shop in Lidl across the border. Due to restrictions I was unable to continue with this and now get my weekly shopping online from Asda. It is too expensive to shop local for the weekly grocery shop for a family of five. Even having access to the cinema and local beaches all stopped due to restrictions'.

Still others have stressed multiple effects, including (for few) restricted access to work:

R9 'I can no longer go food shopping in my usual superstore. I cannot access my university library. I cannot travel to see family'

R139 'Travel has been restricted for business and leisure purposes'

R306 'Travelling to work. Working in the south but travelling to north'.

These comments and experiences show the diverse consequences of restrictions on movement in the border region and serve as a reminder of the range of cross-border experiences of those in the area.

Need for more cross-border coordination

The perception that there has been a lack of a joint cross-border approach to dealing with the pandemic adds to concerns in this area. Indeed, some respondents comment on the complications associated with the different approaches to the pandemic taken on either side of the border, or have directly suggested that an all-island approach to Covid was needed:

R137 'Unfortunately there has been no success in having same restrictions and same vaccination roll out on both sides of the border so many are afraid to cross the border to access services or shop. If vaccines could have been transferred to areas near the border this would have helped to protect cross-border communities'

R207 'I'm not too bad as am in the town. But I'm from right on border and the difference in approach/restrictions North and South has created a lot of confusion. I believe it has affected mental health for many people in this area and has led to a feeling of being hemmed in. I fully accept the stay local messaging when that was required, but when that changed in one area and not another, it was quite distressing for people'

R249 'Different strategies on both sides of the border - it should have been one all island strategy'

R314 'I live in the North but I work in the South. The difference in the pace of easing restrictions between the two jurisdictions has been stark, e.g. pubs and restaurants reopening later in the South'

R386 'The slow rate at giving out the vaccines is holding me back from crossing the border and visiting relatives and friends'.

It is in the border region that differences in policies and state responses to a cross-border, global pandemic are most acutely experienced.

What are the opportunities?

Political analyses of the impact of Brexit

Our survey included two open-ended questions that inquired about the perceived positives or opportunities of each Brexit and the Protocol. Unsurprisingly, views of Remain and Leave voters differ on this point. **The prevalent view regarding Brexit from our respondents is that there are no, or very little, such positives.** While this was most often articulated simply as 'None', a number of respondents had taken the time to be more detailed, if at times, abrasive:

R47 'I can't see any positives with Brexit so far. It has only served to deepen the gap between already divided communities. I don't want my children growing up in a 'them and us' society. We have peace and I hope we don't go backwards due to Brexit, and all that Brexit brings'

R53 'I don't think Brexit can have any positive impact for us living in border areas. Even basic things like getting my car serviced took longer, due to some car parts taking longer to arrive at the mechanics garage, due to Brexit.'

Those who see positives in Brexit do so in both a mix of traditional pro-Leave terms and also new terms that relate to the unexpected conditions of the Covid-19 pandemic; such positive views focus on being freed from restrictions imposed by the EU:

R67 '[G]et the UK economy back to normality, free from the red tape that have hindered the rest of the EU block Countries that are still experiencing lockdowns and vaccine rollout issues'

R136 'The UK vaccine programme has been infinitely better handled than the EU's. This makes a huge difference to recovering from the impacts of the pandemic'

R145 'UK Covid vaccination rates have saved the lives of many people who would have died in the EU.'

Along similar lines of 'national sovereignty', albeit from a very different perspective, a number of respondents also perceived the positives of Brexit in terms of how the relationship between the two jurisdictions has changed:

R139 'A border poll leading to a new Ireland for all peoples. A thriving all Ireland economy in Europe'

R39 'Positive Impact may be increased co-operation on mutual interests between N. Ireland and R.O.I.'

Some go further in their analysis of where Brexit will leave cross-border relations:

R7 'A greater detachment from Britain and the realisation that a border poll could happen soon'

R17 'An incentive for the promotion of a shared and united Ireland, a wider realisation of the failed northern state, opened up doors to both the EU and UK market'

R348 'It has highlighted the ridiculousness of the British border in Ireland and therefore increase the chance of a border poll'

R367 'Increased likelihood of creation of a United Ireland'.

Economic gains

Some of our Remain- or non-voting respondents note some perceived positives of Brexit, particularly in relation to business. Some such benefits are most easily exploited by those in the border region:

R282 'I had to change how I do business. Create a company in the ROI. The benefit of this is that I have not had to pay VAT. When I did business previously the goods that I imported from Switzerland into the NI company, I had to pay 20% VAT upfront. Bringing in goods via the Irish company means that it's zero rated. The transportation is now coming via France to Rosslare and this is quicker'

R283 'Great opportunities for growth of my business in both the UK and EU markets'

R281 'Improved Business Opportunities. Great yearning to remain in EU'.

Other positive perceptions of Brexit's economic consequences were articulated in the terms of a more general advantage for Northern Ireland, for the Republic of Ireland, or - on one or two occasions - for the border region specifically. This included perceptions of there being benefits to trade and investment, to the creation of jobs, or advantages to own business/work, although such perceptions were occasionally tempered with the consciousness that economic advantage for some parts of the island does not always mean the same for others:

R357 'It has benefitted places like Dublin who have seen an influx of MNCs and other companies who want to locate in the EU region however, rural areas such as Donegal and other border counties experience a negative effect'

R239 'Opportunities for Republic of Ireland for businesses to relocate to EU location rather than UK'

R200 'It gives Northern Ireland a chance to grow their economy on its own and become more self-sufficient'.

It has to be noted that some of the responses to the question concerning the positives/opportunities of Brexit centre upon what the Protocol provides:

R400 'Allows businesses in N Ireland to trade and develop both within the UK and the EU'.

Indeed, this example bears some resemblance to another category of responses which we have notionally called 'best of both worlds' - one that is perhaps also best interpreted as a reference to the Protocol, rather than to Brexit as a whole:

R12 'NI can embrace its unique position in the U.K. and EU single market for goods'

R111 'Unique opportunities for NI - if people would get over the traditional rhetoric and grab the opportunities'.

Case Study: Effects of Brexit and the Protocol on larger businesses

In an interview a business representative from the agri-food industry spoke to us about the extent to which the Protocol has protected the business and local suppliers, and about some of the new problems they are encountering.

What from your perspective and experience, have been the effects of the Protocol?

'So, the Protocol works really well because we can move our product anywhere we want on the island of Ireland. And that is very, very important for us. There are no SPS issues, and there are no tariffs, it just moves freely as before. Then we have product that we have made both sides of the border, and because of the unfettered access to in the Command paper that the UK Government gave last year, it means that product that is made with Northern Ireland ingredients, irrespective of where it is made can go back into GB through Northern Ireland unfettered. That is very important for us. ... It's more or less the same as before. On the sale side it is working very, very well. On the purchasing side, it is a little more problematic. ... The fundamental problem I would say ... is that a lot of GB suppliers are still not ready and still don't know what to do. So, we had to make the decision that we had to work with these suppliers and help them sell to us. So that's extra work on us and that's the approach we have taken. The burden lies with us. ... As we get each supplier through the process... their skills have improved [but] we're here in September and we're still picking up the same problems.'

Why do you feel that this situation has arisen given that suppliers knew this was coming?

'I'd say because of the media in GB, people were thinking that once this Free Trade Agreement is signed, it'll be just the way it was. And there wasn't enough honesty... explaining that paperwork will still be needed here, regardless of whether there are tariffs or not. So the kind of expertise needed wasn't there and it seems to be a shock to the system'.

As experienced exporters to destinations in GB, Europe and beyond, the company had built up expertise in the complexity of paperwork associated with international exports. After Brexit, they are now well positioned to build on their existing expertise but are appreciative of the difficulties that small and medium enterprises are facing by contrast, particularly with knowing where to turn to for information, and with having the capacity to integrate this new knowledge into their systems:

'Chartered Accountants Ireland started running formal training courses. They were really good because it consolidated information and knowledge what we had gathered. It was formal and it gave structure to what we had learnt. ... I would also add that in Northern Ireland, the Chamber of Commerce was absolutely brilliant in that space for training. But that didn't seem to be replicated in GB. ... It was difficult to get information from a GB perspective. I don't know how an SME would have worked through that.'

At the same time, the effects of Covid-19 on the industry were said to have been just as serious, if not more impactful than those of Brexit, disrupting supply chains and requiring much longer lead times for orders, accruing extra costs for the business.

Positive views on the Protocol

Compared to their assessment of Brexit, respondents' assessment of the Protocol can be described as slightly more positive. Perceptions of there being any positives to the Protocol, however, tended to diverge and vary depending on one's espousal of a 'Remainer' or 'Leaver' position vis-à-vis Brexit as a whole. The respondents who do see some positives to the Protocol, articulate these mostly, or even exclusively, in economic terms. Some among them find the Protocol gives Northern Ireland access to both the EU and UK markets, describing this as 'the best of both worlds' and a 'unique' position':

R237 'It might help local trade directly with the EU without having to go through the UK; The 'best of both worlds' in so far as trade and customs goes'

R261 'Northern Ireland is in an ideal position to avail of so much to build on the country's economy and in turn have positive impacts on the country socially, environmentally etc. It's up to the government to take advantage of this unique position and make amazing strides for the country'

R141 'The Protocol is a positive thing for NI as it allows life to continue here as it has since 1998. To maintain peace on this island, we cannot have a hard border in place. The Protocol not only allows this to happen but it makes NI a more attractive place for businesses with unique access to the EU and UK markets.... It's time to promote the positives such as opportunities for employment and economic growth. This message is mostly for the NI Exec but also the UK government. As the implementors of both Brexit and the Protocol, they have a responsibility to promote the positives here and alleviate fears'.

There are a few Leave-voters among those sharing the 'the-best-of-both-worlds' interpretation:

R159 'Dual market accessibility'

R379 'Northern Ireland to be an innovative country that can span both EU and UK in its economy'.

However, 'Leavers' who do share an understanding that the Protocol may offer at least a potential advantage believe such potential is unlikely to be realised in practice:

R243 'Remaining in the Single Market whilst still maintaining its links as part of the U.K. has tremendous potential for inward investment from third countries. However, the EU will put impediments in the way of NI achieving these advantages'.

A similar pragmatic 'best of both worlds'-type of position was also expressed by a businessman from our focus group 2. This illustrates well the type of rationale and attitude of those who may not see either Brexit or the Protocol in an entirely positive light but who are nevertheless prepared to accept that Northern Ireland needs to move on ahead on this basis:

'I think Brexit, when I thought about it, I thought that maybe this is the case that people in Northern Ireland can actually be 'we are the people of Northern Ireland'. We have an opportunity here, in my eyes to be a Hong Kong in the middle of Europe; where we can trade both ways, frictionless.

So, I can trade into the UK frictionless, and I can trade into the EU frictionless. We have an opportunity, that creates for the people of Northern Ireland – or whatever they want to call the place, but that creates a unity of people... personally speaking, are we ever going to get everyone to join a Dublin government – never. Are we ever going to get everyone to join a UK government – never'. **[FG2]**

Others find that the Protocol leads to economic advantage in the terms of increased opportunities for trade (particularly cross-border), more investment, jobs and gains for own businesses:

R210 'Improved opportunity for Irish traders'

R281 'Improved business status in Europe. Freedom of Travel retained'

R9 'Better all island economy. More FDI [Foreign Direct Investment]'

R17 'Further opportunities for business with less constraints, promotion and realisation of cross-border trade and its impact'

R202 'More North-South trade'.

Political analyses of the Protocol impact

Some respondents have constructed their answers in terms of the Protocol as a mitigation measure against the worst effects of Brexit:

R310 'I believe the Protocol will help protect some aspects of our life. Brexit was always going to be disastrous for everyone in Ireland, but hopefully the Protocol will mitigate the worst of it'

R220 'Avoids hard Brexit. Avoids hard border. Very minor progression towards All Island economy/society'

R291 'It has held off the absolute worst effects of Brexit. It has kept us at least somewhat tied to the EU. It has held off the prospect of an internal border in Ireland'.

As these quotes suggest, in some cases **the mitigating effects of the Protocol are seen in the terms of avoiding a hard border, and a number of participants have turned this avoidance into the main focus of their responses**, e.g. **R326** 'The possibility of no return to a hard border'.

Among some of those who voted 'Remain' at the 2016 Referendum, the Protocol is also viewed as a safeguard to the NI economy and one that should therefore be smoothly implemented:

R17 'The implementation of the Protocol is vital to the sustainability of the north's market and economy'

R141 'I was dreading Brexit but it has happened now and the impact on NI hasn't been bad. I'm so thankful for the Protocol that allowed us to end up in this situation'.

Criticisms of the Protocol

It is notable also that compared to other open-ended questions in our survey, there was a bigger proportion of ambivalent or 'Don't Know'-type responses returned for this question. We interpret this as testament of respondents' awareness of what could be seen as contradictory political and economic effects of the Protocol:

R239 'Protocol is good in concept but is causing huge disruption in Northern Ireland as the details were not resolved in advance'

R244 'NI business opportunities are available but uncertainty is preventing them being actioned'.

Nevertheless, there are very strong criticisms too. Many, but not all, among those seeing the Protocol entirely in a negative light had casted a 'Leave' vote at the EU Exit Referendum. Examples of such responses include:

R96 '[T]he Protocol as it stands clearly isn't working and the fact the EU triggered article 16 over vaccines makes me very uncomfortable. It feels like NI is stuck in the middle of UK and EU and is the scapegoat for issues the EU has with the UK and that every time the EU has a political problem with the UK we will be the ones to suffer first and most'

R145 'None, it is an unmitigated disaster being used as a political stick to the detriment of everyone in NI and it must go'

R155 'None - it is completely undemocratic and contravenes the Belfast Agreement'.

What Do 'Leavers' Think?

Disappointment

For each of our surveys we have also reported on the opinions of those among our respondents who state that they have voted 'Leave' at the UK 2016 Referendum on leaving the European Union. Given the continuous salience of the 'Remain' and 'Leave' identities in NI politics, we have continued to monitor the attitudes and feelings among this group, shared through our online survey.

In responding to the question of why the importance of Brexit may have changed for them over the course of the past year, **the 'Leavers' among our respondents tended to point out that what had been delivered, either politically or in purely economic terms, was not what they felt they had voted for.** While our question referred specifically to Brexit, some of the comments quoted below clearly focus on the Ireland/Northern Ireland Protocol instead.

In most cases, a sense of disappointment with the outcome of Brexit negotiations and, on occasion, with the position of the negotiating parties – either the EU or the UK government – was palpable:

R79 'Because Northern Ireland has not been treated the same as the rest of the U.K.'

R82 'It has changed, the ability of not being able to trade freely with GB has impacted everyone's lives. Not getting food in supermarkets, soil for plants. This is crazy!'

R95 'It would appear that we have been "shafted" and not being delivered what was promised'

R105 'In hindsight I regret voting leave as I did not realise how NI politics are. GFA would complicate haulage, imports from GB to NI'

R236 'More determined to get the EU intransigence and bullying over the illegal Protocol removed and Northern Ireland to have no sea border'

R304 'I was told lies about Brexit by UK government and this has become apparent now'.

It is interesting to note, however, that not all comments on this question aligned with the above strongly negative perceptions of the outcomes of Brexit. The couple of quotes below also demonstrate that some among those who did vote Leave either see these outcomes in a positive light economically, or even anticipate potential political dividends (and less expectedly for this group - in terms of the possibility for a united Ireland):

R211 'The deal that N Ireland has ended up with will give us an advantage over the rest of the UK and Europe'

R178 'I'm even more determined to gain my democratic vote for a Reunited Ireland back in the EU'.

Identity salience

In addition to pointing out the practical (and often negative economic) effects on everyday life (emphasised by most respondents), **the responses of 'Leavers' to our question on the impact already felt from Brexit tended to stress how such change is entwined with the anticipation of political change and of loss of identity:**

R110 'Loss of identity, supply of goods and customs within our own country'

R155 'Amazon parcels, loss of democracy, Irish Sea border'

R243 'None as of yet. But seriously concerned by the rigid plans by the EU towards the movement of medicines and pharmaceutical drugs between the U.K. and NI after December 2021'

R272 'I feel my British identity is started to be erased'.

Yet, some (albeit few) 'Leavers' were still able to point out some positive effects:

R134 'More freedom. More opportunities. Better Covid response than other places'.

Leavers tend to have more positive views of Brexit and more negative views of the Protocol, for reasons of sovereignty:

R38 'Ability to develop and roll out the Covid vaccine'

R74 'The UK have the power to rule in their own hands again, this is priceless'

R95 'Our money not going to EU and that money kept and spent locally'

R110 'Ability to trade worldwide, removal of EU red tape'

R236 'Hopefully better border controls (not evident at present). The EU open borders idea is turning out to be a disaster for every country in the EU. Better trading relationships with non-EU countries. Getting back UK sovereignty from the non-elected EU bureaucrats'

R274 'Restrictions on immigrants from within EU, in particular to health care and social housing'

R149 'Brexit is fine as it gives the UK (NI included) a much wider market place. The problem and difficulties arise from the Protocol, which has a damaging effect on NI and indeed ROI'.

Notably, some comments focus on what the Protocol has potentially offered in terms of benefit:

R159 'The possibility of unhindered access to both markets.'

Although, of the minority of Leavers who see positives in the Protocol, a number are careful to point out that these are potential rather than already visible or realised:

R101 'Stronger economy once things are sorted out'

R131 'There is positives in dealing with the EU but if its having the effect of destroying trade with the UK then it needs to be removed'.

Significance of the Covid-19 pandemic

Although Leavers largely shared the experiences of the general cohort of respondents with the impact of Covid-19 related restrictions on their normal access to services, they were more likely to point out that there have been no changes or effects on their usual access to services.

R110 'I seldom need to access the border so restrictions don't bother me'

R379 'I rarely personally use services across the border'.

A few suggest that access to cross-border services was affected by the interaction between the Protocol and Covid-19, sometimes by way of personal preference rather than practical barriers:

R278 'I will not be traveling across the border to the south of Ireland until the Protocol is sorted out'

R234 '[Covid] affected people visiting families and trying to work [across the border] - however without the Protocol and a more sensible approach this could be better sorted'.

At least one respondent is adamant that 'There should be stronger restrictions at border to prevent spread of Covid from ROI' (**R170**).

Leavers' messages on the Protocol

Finally, do the messages that 'Leavers' have for the powers that be differ in some way from those of other respondents to the survey? **One type of message that 'Leavers' have often articulated, yet which is largely not present in the responses of 'Remainers', stresses the need for NI to be treated no differently than the rest of the UK.** As such, a clear criticism of the Protocol has found its way in a number of statements here:

R95 'To UK & Irish governments: Northern Ireland is as big a part of UK as England Scotland or Wales is, so treat us as such'

R105 'Sort out the internal border between GB and NI. Directed to HMG, EU and Irish gov'

R149 'Scrap the Protocol'

R236 'Stop playing politics and using Northern Ireland as a play thing. They are all ignoring the anger of the Unionist community which will erupt if the Protocol is not sorted out!'

Interestingly again, the above is a position not universally shared among 'Leavers', since **R323** for instance, states: 'To tell the UK government that they must honour their obligations and the treaty they signed up to'.

A good number among the 'Leavers' at the same time – both curtly and at times more moderately – express negative attitudes and expectations very specifically with respect of the EU:

R243 'The ludicrous and draconian rules currently being imposed by the EU at ports entering NI represent 20% of ALL paperwork that they use in ALL of their other borders with third countries. This is nonsensical and is clearly the EU being vindictive and aggressive towards the U.K. because its people voted for Brexit and its government complied with the wishes of its people. The EU's failure to compromise has created a very corrosive attitude towards it by unionists in N. Ireland and has raised the fear of street violence if the EU fails to see sense'.

R134 'We are independent and the EU needs to sort itself out and stop blaming the UK for its problems. NI executive need to concentrate on NI people and what is best for them'

R238 'Northern Ireland is part of the union of United Kingdom so the British Government needs to stand up and take control of that. We should not be bullied by the EU or Irish government. The Northern Ireland Executive should also be working as a whole to defend their own country'.

Such specific and vocal negativity towards the EU is perhaps one of the strongest characteristics of the messages of 'Leavers' to the powers that be, aligning very clearly with the messages and opinions expressed by those in Northern Ireland who most categorically oppose the Protocol and its effects on Northern Ireland. It is for these reasons that we concentrated on these topics in our interviews and focus groups.

Looking ahead

Persistent fears of a hard border

So much of the negotiation time for the UK withdrawal from the EU and the UK-EU future relationship had become dogged by the question of what would happen at and about the Irish land border. Now, with Brexit having happened and the Protocol in place, we thought it worth testing to see how much the concern for a hard Irish land border had been put to bed. In our 2018 study, 59% reported that they thought a hard border was more likely than they had anticipated in 2017. In the 2019 study, 83% of our respondents said they thought a hard border was more likely than they had thought in 2018.

In this survey we asked about whether this was still an ongoing concern. **Although around a third have been reassured (possibly by the Protocol and the TCA) that a hard border is now not a possibility, well over half (57%) remain concerned that there could yet be a hard Irish land border in the future.** This helps explain the importance that is given to the topic of Brexit that was noted above.

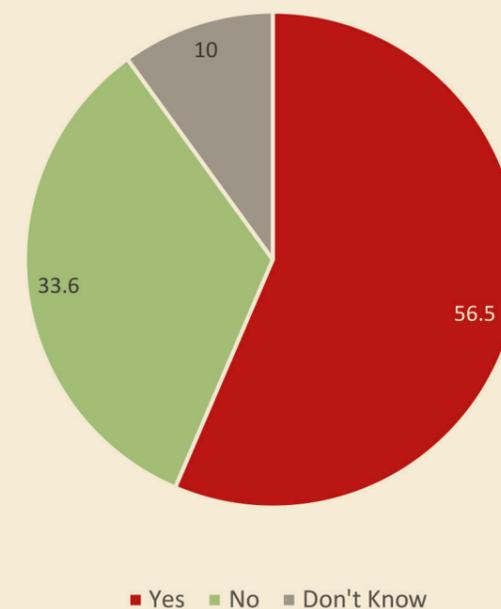


Figure 10. Do you have any concerns that there still may be a hard Irish land border in the future?

Optimism/pessimism for the future

In a follow-up question, we asked about the sense of optimism for the future when it comes to Brexit. This is in light of the fact that the UK and EU repeatedly stress their commitment to the 1998 Agreement and minimising the disruption caused by Brexit to 'everyday life'. However, we found that **half our respondents say that the experience of the past 12 months has made them less optimistic about the future in light of Brexit.** Only 18.5% find grounds to be more optimistic than they were then.

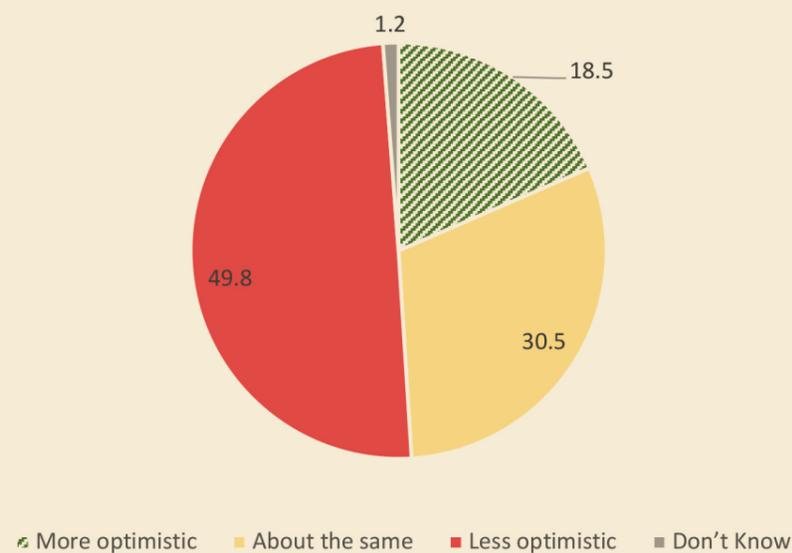


Figure 11. Would you say that, on balance, you are more or less optimistic about the future after Brexit than you were this time last year?

Against this background, but with a specific focus on Brexit and the Protocol, we asked about the degree to which the survey respondents were optimistic about the future of different aspects of cross-border life (Figure 12). Here, interestingly, we see less consensus than in many of the other questions. **People are more optimistic than pessimistic regarding cross-border travel, leisure, tourism, shopping and retail.** They are also considerably more optimistic than pessimistic about their business and job – although a large 43% say that they are unsure or undecided on the matter, which points to the persistent sense of uncertainty with respect to the economic conditions in the border region post-Brexit and (indubitably) post-Covid. Deeper analysis of the data does not reveal any particular patterns when it comes to whether respondents are more likely to be pessimistic than optimistic in answer to these questions – there seems to be diverse opinions that criss-cross jurisdictions, gender, age, and Leave/Remain voters.

It is notable that **the greatest concern is about good relations between communities in the border region, with 45% saying they are pessimistic or very pessimistic about this now.** This tallies with the fact that the greatest source of concern for our respondents post-Brexit and post-Protocol is with respect to political stability in Northern Ireland. The next greatest area of pessimism is around access to cross-border health services (39% pessimistic), and then for access to cross-border education or training (34% pessimistic).

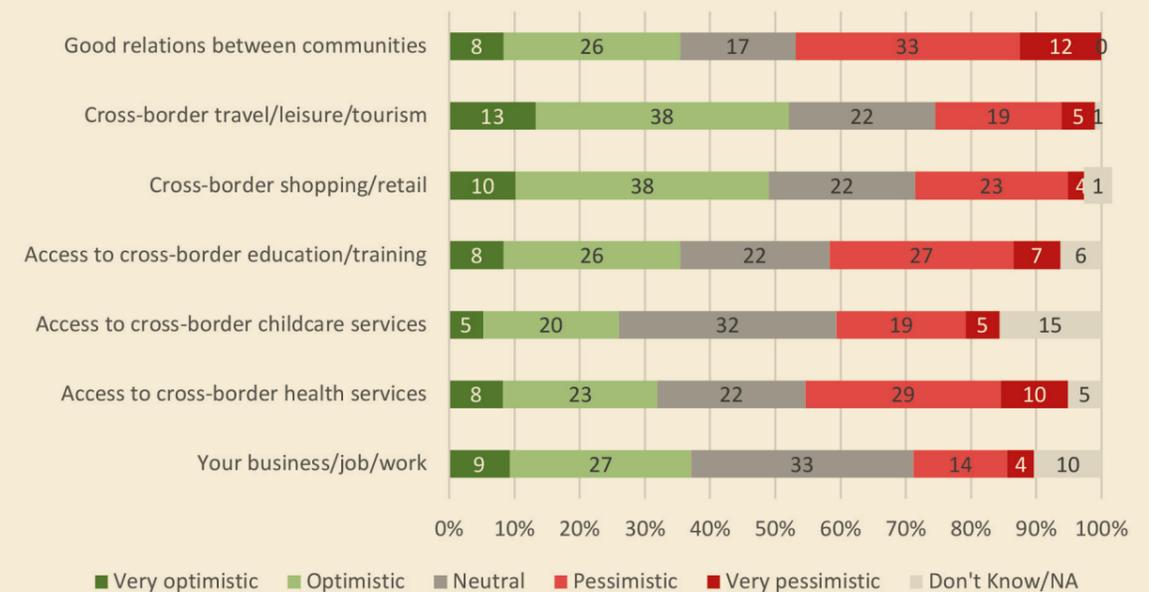


Figure 12. Living in the border region, and specifically in light of the impact of Brexit and the Protocol, how optimistic are you about the future of...?

Issues requiring further discussion

All our past-year surveys have concluded with a question asking respondents whether there were any particular issues relating to the impact of Brexit that they felt are not currently being addressed, yet which they would consider important for the border region. This year was no exception in this regard, and we asked respondents to take the Protocol into consideration too. Only around half of them answered the question and, while no single issue emerged as entirely dominant, the greatest number stated that there were no issues not currently addressed. This contrasts with the overarching response to the question in our 2019 survey when the majority made the

all-encompassing point that ‘everything’ was not being discussed; that there was ‘no honest discussion’; and that ‘issues [were] not [being] taken seriously’.

One positive interpretation of this year’s results could be that they reflect a general perception of the seriousness with which the implementation of Brexit (and/or the Protocol) is now being discussed and approached, and that the existence of such public debate is in itself a healthy sign for democracy. However, given the fractious nature of public and political debate over these issues, as well as the predominantly negative perception of the effects of Brexit (and/or the Protocol) discussed above, we suggest that a more cautious interpretation is warranted. The relatively low number of responses to this question might suggest instead a wariness with how the impact of Brexit and/or the Protocol is being discussed as well as with the negative political and societal effects of the discussion itself.

Among those responding to the question, the optimists who had a positive perception of the Protocol tended to suggest that such positives need talked up, understood and sold better:

R62 ‘The Irish Government and all political parties in the NI Executive need to get out there and start selling the benefits of the NI Protocol and do everything possible to attract FDA into NI and the border region. It is a once in a lifetime opportunity to breathe new life into this part of the island, don’t waste it!’

R148 ‘All the media talk about is the point of view of one section of our community. They have and do not question some of the outlandish views of unionism towards the Protocol. Thus denying people the opportunity to drill down and understand what the Protocol is about and why it is in place’.

By extension, others among this group of respondents suggested that the Protocol and the ‘sea border’ need protected, implemented and kept in place (albeit with the occasional remark on the need to amend or simplify the Protocol):

R213 ‘The Protocol should be protected by all political parties, both north and south’

R137 ‘The negative aspects of the Protocol have to be addressed to encourage the unionists to accept the Trade Agreement they voted for, ie make it easier to trade between Northern Ireland and the UK. This is because this is not a normal trade agreement but a fragile peace agreement that is on the cards’.

Another group of respondents stress both the principal importance of protecting and maintaining cross-border cooperation and integration as the only way forward in addressing the challenges of Brexit and of Covid, as well as of the specific need to resolve the current disruption in cross-border services:

R293 ‘Recent gains on cross border health treatments have been wiped out overnight with Brexit. Even as neighbouring countries, there should still be room for cooperation’

R14 ‘The closure of local rural services, such as banks and schools, is making it harder for people living in border areas to survive!’

Finally, a few respondents have taken the chance to reiterate a recurrent theme and worry, expressed by many through different parts of our research, with the rising of social tensions and divisions, as well as the risk of violence and unfolding unrest resulting from Brexit:

R132 ‘The high risk of the eruption of violence as an outcome to the state of the border’

R239 ‘The political situation in Northern Ireland is the most worrying - people are feeling more marginalised and we are going backwards rather than forwards. Brexit is fuelling the fears of many Protestants in Northern Ireland’.

Conclusion

Messages from the border region

As in previous surveys, we asked our respondents what message they might want to give to 'the powers that be', namely the EU, the UK government, the Irish government, the Northern Ireland Executive, or cross-border development organisations. The overwhelming number of respondents did leave such messages and these were often elaborate and heartfelt. Such responses can be seen as largely reflecting the above emerging mixed picture of optimism and a sense of there being political and economic opportunities to be grasped, yet also of persistent concerns and fear, especially for the future of political stability and peace in Northern Ireland. Inevitably, they also reflect the rather contrasting views with respect to both Brexit and the Protocol that emerge from each of the 'Remain' and 'Leave' positions espoused by different participants.

Many messages called for a united Ireland as a way of addressing the perceived negative socio-economic and political consequences of Brexit. Some urged politicians and the Irish government in particular to plan or arrange for a border poll or, at the very least, to begin a serious and inclusive conversation about this possibility:

R10 'We need to begin laying the groundwork for a referendum on Irish reunification. Irish unity is the only sensible, workable, long term solution to the issues caused by Brexit'

R39 'My message would be to the Irish Government - I think that we should be promoting more all - Ireland co-operation with a view to opening a discussion on a United Ireland. I think that we should be encouraging and positive about this. I also think that the EU and the Irish Government underestimate just how much Brexit could de-stabilise things in N. Ireland again and harden attitudes. I think that it is also underestimated how much damage the Border and border restrictions have had on areas such as Donegal, Monaghan & Cavan'

R148 'Begin a discussion on how a united island would look, outline benefits, address peoples misgivings, discuss the shape of a United Island that can encompass all our traditions and beliefs'

R209 'I would want a Unity poll so that the North can return to the EU'

R221 'Now is the time for constitutional change and build on all the good cross community/border work that has been going on for years'

R260 'Time for change, time for a united Ireland with all identities catered for'

R279 'Let us be part of a united Ireland, clearly UK doesn't want us'.

Interestingly, although not typically, among the above group there are at least a couple of respondents who have declared that their vote at the 2016 Referendum was for leaving the EU. **R6** states: 'To the EU UK Irish Govt and Stormont, stop stalling [...] and get on with Uniting Ireland back in EU'; while on a slightly different but related note **R128** says their desire is: 'For Britain to get out of Ireland'.

Equally, many have urged all involved to find a way to work together, to compromise or to be flexible. In essence, these are often conciliatory messages that plead with political institutions in Northern Ireland and on the island to be guided by their commonalities of interest, over and above political or ideological distinctions:

R3 'Stop with the aggressive language and work together to make NI better'

R47 'To the NI Executive: Ireland is your friend and nearest neighbour. We have a lot to offer each other if we work together for mutual benefit'

R119 'Work together not against each other. Green and orange politics is finished move forward'

R146 'To all of the powers to be: Please work together we are neighbours we need to co-operate with each other'

R205 'Having lived in England for 30+ years I can confirm that they (English residents) have NO INTEREST in NI at all and would dump it in the morning and the sooner some here in the North wake up to that fact the better the Province will be. People are sick of Tory lies and fraud, sicker still that we have Stormont incapable of working together for the benefit of the people that voted them in'.

While the desire to urge all sides to 'make it work' and protect peace above all is most commonly expressed by those stating a 'Remainer' position vis-à-vis Brexit, 'Leavers' too share similar sentiments: **R38** 'No more political grand standing and sound bites get on with the job'. At the same time, in their call to the powers that be, **R79** also emphasises their desire for NI to be treated the same as the rest of the UK: 'Northern Ireland needs to be treated fairly in the same way as the rest of the UK. The peace process needs to be paramount with no civil or political unrest'.

Concentrate on commonalities

A number strongly make the broader point that the very nature of politics in Northern Ireland (and with respect to Brexit) has been disappointing and needs to change. Again, therefore, they urge politicians to work for the better of all, leaving 'orange' and 'green' ideologies behind. Some in this group simply chastise politicians, asking them to 'get a grip', 'get on with it' or 'sort it out':

R19 'To NI Executive - make decisions based on what is best for the Country and your closest neighbour and not based on Green or Orange'

R37 'Message to political parties to stop fuelling nationalistic rhetoric to serve their own purposes'

R62 'My message would be to the NI Executive to wake up and smell the coffee... Brexit and the NI Protocol are here to stay and you need to grasp the opportunities that NI's unique position offers and stop playing the petty orange/green politics of the past...the world has moved on, NI needs to catch up and leave its troubled divided past behind'

R96 'I wish the NI Executive could learn to work better and compromise equally. I wish they would really think about what is actually best for all the people of NI and not just take an opposing view to the 'other' side just because they don't want to be seen to agree. I also wish they would base their policies around actual political theories and principles and not just 'green' and 'orange''

R344 'Time to drive home pluralism in Northern Ireland for future generations. Northern Ireland can become an incredible liminal dominion where Britain & EU can coexist and re-establish commonalities rather than splitting the difference'

R360 'Brexit is done, get working together to make it work especially for NI. It's about the economy and people's lives not some notions of sovereignty. It's not sovereignty that puts bread on tables, it's the functioning economy. Get on with it Boris, Micheal and Edwin'.

A number among 'Leavers' too share the above concerns that religious and political differences be put to one side and common sense and pragmatism prevail so that NI can be made to work better for all:

R84 'Sort this out. People in NI have suffered enough over the years of the troubles - put religious concerns and political differences to one side and think big - what's best for the lives of people in NI - their health, education, financial security, wider economy and environment - UK and NI Gov'

R70 'NI Executive - the Protocol is here to stay, do your best to make the most of it for NI people and businesses and stop obsessing about the "constitutional issues".'

Conversely:

R68 'The EU need to back off and not interfere with the UK affairs and scrap the Protocol and Irish sea border as it's having a negative effect on the Irish and UK economy through trade, health care and livelihoods'

R145 'To all and sundry, the NI Protocol must go now!'

R155 'The Northern Ireland Protocol drives a coach and horses through the Belfast Agreement - destroying the central tenant of consent'

R170 'Remove NI Protocol, place UK and Ireland in one independent trade bubble and move customs to South of ROI with free trade and movement across common travel area of UK and Ireland'

R355 'EU, Ireland and US need to respect Britain and NI's sovereignty and remove the trade border down the Irish Sea.'

Finally, a few have called for peace – whether in the more general societal sense or in terms of the need for investment and funding. This is often in the context of calling upon the powers that be to 'work against divisions', or worrying about the extent to which peace is being undermined and threatened:

R26 'The importance of the peace process and the Good Friday Agreement. Maintaining peace in NI must be a priority as we don't want to go back to the bad old days'

R65 'Invest in PEACE. Address poverty and poor education, this is key to a peaceful community. Focus on individuals and systems that improve lives, e.g. minimum wage, school completion, quality job opportunities'

R86 'Peace is paramount and should not be compromised'

R144 ‘The Protocol is here to stay but can the contentious issues be looked at. Also the peace process is very precious and needs to be protected’

R322 ‘To the British government: Leave our peace alone. England wanted Brexit we in NI did not. It is obvious why the Protocol is required. Honour your word and stop playing games with our future’.

Conclusion

After three previous rounds of research, ‘The Border after Brexit’ project was the first to take place after the UK withdrawal from the EU had come into effect. As such it was a unique opportunity to find out first-hand if and how the expectations, uncertainties, even fears and apprehension, that had been shared with us in previous years have now come to pass for the residents of the Irish Central Border Area.

In listening to the voices of local people on both sides of the border, the complex environment of challenges and opportunities for cross-border cooperation is very clear. This arises from the dynamic and unsettled post-Brexit EU-UK relationship, the continuing UK-EU talks over the Ireland/Northern Ireland Protocol, and the still embryonic form of the current arrangements. It is also, of course, now further complicated and strained by the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

We found that the salience and the impact of Brexit on the border region are widely considered as significant and increasing, and that for a multitude this has been worse than expected. While the most reported experiences of the impact of Brexit were economic, concerns with societal divisions and community relations were of particular prominence in people’s minds. The greatest concerns centre upon political stability in Northern Ireland and on cross-border cooperation. Moreover, uncertainty and lack of clarity continue. Difficulties in finding and accessing a single source of reliable information on practical matters, such as cross-border healthcare entitlements, come into sharp relief in the context of a health pandemic.

Mixed messages or conflicting information circulating in the social media have contributed to the hardening of political views as well as to confusion, while the common difficulties of online communication have damaged the means for dialogue in the border region at a time of growing political pressure. We also found that Covid-19 restrictions have seriously impacted the normal access to services, particularly across the border for people living on both sides.

With all these developments in mind, the people of the Irish Central Border Area feel less optimism about the future compared to last year. Albeit retaining hope for the benefits to come for cross-border travel, leisure and tourism, our respondents are particularly pessimistic about the future of good relations between communities.

Two years after the Protocol was negotiated in order to ‘avoid a hard border on the island of Ireland’ and to protect the 1998 Agreement ‘in all its dimensions’, the future of relations across the island, within Northern Ireland and between Britain and Ireland feels very much tied to the still-unsettled UK-EU relationship.

Appendix One: Survey questions

Section A: Introductory questions

1. **Area of residence ***
 Armagh City Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council
 Cavan County Council
 Donegal County Council
 Fermanagh and Omagh District Council
 Leitrim County Council
 Mid Ulster District Council
 Monaghan County Council
 Sligo County Council
 Other (But work in one of the above areas)
2. **Please tell us what age group you are in ***
 Under 18
 18-30
 31-45
 46-65
 66+
3. **Gender ***
 Female
 Male
 Prefer not to say
4. **Citizenship ***
 British
 Irish
 Both British and Irish
5. **How did you vote in the referendum on the UK's membership of the EU in June 2016?***
 Other dual citizenship
 Other EU
 Other international
 Prefer not to say
 Leave
 Remain
 Abstained
 Did not have a vote
 Prefer not to say

Section B: Brexit importance and impact

The EU-UK Withdrawal Agreement of 2019 set a transition period for the UK until December 31st, 2020. During this time, the UK was preparing to fully exit the EU, remaining temporarily in both the EU single market and customs union. The transition period has now ended and Brexit has come into effect. The UK (including NI) is no longer a member of the EU and the new EU-UK relationship is governed by the terms of their Trade and Cooperation Agreement, concluded in December 2020. Here we ask a few questions about the importance and impact of Brexit on your life so far.

6. **How important is the subject of Brexit now for you? Please use the scale from 1 to 10, where 1 = Not important at all and 10 = Very important?**
7. **Has this importance increased or decreased since this time last year?**
 Increased
 No change
 Decreased
 Don't know
- 7a. **If the importance of the subject of Brexit for you has changed since this time last year, please tell us briefly why or what has changed for you?**
8. **Since the Brexit transition period ended in December 2020, what impact on your life (if any) have you felt from Brexit? (please give up to three examples)**
9. **Would you say that any impact of Brexit on your life since the end of the transition period has been:**
 Very significant
 Significant
 Neither significant nor insignificant
 Insignificant
 Very insignificant
 Don't know
 There has been no impact.
10. **Given that Brexit has happened, has it been better or worse than you anticipated?**
 Much better
 Better
 Neither better nor worse
 Worse
 Much worse
 Don't know

Section C: The Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland

A few questions about The Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland now. The Protocol was jointly agreed by the UK and the EU to “address the unique circumstances on the island of Ireland, to maintain the necessary conditions for continued North-South cooperation, to avoid a hard border and to protect the 1998 Agreement in all its dimensions” (Article 2).

11. Are you aware of/have you heard of the Protocol before?

Yes, and I know a lot about it
 Yes, and I know a little about it
 Yes, but I know nothing about it
 No, I have never heard of it
 Prefer not to say

North-South cooperation
 Political stability in Northern Ireland
 The economy of Northern Ireland
 Northern Ireland’s place in the UK internal market
 Northern Ireland’s constitutional position in the UK
 Decreased choice/increased price of consumer goods

12. Based on your present experience of Brexit and the Protocol, how concerned are you about the following? (Scale: Very unconcerned; Unconcerned; Neutral - Neither concerned or unconcerned; Concerned; Very concerned; Don’t know; Not applicable)

UK-EU relations
 British-Irish relations

13. Living in the border region, and specifically in light of the impact of Brexit and the Protocol, how

The economy of the Republic of Ireland
 Ability to work across the border
 Ability to access services across the border
 Inadvertent mobile roaming charges

optimistic are you about the future of...? (Scale: Very optimistic; Optimistic; Neither-nor; Not optimistic; Very unoptimistic; Don’t know; Not applicable)

Your business/ Job/ Work as self-employed
 Access to cross-border health services
 Access to cross-border child-care services
 Access to cross-border education/training services
 Cross-border Shopping / Retail
 Cross-border Travel / Leisure
 Good relations between communities

14. Would you say that, on balance, you are more or less optimistic about the future post-Brexit than you were last year? (Scale: More, About the same, Less, Don’t know)

15. 15a. What particularly POSITIVE impacts or opportunities do you believe that BREXIT has given, or may give rise to?

- 15b. What particularly **POSITIVE** impacts or opportunities do you believe that the **PROTOCOL** has given, or may give rise to?
16. Do you have any concerns that there still may be a hard Irish land border in the future?
(Yes, No, Don't know)

Section D: Cross-border cooperation

17. Cross-border co-operation is being challenged by issues such as Brexit, the pandemic, and climate change. How important is cross-border co-operation in managing issues such as these? [Scale: very important through to very unimportant]
18. Business development
19. Developing cross-border projects between local Councils
20. Relations between the NI Executive and Irish Government
21. Community Relations in the border region
22. To what extent have Covid restrictions impacted on your normal access to services on the other side of the border? (Scale from 1 to 5 where 1= Not at all and 5 = Have impacted on access profoundly)
23. Please add below any comments you may have on the impact of Covid-restrictions on your normal access to services across the border.

Section: Final

24. If you had to give a message to the powers that be (e.g. the EU, the UK government, the Irish government, the Northern Ireland Executive or cross-border development organisations), what would that message be and who would it be for?
25. Finally, are there any particular issues relating to the impact of Brexit and / or the Protocol that you feel are not currently being addressed and which you would consider important for your area?

Appendix Two: Focus group and Interview questions

Healthcare

- ▶ What has changed in effect, if anything in your access to any aspect of cross-border healthcare? (Probe for if the loss of the Cross-border Health Directive had any direct impact on people and if so, please give examples?)
- ▶ Difficulties experienced with supply of drugs/medications? Probe for expectations regarding supply in the future.
- ▶ Have you experienced/observed any actual changes in access to cross-border healthcare?
- ▶ Have you found ways of coping/alternatives? Probe for expectations.
- ▶ Have you been directly informed or otherwise made aware of how your access to cross-border healthcare may change (is changing)? Probe for where do people normally get informed of this from?
- ▶ Discuss examples of how Covid-related restrictions may have hidden/masked or openly compounded individual access to cross-border healthcare.

Education

- ▶ What has the past year (since the end of the transition period) changed with respect to the different aspects of your institutional relationship with students, e.g. probe separately for:
 - ▷ Recruitment (effects on students' ability/willingness to apply)
 - ▷ Enrollment (overall change in numbers?; changes in numbers of UK/ non-Irish EU students?)
 - ▷ Funding/fees
 - ▷ Administration (navigating your way through any new/complex requirements)
 - ▷ Teaching/Assessment

- ▶ To what extent are any of the above the result of Brexit (end of transition) and which aspects are affected more by Covid?
- ▶ Is any of the above specific to you being situated in the border region?
- ▶ What issues/ difficulties are you anticipating in the future?
- ▶ What impacts, if any, have you already observed/experienced and how have these differed to expectations, if at all, in:
 - ▷ Access to formal education.../probe for effects of Covid
 - ▷ Access to other training.../probe for effects of Covid
- ▶ Has the choice of where to study/train changed? How? Are there realistic alternatives and what are those?
- ▶ Have the conditions of education/training changed? Probe for
 - ▷ Any changes to do with availability/level of funding, travel, (future) recognition of qualifications, others?
- ▶ Any observations on the above from the perspective of delivery of education/training, rather than receiving?
- ▶ Discuss examples of how Covid-related restrictions may have hidden/masked or openly compounded individual access to cross-border healthcare.
- ▶ Again, where do people get their information from?

Other Services

- ▶ What effects (if any) have you already observed on either the availability, or accessibility and delivery of any other services? Probe for:
 - ▷ In your experience, what (kind of) service availability/accessibility/delivery has been impacted the most (probe for delays, price changes, supply chain effects, etc)?
 - ▷ Are there services you can no longer access at all and why? Difference between Brexit-related and Covid-related effects?
- ▶ What coping strategies/alternatives? Perhaps there are things that you can do/ access now but were not able to before...?
- ▶ Are there parts of the border region where any of the above might be more keenly felt or differently affected?

Cross-Border Workers

- ▶ What are the type of changes that you have already experienced or observed with respect to cross-border work? Examples? Probe for/clarify:
 - ▷ Are you a cross-border worker yourself or is this an observation on family, friends, colleagues/ stemming from your professional position?
 - ▷ Has anybody's status as a cross-border worker changed e.g. have people left jobs or have had to leave/lost jobs?
 - ▷ Are these changes around rights and admin/legal/immigration rules?
 - ▷ And/or perhaps indirect effects from other issues, such as: economic; (general effects on the economy but also uncertainty around changes to taxes/other charges, social security benefits, sick leave, insurance, and other entitlements); travel; safety considerations?
 - ▷ Issues with acquiring Frontier Worker Permits (for those living south of the border) – what effects of that?
 - ▷ Any issues already experienced around recognition of qualifications?
 - ▷ Observations around where in the border regions problems in any of the above are most keenly felt.
- ▶ Awareness of the forthcoming changes – where do you get information on that from?
- ▶ Examples of how Covid-related restrictions may have hidden/masked or openly compounded individual cross-border work situations
- ▶ What alternatives/coping strategies/remedial measures have you been able to take (or observe in others)?
- ▶ What expectations of change for the future/plans?

Businesses in rural community and border region

- ▶ What changes already for rural communities and are effects on rural communities different than those for others?
- ▶ What (and how) has changed in practice for businesses in the border region since the beginning of this year?
- ▶ How have they been experiencing the impact of the Protocol and how is this compared to expectations?
 - ▷ Positives
 - ▷ Negatives
- ▶ What coping strategies?
- ▶ What expectations of the future for their businesses?
- ▶ Concerns about a hard land border in the future?

EU Citizens

- ▶ What has Brexit changed in effect for non-Irish EU citizens living on either side of the border?
 - ▷ Are there issues specific to access to health, education, work or other services where EU citizens are differently affected?
 - ▷ What coping strategies/alternatives? Perhaps there are things that you can do/ access now but were not able to before...?
- ▶ What expectations of change in the future?
- ▶ Where do people get information from?

Community Relations

- ▶ Community Relations: are changes (tensions or otherwise) felt in any way? Can you give examples?
 - ▷ Probe for: are such changes perhaps related to Covid restrictions as well and how do you think?
- ▶ Are such changes different to previous expectations and why do you think? (probe for difference between Brexit and the Protocol)
- ▶ What are the expectations for the future?

THE BORDER AFTER BREXIT:

Experiences of Local
Communities in the Central
Border Region of Ireland
/ Northern Ireland

The eight Member Councils areas of the Central Border Region include Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon; Fermanagh and Omagh; Mid Ulster and the counties of Cavan, Donegal, Leitrim, Monaghan and Sligo.

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**UK IN A
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