

BORDERING ON BREXIT:

Views from Local Communities in the Central Border Region of Ireland / Northern Ireland

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



An initiative of the Irish Central Border Area Network, working with Queen's University Belfast

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Views from Local Communities
in the Central Border Region of Ireland / Northern Ireland

A report prepared for the Irish Central Border Area Network.

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Although the scope of a report of this nature prevents us from doing justice to all the views gathered in this research exercise, we trust that we have shown respect to them in our presentation of this material. We hope that this is but the beginning of ongoing conversations and information-sharing on this important subject.

Overview

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. The Region had a population of approximately 850,000 in 2011. This is a predominantly rural area, characterised by a dispersed population and distance from major urban centres. Approximately one third of the population live in settlements over 1,500 population; and two thirds in smaller settlements and open countryside. The Region accounts for 20% of the land area of the island of Ireland, with a high quality landscape of coastline, lakes, inland waterways and hills.

After generations of severe social, political, and economic challenges in the Central Border Region, not to mention the experience of violent conflict, the 21st century has begun to prove the viability and value of cross-border cooperation. Unremarkably and uncontroversially, cross-border connections have become a means of overcoming the dual challenges of underdevelopment and geographical peripherality. Economies of scale, small-step exports, social enterprise, cross-community projects, tourism initiatives, even bargain hunting — in the past fifteen years, habits of cross-border movement have been developing that have brought evident and practical gain. The European Union helped to create an environment that made such contacts easier; indeed, it did a great deal to encourage it, as per the logic of the Single Market, legislative harmonisation and the European Regional Development Fund. Political parties of all hues have come to encourage local communities and businesses in the Border Region to make the most of such opportunities.

The UK's withdrawal from the EU will constitute a major change to the context for such relationships across the border. As such, the Central Border Region is the area most exposed to the risks of Brexit, for the impact of any divergence between the UK and Ireland will be felt most acutely at the Irish border. Although the nature and extent of any changes are as yet unknown, the very prospect of them is already having an impact in the Central Border Region. The purpose of this small-scale research project was to give a voice to members of local communities on both sides of the border in this Region, to better understand the potential and actual impact of Brexit even at this early stage.

Responding to Brexit

The research for this report was conducted in the summer of 2017, some four months after the triggering of Article 50 by Prime Minister May and after just one round of the Brexit negotiations. Although the Irish border had already been identified by the EU and UK as one of the top three issues for negotiation (along with citizens' rights and financial liabilities), the position papers from the UK government and the European Commission on Ireland/Northern Ireland had not yet been published at the time of this research. Whilst the political parties in Ireland and Northern Ireland had set out their positions on Brexit (with strong policy differences evident between Unionism and Nationalism on the issue), there was as yet no development of a common approach to Brexit in Northern Ireland beyond the OFMDFM letter to Theresa May in August 2016.

This report thus constitutes a snapshot of the perception and anticipation of Brexit from the Border Region one year on from the June 2016 referendum but before much progress had been made in the negotiations. The focus on the movement of people and goods in the survey responses reflects the main issues raised in media coverage of Brexit. The possible fallout from Brexit for the peace process was also frequently mentioned. Other practical concerns were raised by individual participants, including diverging environmental standards, specialised healthcare provision, shrinking recruitment pools, the loss

of EU funding (including CAP), tourism decline and tariff barriers. Just as our research reflects the complex links across the border that make up everyday life and practice in the Region, we found that anticipation of the possible impact of Brexit on any aspect of cross-border movement has ramifications for several others. These local-level concerns contrast with the high-level picture of trade opportunities and Treasury savings presented by Leave supporters. We give space to both in this report.

The study

The online survey and focus groups were used in this research to better understand the nature of cross-border movement in the Central Border Region now alongside the anticipated effects of Brexit from the perspective of local communities. It is not intended to be a comprehensive report on the potential impact of Brexit across a range of sectors but rather an opportunity to record the views of local communities who are 'bordering on Brexit' in a very literal way, from both sides of the border.

The survey received over 300 responses [n=305] from across the eight local authority regions of the Irish Central Border Area Network (Armagh City Banbridge and Craigavon; Cavan; Donegal; Fermanagh and Omagh; Leitrim; Mid Ulster; Monaghan; and Sligo). Most of our respondents are in full-time work and aged 31-64. They come from both sides of the border and constitute balanced representation from the 8 local authority areas of ICBAN. There was an under-representation in our sample of those with British citizenship and those who voted Leave in the 2016 Referendum. Approximately 60% of our respondents had a vote in the June 2016 referendum. Of those who exercised this right, 1 in 6 voted for the UK to Leave the EU, which is not representative of the actual result of the referendum in the relevant Northern Ireland constituencies. This disparity may be because those most motivated to respond to a survey on Brexit were likely to be Remain voters and concerned to express their views. That said, from our focus groups it was clear that pro-European and Remain voters are just as keen as Leave voters to find ways of ensuring the best possible outcome, and avoiding unnecessary disruption or risk, in the process of Brexit for their local communities and the Border Region.

Key Findings

This project contains eight core findings regarding the views of local communities in the Central Border Region towards Brexit that should be highlighted at this critical time:

1. The Central Border Region is most exposed to the impact of Brexit

- 1.a. The Border Region has experienced the most long-lasting economic and social consequences of partition and violent conflict, exacerbated by the 'back-to-back' development of Northern Ireland and Ireland. Respondents describe the Region as 'marginalised', 'deprived', 'isolated' and 'on the periphery'.
- 1.b. Through the creation of economies of scale, productive networks, resource-sharing and joint initiatives, cross-border cooperation has been one means of addressing the particular needs of the Central Border Region. Respondents identify cross-border cooperation as a sign of the changing fortunes of the Region.
- 1.c. Any change to the status of the border or ability to easily cross the border will have the most direct impact on residents in the Border Region, on both sides of the border. This in a Region where development and cooperation is greatly needed.
- 1.d. One respondent noted: *'Cooperation is based partly on goodwill and ease of access to one another's jurisdiction and both these qualities could be seriously diminished by a hard Brexit.'* (#251, M, Fermanagh and Omagh)

2. The legacy of conflict

- 2.a. The legacy of violent conflict is apparent in the fears that people have about the impact of Brexit on the border. For many respondents, the very term 'border control' is one that conjures images of a securitised border and recalls deeply negative experiences and community tensions.

- 2.b. The emotional and psychological (as well as social and political) significance of the border should not be underestimated. As one respondent put it, ‘hardening the border is like opening a wound’.
- 2.c. Physical or material manifestations of border control would not only be targets for paramilitary activity but would stand as a symbol of regression in cross-border and British-Irish relations.
- 2.d. Above EU membership, most respondents credit the 1998 Good Friday (Belfast) Agreement with fundamentally changing their experience of crossing the border and facilitating cross-border cooperation.

3. The effects of Brexit are already being felt in the Central Border Region

- 3.a. Brexit is already having an effect in respondents’ comfort in living on one side of the border and working on the other, in their confidence in doing business on the other side of the border, and in their view of the UK as a welcoming place for residence/work/study for Irish citizens.
- 3.b. Respondents suggest that the different high-level political responses to Brexit – Unionist and Nationalist, British and Irish – are beginning to have a ‘polarising’ effect at a community level in the Border Region.
- 3.c. Frontier workers and some businesses are already feeling the effects of Brexit, particularly in the exchange rate. Some respondents have already decided to move to the other side of the border in anticipation of future difficulties in cross-border work.
- 3.d. Remain voters and those in the southern border counties view Brexit as risking the ‘reimposition’ of a hard border as a consequence of British government policy. In contrast, Leave voters are more likely to see imposition in the form of EU ‘red tape’; they see Brexit as an expression of democratic freedom and Parliamentary sovereignty.

4. Leave and Remain voters differ in their anticipation of a hard border

- 4.a. The vast majority of respondents (94%) expect to be personally affected to a considerable degree by Brexit. 73% of respondents believe that Brexit will affect their local community ‘to a great extent’.
- 4.b. The predominant hope (whether they be Leave or Remain voters) among respondents regarding the post-Brexit border is that there would be minimal disruption and change to the border as it is currently experienced.
- 4.c. There is no significant difference between respondents in different jurisdictions (Northern Ireland or Republic of Ireland) as to the emphasis they place on the border in the anticipated impact of Brexit.
- 4.d. There are sharp differences in views about the significance of Brexit for the border. Leave voters are less likely to fear a hard border – not because they don’t cross it or see the economic value of an open border – because they are less likely to believe that negotiations will result in such an outcome (largely due to the position of the Irish government).

5. There seems to be a paradox in the contemporary Irish border: crossing the border is both unremarkable and extraordinary. In some ways it is non-existent, completely irrelevant; however, in other ways it is ever-present and at the centre of politics, economics and peace

- 5.a. The most significant aspects of EU membership for our respondents are, by far, EU citizenship rights and EU funding. Beyond this, the majority of respondents credit EU membership with direct, tangible benefits; many of these could be compromised through Brexit (e.g. workers’ rights, environmental protection).
- 5.b. Cross-border workers are especially conscious of the importance of EU membership for them and feel particularly anxious about the potential impact of Brexit on them.

- 5.c. Cross-border connections have been carefully fostered; they are still far from secure and concrete. The informal, relational links formed as an indirect consequence of EU projects or joint initiatives are those most easily broken but most vital to ‘normalisation’ and trust-building.
- 5.d. Many respondents expressed the view that they would avoid crossing the border, or do so less, should there be any difficulty or obstacles in the future. This relates in part to the evocation of the ‘border of the past’ when it comes to anticipating any border controls or restrictions.

6. The overwhelming sense is one of uncertainty; this is not a good thing in a Border Region with a legacy of conflict and under-development

- 6.a. Accurate information on Brexit is particularly vital for residents of the Border Region – not just because they will be so directly affected by any significant change and will need to prepare for it, but also because these residents are so particularly aware of the negative effects of a ‘hard’ border.
- 6.b. There is a conundrum faced by local representatives, in wanting residents to prepare for Brexit but in not wanting to risk (a) growing north/south polarisation or (b) unnecessary anxiety or disruption.
- 6.c. Brexit has evoked strong emotions among people who would otherwise describe themselves as having little interest in politics. Respondents describe feelings of anger, annoyance, resentment, fear, anxiety, confusion, helplessness, and devastation.

7. Brexit is exacerbating the sense of marginalisation and invisibility felt by residents in the Central Border Region, in both jurisdictions

- 7.a. Respondents who anticipated negative impacts from Brexit tended to show much less confidence in the current democratic system and in the capacity for the representation of the views of the Border Region.

- 7.b. This is also true of voters in Northern Ireland (both Unionist and Nationalist) who expressed concerns about the lack of representation in the absence of a sitting Assembly/Executive and concerns about the representation of Northern Ireland in Westminster (especially if Direct Rule was reintroduced).
- 7.c. The survey reveals acute anxiety among some respondents in the southern border counties, especially those who work or trade on the other side of the border. The fact that they did not have a vote in the referendum and yet are deeply affected by its outcome exacerbates their concerns.
- 7.d. The sense of having no voice further deepens concerns and has a destabilising effect. Communities in the Border Region are wary of future arrangements being ‘imposed’ on them with no local input nor accommodation of local needs.

8. There is a risk of return to back-to-back development

- 8.a. Opportunities expressed for the Border Region/Northern Ireland from Brexit tend to be framed as being at a cost to the other, i.e. NI/UK benefiting at the expense of the Republic or the southern border counties seeing opportunities arising from difficulties in NI/UK.
- 8.b. There is a profound risk of a re-emergence of ‘back-to-back development’ even in anticipation of Brexit. This may come at a micro-level in the form of people deciding to avoid crossing the border. It may also come in the private sector, as economic opportunities come in competition with those on the other side of the border. Or it may come as a result of reduced funding for cross-border initiatives (e.g. in the absence of Interreg funding from the European Regional Development Fund).
- 8.c. It is critical that cross-border bodies and forums receive investment rather than divestment at this time, not least to help prepare for a smooth transition to post-Brexit cross-border relationships and to minimise the risk of a sharp decline in market integration.

- 8.d. Without careful protection of its common interests, the Border Region is at risk of being simultaneously the Region most deeply affected by Brexit and least closely protected by measures put in place by London, Dublin or Brussels to mitigate its effects.

Looking Ahead

As the border looks set to take on even more material, legal and economic significance come March 2019, it is important that the views and needs of the Central Border Region are taken into account. We would hope that these views might yet inform decision-making on the nature of the UK's Withdrawal Agreement and future UK-EU relationship, as well as policy-making for the future of the Region. We also hope that it will inform the representation of peoples in this Region beyond party political, local or sectoral priorities and enable better preparation for Brexit among communities in the Region as a whole.

Just as political leadership in both governments have emphasised that they wish to avoid any return to a hard border on the island of Ireland, so too is it imperative that the benefits of cross-border cooperation in the Central Border Region are preserved and protected during and after the UK's withdrawal from the EU. Amid current uncertainties and political differences, there remains a widely-held commitment across local communities and groups around the Region to continue working together to preserve the gains already achieved and to realise potential benefits for future generations.

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