

Northern Ireland Affairs Committee
Inquiry: The land border between Northern Ireland and Ireland

Written evidence submitted

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on behalf of the Irish Central Border Area Network (ICBAN)

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Background note on the Irish Central Border Area Network ICBAN

ICBAN is a local authority-led cross-border development organisation. The ICBAN partnership covers a significant area of the North West quadrant of the island of Ireland and has eight local authority members – three in Northern Ireland (Armagh City Banbridge and Craigavon, Fermanagh and Omagh, and Mid Ulster) and five in the Republic of Ireland (Cavan, Donegal, Leitrim, Monaghan and Sligo) - in the area known as the Central Border Region. The ICBAN Management Board comprises Elected Representatives from the member Councils. ICBAN works in promoting cross-border co-operation between the local authorities and communities of the Region.

Submission

1. The Central Border Region of Ireland/Northern Ireland

- 1.1. After generations of severe social, political, and economic challenges, not to mention the experience of violent conflict, the viability and value of cross-border cooperation is now quite evident in the Central Border Region.
- 1.2. Cross-border connections have become a means of overcoming the dual challenges in the Region of underdevelopment and geographical peripherality. Economies of scale, small-step exports, social enterprise, cross-community projects, tourism initiatives are habits of cross-border movement that have brought evident and practical gain.
- 1.3. Political parties of all hues have come to encourage local communities and businesses in the Central Border Region to make the most of such opportunities.
- 1.4. The areas immediately proximate to the border are still socially and economically vulnerable and would be significantly impacted by any hard border.

2. The impact of EU membership on the Central Border Region

- 2.1. 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.
- 2.2. In particular, the EU measures for territorial cohesion have made a direct and major contribution towards meeting the needs of the Central Border Region, i.e. in seeking to reduce disparities between regions and arrest the backwardness of peripheral regions and regions which suffer from severe demographic handicaps, as this Region has (e.g. low population density).
- 2.3. After the conflict in the area, these co-operation measures, along with the benefits of the Single Market, helped develop and build trust between the people of both parts of the island, as well as local Councils on the border. EU supports have enabled the strategic upscaling of piecemeal cross-border activities to a level that would offer the potential for wider regional development.
- 2.4. 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.

3. Views on the UK's withdrawal from the EU from local communities in the Central Border Region

- 3.1. Dr Katy Hayward of the Centre for International Borders Research at Queen's University, Belfast has prepared a report for ICBAN entitled: *'Bordering on Brexit – Views from Local Communities in the Central Border Region of Ireland/Northern Ireland'* (forthcoming, 2017).
- 3.2. The initiative has provided an opportunity for residents from both sides of the border region to have their opinions recorded. This includes those who are resident within Northern Ireland but it also provides a unique opportunity for those who live in Counties Cavan, Donegal, Leitrim, Monaghan and Sligo in the Republic of Ireland to have their voices heard also.
- 3.3. The research in this study was constituted of an online survey which 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.
- 3.4. The survey asked for detailed comments in answer to 20 substantive questions on the experience of the border and anticipation of the UK's withdrawal from the EU.
- 3.5. This qualitative data was supplemented by three focus groups in Monaghan and Enniskillen.
- 3.6. In sum, the findings from this research show that, although the nature and extent of any changes to the Irish border as a result of the UK's withdrawal from the EU are as yet unknown, the very prospect of them is already having an impact in the Central Border Region.
- 3.7. This project contains eight key findings drawing upon the views expressed by local communities towards Brexit; these are summarised here for the Committee.

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

- 4.1. 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'.
- 4.2. 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.
- 4.3. 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.
- 4.4. 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.'

5. The legacy of conflict is evident in the fears that people have about the potential impact of Brexit on the border

- 5.1. 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.
- 5.2. 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'.

- 5.3. 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.
- 5.4. 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.

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

- 6.1. 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.
- 6.2. 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.
- 6.3. 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.
- 6.4. 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.

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

- 7.1. 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'.
- 7.2. 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.
- 7.3. 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.
- 7.4. 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).

8. 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.

- 8.1. 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).
- 8.2. 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.
- 8.3. 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.

8.4. 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.

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

9.1. 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.

9.2. 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.

9.3. 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.

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

10.1. 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.

10.2. 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).

10.3. 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.

10.4. 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.

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

11.1. 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.

11.2. 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).

- 11.3.** 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.
- 11.4.** 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.
- 11.5.** Respondents also expressed views with regard to representation and the current impasse in restoring the NI Assembly. Given the Inquiry's interest in this matter we note some of the commentary made on this subject from the report.

12. Representation of the Border Region

- 12.1.** The recent experience of a very hard Irish border has created a profound awareness in the Border Region of the damage that can be caused by circumstances that affect the symbolic and practical manifestation of the border.
- 12.2.** As such, representation was a theme or ideal that many respondents viewed as being appropriate for the nature of these challenges, wishing to see a future situation in which 'decisions are devolved down to a local level'.
- 12.3.** Meeting the particular needs of the Central Border Region, then, is seen as a challenge that requires proper representation. This would need to be acknowledged and steered from local political forums as well as at higher levels.

13. The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement and peace process

- 13.1.** Most respondents credit – not the Single Market or EU membership – the Good Friday (Belfast) Agreement with fundamentally changing people's experience of crossing the border. E.g. 'I travel more now. It's much easier to cross now than when I was growing up. The GFA changed all that immensely.'
- 13.2.** One focus group participant elaborated on the importance of the peace process for border crossing: 'I wouldn't be living here if it wasn't for the GFA. I moved in 2000 to the border area. I am back and forth [across the border] every day and the idea of a border in the north is just terrifying. If I'm queuing and don't know how long for, it's going to be almost impossible to run my business from Enniskillen. I would close my business if there was a hard border.' (2.6.52)
- 13.3.** Respondents make close connections between the 1998 Agreement and the ease of moving and working across the border now – and express anxiety at potential disruption to this.
- 13.4.** A number of respondents talk about the 'them and us' attitude that contributes to the conflict and that was worsened by the existence of a hard border. A focus group participant goes further: 'The 'them and us' complex could be very quickly re-established if there is difficulty and restrictions on movement. That movement starts with social and extends into business. This forum [ICBAN] and other cross-border forums have broken down barriers and personal relationships have established as a result of this.' (3.27.12).
- 13.5.** A number of respondents connected the expectation of restrictions on cross-border movement with resonances of conflict. One described an impact of Brexit on them personally as being a 'sense of fear and intimidation' (#43, F, Leitrim).

14. Fears of discrimination

- 14.1.** Most often mentioned in the responses concerning the prospect of a hard(er) border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland is the expectation that this border would lead to delays and that crossing the border would generally become more difficult.

- 14.2.** More broadly, there is an anticipation that there will be change in the treatment of – and discrimination between – different types of citizens. There were many mentions of fears about diverging experiences of Irish citizens on either side of the border.
- 14.3.** There were also concerns raised about the position of non-British and non-Irish citizens in the Border Region. Some viewed controls on migration as causing problems for the sustainability of some businesses (particularly in the hospitality sector) in the Region. This is a concern to both sides of the border:
- 14.4.** Another broader concern relates to the question of potential effects on immigration and migrant communities in Northern Ireland. Some specifically named the risk of increased ‘race hatred’ and ‘racist profiling’ (1.30.05), noting it has particular connotations and difficulties in a place that has experienced ethnonational conflict of this type.
- 14.5.** One other pertinent point in relation to migration: a number of respondents comment that the Brexit vote has made them think differently about their plans for moving across the UK/Ireland border in future:

15. Impact on business

- 15.1.** Respondents comment frequently on the potential problems for cross-border trade and business, and the fact that some in the Region would have to make different choices about where they will live and work as a result of a harder border. Among business-related priorities, the themes of tourism and environmental protections are mentioned most frequently.
- 15.2.** A particular Brexit-related concern for business relates to the issue of smuggling that comes up in several comments in response to the survey question about the impact of Brexit. Experience already shows that smuggling causes particular harm to the legal economy in the Border Region. A more significant economic border will mean greater incentives for smuggling. As well as causing a difficulty for policing, at one level this also places some legitimate businesses in the area at a competitive disadvantage.

16. Summary comments

- 16.1.** This submission notes the views of residents on both sides of the border in the Irish Central Border Region as those most exposed to the changes that may come as a result of the UK’s withdrawal from the EU.
- 16.2.** It is clear that the anticipation of change, combined with uncertainty as to the future, means that Brexit is already having an impact on people on both sides of the border.
- 16.3.** Even more than EU membership, the way that the border is experienced today is seen primarily as an achievement of the peace process. It is thus extremely important that, throughout the Brexit process, the EU and UK government continue to maintain their shared principles of upholding the 1998 Agreement, protecting the peace process and avoiding a hard border.
- 16.4.** In seeking to realise these principles in their negotiations, they hold immense and direct responsibility for the future prospects of the Border Region as a place of stability, growth and peace.
- 16.5.** We welcome the opportunity to make this submission to the Committee’s Inquiry. The full report ‘*Bordering on Brexit*’ referenced here will be published in the next few weeks and can be provided on request or accessed from www.icban.com.