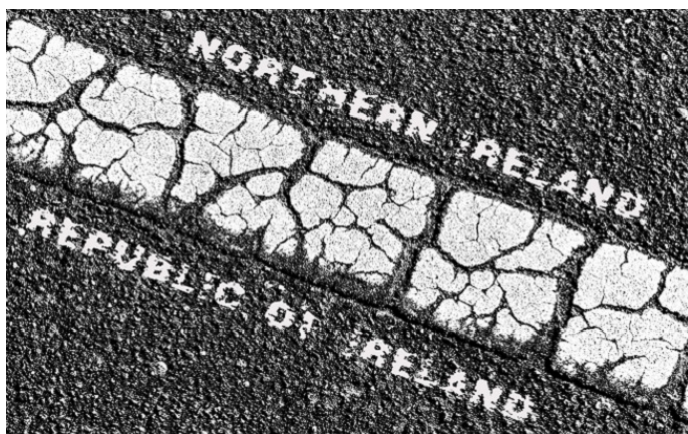


Research for REGI Committee – Impact of Brexit on the Development of Irish Regions and their Cross-Border Cooperation



This report explores the impact of Brexit on the development of Irish regions and their cross-border cooperation. The research presented includes a review of the literature and policy analysis, plus evidence from semi-structured interviews and focus groups conducted specifically for this report.

The report first provides an overview of regional development in the Republic of Ireland (heretofore referred to as Ireland) and cross-border cooperation with partners in the United Kingdom, most notably Northern Ireland. This includes cooperation supported under the INTERREG and Peace programmes.

Regional development policies and North-South political, legal and institutional ties, common approaches and mutually-beneficial collaborative frameworks have emerged and been consolidated over the past two decades against the backdrop of EU membership and with EU support - both tacit and explicit. EU cohesion funding has been, and remains, vital for the social, cultural and economic development of the island of Ireland. Membership of the EU has been critical to achieving regulatory and policy alignment across a range of sectors. Local authorities have been among the foremost actors in driving cross-border collaboration. Such collaboration has improved efficiencies, enhanced services and engendered modes of collaborative governance that have fostered peace and prosperity across the island. At local government level, a number of models have been developed to enable and strengthen collaborative practice; with bi-lateral agreements such

The present document is the executive summary of the study on “Impact of Brexit on the Development of Irish Regions and their Cross-Border Cooperation”. The full study, which is available in English can be downloaded at: <https://bit.ly/41VTNji>

as Memorandum of Understanding and Partnership arrangements proving most effective on the island of Ireland. This is particularly the case for cross-border collaborations.

Official and informal cross-border bodies and networks have been crucial to supporting all-island regional development. Over the past two decades, outside of the 'formal delivery bodies', different structures and players have become involved in inter-regional and cross-border cooperation; the exact arrangements being determined by local circumstances and/or the sectoral need.

These regional initiatives are essential in supporting decision-makers and communities alike in ensuring a continued policy and regulatory alignment on transboundary issues. Inter-agency collaboration can yield dividends in respect of building trust and positive inter-community revelations, enhancing infrastructure, improving services and delivering more integrated planning.

Both the EU and the UK have recognised the importance of the cross-border dimensions of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement and the challenges posed to cross-border cooperation by Brexit. More generally, the Irish government was very quick to consider the impact of Brexit through its regional development strategies. There are concerns around the impact of Brexit vis-a-vis certain EU funding programmes that have not been renewed under the new programming period, but also optimism around opportunities in higher education, trade and supply chains, etc. It is clear from various research and analysis conducted on the impact of Brexit that an extensive range of sectors, issues and themes involving local government across both jurisdictions will continue to be impacted by Brexit.

Six years after the referendum result, notwithstanding recent progress made with the Windsor Framework on the Protocol, there remains a lot of uncertainty around Brexit. This does leave some sectors in limbo where a lag in planning was stretched as EU-UK negotiations continued. While Brexit has yet to play out in full, impacts are already being felt across a range of sectors. It has also, rather quickly, become obvious that the ramifications of Brexit are complex and cross-cutting. The immediate impact of Brexit has not been the tremendous disruption expected. In part, this can be attributed to the strength of regional and cross-border partnerships and collaborations that have been built up in the last two decades or more. In the absence of a final resolution, the Irish Government, together with local and regional authorities, the business community and civic society have been proactive in taking an all-island and cross-border approach to redressing what issues they can as they arise.

Ongoing issues and concerns on a cross-sectoral basis concern regulatory alignment/divergence, policy alignment/divergence, citizen and non-citizen rights, travel and labour rights, recognition of skills and qualifications, data-sharing and GDPR, access to research funding, and monitoring and enforcement issues. Cross-border cooperation on the island is no longer primarily covered by common EU single market membership but is facilitated by a complex arena of legal agreements and policy arenas: these include the Trade and Cooperation Agreement, the Protocol under the Withdrawal Agreement, the Common Travel Area, and the work of the North South Ministerial Council (NSMC), for example.

There now are new regulatory 'borders' all around Northern Ireland for various sectors and agencies to navigate, including local and regional development actors. Uncertainty, strains on resources, and difficulties in long-term strategic planning are all intrinsically linked to the political context of the breakdown of EU-UK agreements and relations, the absence of functioning devolved government in Northern Ireland and the consequential absence of a functioning NSMC. The longer this persists, cross-border collaboration will become less likely and more difficult.

Based on the conducted research and interviews, the authors of this study propose the following recommendations:

- Once Brexit has been finalised, there is a case to be made for convening a multi-stakeholder symposium to consider a long-term vision for the regions of the island of Ireland up to, for example, 2045.
- Greater commitment is needed to developing the potential of emerging economic corridors such as the Dublin-Belfast Corridor (with potential links to Cork) and the Atlantic Economic Corridor stretching from Derry to Cork.
- There is a need for greater promotion of regional models of good practices, such as the 'Smart Region Initiative' in the Southern Region and the North West Strategic Growth Partnership in the North West.

From the institutional point of view, it is important that:

- The role of the EU in the negotiations to date is widely valued and acknowledged.
- There is a strong case for better utilising the institutions of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement, across its three strands, to meet the challenges that are being posed by Brexit.
- There is a need for an information portal on Brexit that is politically neutral and gives clear guidance on decisions made.
- There is a growing need for an all-island data-base covering data as it relates to, for example, the economy, health, education, demographics, connectivity, and supply chains.

While the commitment of the Irish Government under the Shared Island Initiative to investing in the all-island agenda, is both timely and a welcome, this cannot be considered a long-term solution.

- With the conclusion of programmes such as INTERREG Ireland-Wales, there is a need for long-term funding solutions which support inter-regional development.
- The confirmation of the PEACE PLUS programme is key to the immediate continuity of cross-border funding and relationships.
- The Strategic Planning and Engagement Programme under PEACE PLUS is a welcome addition to the programme.

There are still significant concerns regarding citizen rights, freedom of movement and the destabilisation of community relations as a result of Brexit.

- There is a need to continue to sustain cross-border relationships. Following the conclusion of projects under PEACE PLUS, a new mechanism will be required to deliver on this commitment post-2027.
- Brexit will encourage and necessitate the need for new relationships/new collaborative structures to be established. This will require financial support.

Further information

This executive summary is available in the following languages: English, French, German, Italian and Spanish. The study, which is available in English, and the summaries can be downloaded at: <https://bit.ly/41VTNji>

More information on Policy Department research for REGI:

<https://research4committees.blog/regi/>



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