THE BORDER INTO BREXIT:

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

Irish Central Border Area Network

QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY BELFAST

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Foreword

On behalf of the Management Board of the Irish Central Border Area Network (ICBAN) Ltd. I wish to commend to you this *'Border into 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 third 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 three reports completed to date, c.1600 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 at stake in this process, and affecting those to be impacted most directly – 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 is central to the current debates on how Brexit might be implemented. 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, and to work to help withstand, insofar as is possible, any negative consequences arising from Brexit on 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. We are aware of the important and valuable reports and representations which our member Councils and other Border Region local authorities have led on, and thus we have sought to not duplicate this good work, but to complement it.

The Brexit process has been constantly developing and the latest general election results in the UK will likely move this on again. It is a complex subject and who would bet against yet more twists and turns being involved. What this report provides is a reference guide on the latest up to the minute research on key discussion topics, such as how the likes of a No Deal scenario and the new Protocol are impacting on communities here.

I wish to also record our thanks to all who have contributed to this piece of work and to echo the acknowledgements of our esteemed author, Dr. Katy Hayward.

But firstly, I would wish to record our thanks and appreciation to Dr. Hayward, ably assisted by Dr. Milena Komarova 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 Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's Reconciliation Fund, without whose support we would have been unable to undertake this worthwhile initiative.

Councillor Pat Treanor,
ICBAN Chair, December 2019

Acknowledgements

This report was co-authored by Dr. Katy Hayward and Dr. Milena Komarova (Queen's University Belfast). We are grateful to Shane Campbell of the Irish Central Border Area Network (ICBAN) for his leadership and facilitation of this project, and to Joanne Breen in ICBAN for her invaluable assistance in the preparation of this report, particularly in the organising and transcribing of the focus groups involved.

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 Navigator'* project and has been made possible through assistance from the Reconciliation Fund of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, which has been invaluable. The authors' work on the project is also supported by the Economic and Social Research Council, which funds Dr. Hayward's senior fellowship through *'The UK in a Changing Europe'*, enabling her to work full-time on the research topic of *'The Future and Status of Northern Ireland after Brexit'*. The funders have had no influence at all 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 475 respondents to the online survey whose thoughtful and engaged responses have taught us about the significance of the border region for its people and, with Brexit drawing nearer, have pithily expressed its real-life implications. We regret that there has not been space to do all responses justice here, but we will be drawing upon this data in future publications and papers.

We also wish to express particular gratitude to each one of the participants of the five focus groups and the twelve individual stakeholder interviews, many of whom gave up hours of their time and travelled some distance to contribute to the discussions. So many volunteered to participate in a focus group that we could have run several times this number had time and resources allowed. 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.

It must be stressed also that this, third, instalment of our research on the effects of Brexit on the Central Border Region of Ireland / Northern Ireland was conducted at a particularly critical time of dynamic political change. This rather febrile context actively added to the direction of our inquiries and the dynamic of participants' engagement and discussion during focus groups and interviews, as we acknowledge in the report itself.

In this report, as with the previous two, 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. As the UK moves closer into Brexit, it is important to acknowledge, mark and listen to the views of those most directly affected by the Irish border becoming an external frontier of the European Union.

Dr. Katy Hayward and Dr. Milena Komarova

Executive Summary

The project

► These are results from the *'The Border into Brexit'* project run by Queen's University Belfast in conjunction with the Irish Central Border Area Network (ICBAN) of eight local authorities in the Central Border Region of Ireland/Northern Ireland.

► The research consisted of two parts – a large online survey of 475 respondents, five focus groups and 12 in-depth individual interviews with stakeholders across the region, from both sides of the border. Altogether, the research included over 500 participants.

► The research is a follow-on from two previous reports: *'Bordering on Brexit'*, which was completed in late 2017 (found at https://go.qub.ac.uk/bordering) and *'Brexit at the Border'*, the results from which were published in 2018 (found at https://go.qub.ac.uk/brexitborder).

► With Brexit drawing nearer, the research asked people living and working in the region about their experiences of Brexit already, their anticipation of a hard border and their views on a No Deal Brexit, as well as the unique nature of the border region. The purpose of the study is to create an opportunity for the voices of local people on both sides of the border to be heard.

Impact of Brexit

► Respondents to the survey report wide and significant experience of Brexit already having an impact on their lives and on their plans. This ranges from the economic (e.g. redundancy, business downsizing) to the social (e.g. relocation, community tensions). A related sense of insecurity, many respondents claimed, is exacerbated by ongoing speculation about what the future for the border might be.

► Specific experiences and expectations of impact notwithstanding, many respondents share an overwhelming feeling of uncertainty, which has only negative connotations: *'Like being hunkered down waiting for a storm'* (Respondent 463).

► Just as various cross-border aspects of life in the region are interrelated and, thus, so are concerns about the impact of Brexit. For example, a concern with potential border checks is connected to fears of delays, inconvenience and loss of business, as well as to concerns about a rise of community tensions, friction and regression in the peace process.

► There is a feeling of lack of political representation and voicelessness which exacerbates the sense of anxiety: *'I feel very angry that there is no one to represent my voice in the UK Parliament - and also in our local Assembly. This is the area and the people that are likely to be most affected and where are the leaders representing us?'* (Respondent 279).

A hard border

► More than 4 in 5 respondents think the likelihood of a hard border has increased since last year. The overwhelming reason given for this view is political leadership in Westminster, specifically the stance of PM Boris Johnson and the rhetoric of the British government on No Deal. Another reason given is the lack of political leadership from Stormont.

► Regardless of views of its likelihood, a harder border is unanimously seen as a retrograde step. This is associated with conflict in the minds of people of all generations. As a consequence, the prospect induces fear and anxiety for many: *'I am frightened. I don't think I could go back to living with the old order. Before I didn't know any better, thought it was normal; now I know [it isn't normal] and I don't want to go back.'* (Respondent 344)

► The impossibility of separating the practical from the security implications of a hard border is seen in many responses, e.g. *'Possible loss of my job; increased cost of living; curtailment of my way of living; reintroduction of fear when having to approach potential border checks due to the associated dangers.'* (Respondent 168).

Leave supporters in the border region

▶ The findings of this report concur with the previous two, in that those who voted Leave were much less likely than others to consider Brexit to have already had an impact on the region.

▶ Leave supporters in this survey were also, perhaps unsurprisingly, less likely to view any Brexit impact in the region in negative terms. Many consider the risks and consequences of a hard border to be exaggerated, and often made for political ends.

▶ Nonetheless, many Leave voting respondents do express anxiety about the implications of a No Deal.

▶ There was a small minority of respondents who voted Leave out of strongly Irish republican sentiments, primarily the desire to hasten Irish unification by increasing resentment towards Britain.

▶ A range of ideas were offered from Leave supporters about multilevel means for representing the views of the border region in the next phase of Brexit, including making more use of British-Irish institutions.

A No Deal Brexit

▶ There are two types of a *'No Deal'* Brexit: if there is no Withdrawal Agreement, and if there is no future UK-EU trade agreement. If there is no Withdrawal Agreement, it means that there is no legal basis for much of the current trade and cooperation across the Irish border and would result in an immediate hardening of that border. If the current Withdrawal Agreement is ratified this means that the openness of the Irish land border will be protected, regardless of what happens in the future UK-EU relationship. However, if there is no UK-EU future trade deal agreed further to the Withdrawal Agreement, this means that there will be friction in the movement of goods between Great Britain and Northern Ireland, i.e. a harder Irish Sea border.

▶ When we conducted this research, the *'No Deal'* that we were referring to was about there being no Withdrawal Agreement, and thus a hard Irish land border.

▶ The cross-border normality of life in the region led many respondents to view a No Deal Brexit as having a profound and wide effect, from business closure to conflict: *'A No Deal Brexit means all bets are off, anything can happen'* (Respondent 2).

▶ The fear of a return to violence is ever-present in this research data, but particularly so in relation to a No Deal scenario.

The revised Protocol in the Withdrawal Agreement

▶ Anxiety about what Brexit will mean is exacerbated by a lack of information and clarity about the revised Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland that was negotiated by Prime Minister Boris Johnson's government, and what it would mean for the region.

▶ Many in our focus groups and interviews note growing concerns among unionists and loyalists in Northern Ireland and take this seriously in terms of a threat to stability in Northern Ireland and the border region.

▶ The mechanisms for *'democratic consent'* were not spontaneously mentioned by our research participants, which suggest that they are not considered to be the most significant part of the Protocol.

▶ In contrast, for respondents of all backgrounds, the Protocol (and the comments about it from senior politicians) gave rise to deeper apprehension about the likelihood of concerns from Northern Ireland and the border region being listened to, as the Brexit process moves into the next phase.

Introduction

The project

These are the findings of a project on the impacts of Brexit and the possible implications of a *'No Deal'* scenario on the Central Border Region of Ireland/Northern Ireland. This research has been conducted by a small team at Queen's University Belfast (led by Dr. Katy Hayward & Dr. Milena Komarova), 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.

This work has been funded as part of ICBAN's *'Border Navigator'* project (http://icban.com/border-compass/) by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's 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'* initiative (https://ukandeu.ac.uk/).

This is the third initiative in a series of reports 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 project was conducted in three phases: the online survey (five weeks from September-October 2019), the Focus Groups (October-November 2019), and the Stakeholder Interviews (November-December 2019). Interim findings from the online survey were released in mid-October through a press release and brief interim report of findings (https://go.qub.ac.uk/BorderBrexit). A Twitter account (@BorderBrexit, with over 500 followers) was also set-up to disseminate findings and extracts from some of the qualitative data.

The context of the two phases of the project

The political and *'Brexit'* context for this project was quite different to the previous two reports. The other reports came out whilst Theresa May was Prime Minister and before the Withdrawal Agreement and the so-called *'backstop'* had been negotiated and released. This project occurred over a period of time of particular significance in the process of the UK's withdrawal from the EU.

The first phase of this latest research occurred prior to the third deadline given for the UK's withdrawal, i.e. 31 October 2019. The interim findings of the report were published just prior to the European Council Summit at which the revised Withdrawal Agreement negotiated by Prime Minister Boris Johnson was considered. The second phase of the research was conducted after the revised Agreement was concluded and the deadline for the UK's withdrawal was extended again to 31 January 2020. This timing meant that the risk of a *'No Deal'* Brexit was high during the first phase of the research. It also meant that the focus of concern about the hardening of a border moved from being the land border in the first phase to being the Irish Sea border during the second phase, as this is a potential consequence of the revised Protocol on Northern Ireland/Ireland.

A few of the focus groups and all the stakeholder interviews were conducted during the General Election campaign in the UK but the research behind this report was concluded prior to election day. The election was not a topic for discussion in the focus groups or interviews and it was not raised. It is worth acknowledging that this context served to exacerbate the sense of uncertainty that has characterised so much of the Brexit experience to date. We finalised the draft of this report just as the results of the General Election became known. The report concludes with a brief discussion of what these results, from Northern Ireland and from the UK as a whole, may mean for the Central Border Region and for a project of this nature.

The Central Border Region of Ireland / Northern Ireland

The uniqueness of the border region

The Central Border Region covers eight local authority areas: Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon, Fermanagh and Omagh, and Mid Ulster in Northern Ireland, plus Cavan, Donegal, Leitrim, Monaghan and Sligo in Ireland.

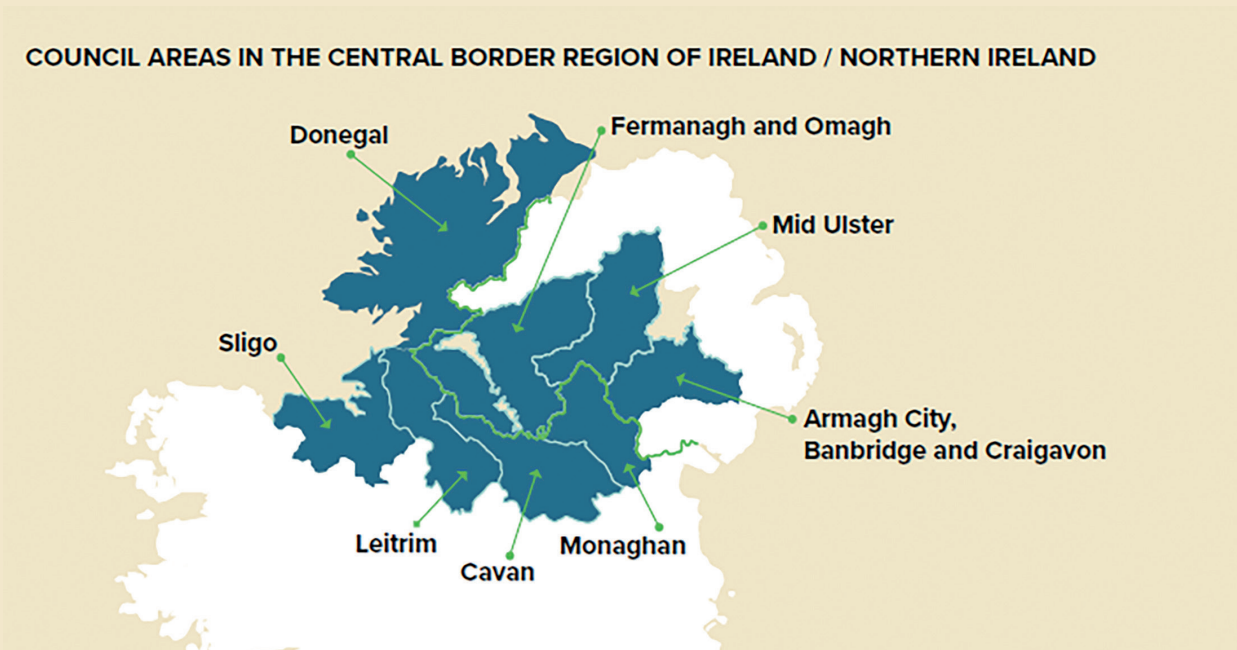**COUNCIL AREAS IN THE CENTRAL BORDER REGION OF IRELAND / NORTHERN IRELAND**

Figure 1. Map of the local authority areas included in the Central Border Region of Ireland/Northern Ireland

The nature of the border region means that the ramifications of Brexit are not confined to Northern Ireland areas as the part of the region which is leaving the European Union. This comes out very clearly in the research conducted for this project, which shows that – although a significant proportion of our respondents (nearly a third) were not even eligible to vote in the referendum – the impact of Brexit is being anticipated and felt across the border:

'Because the border cuts through our parishes, neighbourhoods, farms and homes, it will affect us in every single thing we do' (R70).[1]

'The predictions of job losses and recession in Northern Ireland will mean the whole border region will suffer the same, and they had no say in the decision' (R81).

And for a border region, Brexit brings change and challenges to local authorities in Ireland and Northern Ireland – and changes that are widespread across not just *'entry points'* or *'border inspection posts'* but across communities along the border, on both sides. This interviewee in local government captured the challenge well:

'So, look, Monaghan – the county that I live in, the county that I represent – has one of the longest what you might term international frontiers of any local authority within Europe. There's … over 200km of boundary with counties Armagh, Tyrone and Fermanagh - all touching on to Monaghan. And there are communities living in every road, in every street, in every part of that and every one of those roads and communities has a counterpart on the northern side of the border. So from the community of it, the impact of Brexit will be huge and none of it any good' (interview 2).

Fundamentally, and even more broadly, the uniqueness of the region centres on the ways in which the border is a connection between the UK and Ireland, permeating political, social, cultural and economic life:

'There's always more layers to the politics at the border. It's going to be the land border between UK and the EU. That had loads of possible implications. If you're geographically far away from the border, it's probably not something you're going to think about but if the border goes through your farm or your town, then it's part of your everyday reality' (R9).

And, of course, that reality is of a border that has had enormous symbolic and practical significance:

'It's different here. There's a line in the sand. And first of all, that line says, 'it's a different jurisdiction' and second 'it's a different religion', and then it's 'different this' and 'different that'. A border creates division. And we got rid of that division over the years. I don't

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1   Responses in the Survey are labelled by the randomly-assigned number given to each submission. R = Respondent. We have quoted survey, focus group and interview responses with minimal editing only where necessary for clarity.

want to see it come back in any form, even psychologically. I saw the border, as we were growing up doing so much harm. It pushed people into corners and made people take sides' (focus group 4).[2]

In all the answers to the question of what a hard border would mean to them, and in the anticipation of Brexit, from respondents on both sides, there is a recognition that the border means that the UK's withdrawal from the EU is far more than an economic decision: *'We are at grave risk of being dragged back 20 years or more and I find that both appalling and heartbreaking'* (R12). One respondent summarised the reason why change to the border will have such an impact in this region: *'Pain is more intense closer to the wound'* (R101).

This shows why so many people in the border region cherish and appreciate the fact that a typical way of describing the border is to emphasise its present-day insignificance: *'I don't see a border. So, as far as I can see, at the moment, there isn't a border. I live in Leitrim, I think Leitrim is just the same as Fermanagh'* (focus group 3). This is not primarily a political or ideological point: it is a sign of a successful peace process after a horrendous conflict.

What has been achieved

All this means that the anticipation of a harder border leads people to reconsider the experience of living and working in the border region itself. As another respondent explains, when imagining what it would be to navigate and manage a hard border between an EU and a non-EU member-state running through the Central Border Region:

'To just exist, like going to school, the shops, church, work or socialise we will have to cross between two different jurisdictions with separate compliance regimes, encountering extra surveillance, accountability, checks on a daily basis' (R70).

Indeed, this point is repeatedly elaborated on by both survey respondents and by participants in focus groups. One respondent describes the positive side of living in a border region with an open border as increasing choice; the flip side of this means that, with a hard border, choices will be reduced and difficulties for daily life increased:

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2   See Appendix 3 for explanation of coding of focus groups

'We cross the border regularly and have got used to working /living/shopping/being educated etc. on the side that suits us best at the time. Many choices will be taken away from us. Border [areas] are always less prosperous because they are remote from power and the money. It's hard enough as it is to find well paid work in the border region. That isn't going to get any better' (R23).

The interconnected nature of the border region is seen as both *'normal'* but also a very precious part of present day life in the region – something particularly cherished by the older generation. This was clearly expressed by focus group participants in the village of Pettigo, which straddles the border:

'We've got good integration with Ederney and Belleek through football and social activities. If roads closed, it would totally change the dynamic. I know people now that grew up a mile from here and I never knew them… because the bridge was down. To go to Belleek, you had to go all the way round the country just to get to Belleek.

Kids today, they don't care who their neighbour is – race, creed or religion. They just socialise together, play football together, interact from different towns and different villages. If there is anything going on, it's just rivalry between football teams or whatever it might be. We cannot go back to anything that is more serious than that…we won't and can't allow it' (focus group 4).

Another participant in the same focus group concurred:

'We don't want to look like some sectarian dug-out little hole. We all want to move on for the betterment of our communities and our children. I know before the peace process, your Catholic or your Protestant neighbour mightn't have lent you a shovel. But from the peace process, that all changed. All of that broke down. People weren't afraid of orange and green' (focus group 4).

The achievements of the peace process and the heightened significance in the border region of what has been achieved through that (enabled to some extent by the process of European integration) are encapsulated in a lot of the reflections from participants in the focus groups and stakeholder interviews in particular.

For example, one unionist participant from County Monaghan described what it was like growing up in the area: *'In my personal experience…we didn't cross the border for a long, long period – we simply didn't cross that border. It was as if Northern Ireland was Iceland or something. It was a country we simply didn't go to.'* He then contrasted this with his

present experience of living in the border region, in which the border has been completely transformed by bridge-building cooperation by communities on both sides:

'Specific to this area is the feeling that we have been able to build cross-border relationships to an extraordinary degree; so much so, actually, that the understanding we have now in the Central Region in a way that has surpassed the understanding of the other centres of power in Belfast, Dublin and Westminster have of us and of the problem. We know the problem much better than anyone sitting in those centres of power. Yet, apart from you and a few others, no one has consulted us throughout the process of negotiation in the last three years' (focus group 1).

His conclusion points to the value of listening to people in the border region in particular, in order to properly understand and appreciate both the value of what has been achieved and the enormity of what is perceived by locals as being at risk from a hardening of the border.

The bridged border

'It's in our bones that the border is here and what it means. The fact that it disappeared to all intents and purposes was fantastic and now it appears to be creeping back in again, which is why we're so concerned. We spent so long trying to get rid of it' (focus group 4).

It is by contrast to the past that not only the tremendous importance of the disappearing border but the threat of Brexit in the present day is most succinctly articulated, by people from a unionist background as well as by self-described nationalists. This respondent in one focus group puts the process and risk in historical context, showing quite how important that history remains for contemporary identity and belonging:

'Why does the border matter to people like myself? – it's because I come from a unionist family in County Monaghan, which you know was left in the south during partition and on the whole, people like us were not happy to be left out of the six counties. Not only was that a political reaction to partition, but also an economic…we felt a very strong economic impact of partition, back in the 20s. It very much changed the nature and the relationship of my family - which had been living in County Monaghan for some 400 odd years – had with the border region. I felt as, someone who is a British citizen, living in the Republic of Ireland that this referendum was a terrible mistake' (focus group 1).

The uniqueness of the border region is understood, first, by contrast to urban areas and big cities: *'Yes, obviously, a very rural area which is completely different from, life in Belfast or London'* (focus group 3).

And it is also understood that the border, to all intents and purposes, could be disregarded for such large swathes of daily life. In that sense, the border region is truly British-Irish and north/south. As one respondent put it: *'I think we got to the point a couple of years ago where the border was non-existent and people were going about their normal, daily business as they would in any other part of the world'* (focus group 1). This is not in any way to diminish the integrity and distinctiveness of different cultures and identities in the border region. Instead, it points to a region that upholds the potential for nuance, complexity and diversity that is sustained even as a border is transcended. This is summarised by one focus group participant:

'I do think the border does have a sphere of influence in cultural practice, social practice, recreational practice. We have all just built it into our everyday lives.

I'm from Enniskillen, but I would've seen myself as British, even though my family is nationalist. I would've gone to college in England, would've had quite a lot of aunts and uncles that lived in England. But we always holidayed in Donegal, so it's like schizophrenia: Irish-British!

But yet, it seemed to be porous… even though we were stopped at the border, had our car searched… [Crossing the border] seemed to be almost just a day-to-day operation for us; we did put up with it.

But if you moved even 30 miles, they wouldn't have that same social, cultural, recreational undertaking around the border. They just wouldn't have that, because they don't have a border to really contend with' (focus group 1).

This is important in two ways. First, the commonality between people and communities on both sides of the border is seen by many respondents as being more important than forms of communal divisions and is rooted in people's common rural lifestyle and experience. Secondly, the presence of the border – even as it has become less visible and more open – is a constant factor that shapes people's lived experience and conception of *'home'* in the border region. As noted in previous reports, describing the border via its invisibility emphasizes a contemporary *'border paradox'* – while being of enormous symbolic, practical and historical importance, the invisible and frictionless border of today has become,

and is described as, *'incidental'* to people's lives. The use of this phrase by this interviewee is telling:

'Those [cross-border] relationships have all been built up on this interchange of information and we've got to know, I've got to know a lot of folk just across the way that I never would have known. And that has been building for the last 35 years. And it had really come to the point where the border was incidental. ...You wouldn't know there was a division' (interview 3).

It is precisely this feature of the border and the region around it, on both sides, that is widely cherished and appreciated as its most important feature by all participants, irrespective of community background, political views or stance in relation to Brexit.

The paradox that the border in effect doesn't exist for many local people, at the same time as being hugely important and definitive for social and political life, is neatly summarised by one interviewee:

'I think for many people they have to understand that of course the border is a line. It's a line that people have put on a map. That's all it is for many people who live along the border. It's a place where for you maybe is a field or the road but for many border people it doesn't exist. It doesn't exist in terms of where they farm their animals, where they cut their grass, where they bring their milk from... So, for many people their natural affinity, their natural environment is in another jurisdiction.

And what the Good Friday Agreement and the development of the peace process said is that you can go about your business and nobody will stop you. You can shop. You can read whatever newspaper. You can listen to whatever radio programme. You can go to whatever school. You can be who you want to be and nobody will stop you. There will be a currency difference but there will be plenty of places where you can change currency. Or, actually, you can go to a machine on the wall and you can take whatever currency in whatever jurisdiction you are in. There is, now, for many people- many people live on one side of the border and maybe go to socialize or work on the other side' (interview 5).

The difference in the experience of this paradox along lines of generation is very much emphasized by many of the participants in focus groups and in a number of the individual interviews:

'I just finished a project with a group of young people from the north and south, called 'Border Memories'... We had a group of older people that lived just along the border that told their stories to the young people. You wouldn't believe what the young people

don't know. They couldn't believe the stories, it actually scared them. I think if the young people along the border... heard some of the stories that we heard doing that project, they definitely wouldn't want to see customs posts or anything along the border because it was a scary time' (focus group 5).

One interviewee described in vivid detail his experience of the border and contrasted it with the experience of the present generation:

'The young ones coming now, they don't realise what did happen. They don't realise the fear that was there at the time, you know what I mean, it was desperate to be honest with you. Just desperate and the hold ups – you could be coming home at night and there would be a check point some place and you didn't know who was doing the checkpoint, you know – in the dead of night – and you would be brought in there and you would be told to switch off your lights, switch off your engine and nobody will be with you for maybe half an hour.

And there you sat there and you sat there, and you daren't start the lorry and you can't move because you didn't know if you will be shot. And, you know what I mean, that's the facts of it. That did happen on the border down the years.

So, the point I'm making about that is that that bred terrorism... that just bred hatred. And that's not happening now with the young people' (interview 1).

Those negative and fear-ridden experiences of crossing the border only poured oil on the fires of violence during the Troubles is a view that is frequently offered in our research in the border region. This is very important to understanding why it is that people are so resistant to any manifestation of border management and control.

The criss-crossed border

One thing that comes out clearly from our research is that freedom of movement across the Irish border is not seen so much as an abstract right, a practice of travel, or a feature of the border today but more as a way of life, and an important experience of place and identity in the region. As one younger participant in a focus group put it:

'I cross the border six times on the way to work and six on the way back. So, there's a complete misunderstanding of the day-to-day commute, the use of crossing the border, that the political class have. It's our day-to-day reality. ...most people in Pettigo have a

long commute, by virtue of where they live. The idea that you'd put any kind of stop there on the border – and I'd have to do that six times – it's just going to make it an impossibility. The practicalities [of a hard Brexit border] are what worry me' (focus group 4).

The importance of cross-border work and life mean that uncertainty about Brexit has brought deep uncertainty into the very heart of respondents' lives in the border region. The nature of life in the region is cross-border to the extent that it makes the operationalization of Brexit unthinkable for many. This is worsened by the lack of trust in the information coming from politicians on the topic, which is articulated in many of the interviews conducted for this research:

'Well, I think there are a number of people in this whose homes and farms straddle the border. Those people are still wondering what on earth is going to become of their lives at the end of the day if Brexit happens, so that they feel hasn't been properly looked at and properly examined and this breeds uncertainty. You know, particularly when you come across somebody whose living room is in the south and their kitchen is in the north – very confusing, very, very confusing and this again goes back to the whole feeling of so much uncertainty and not enough answers to their many questions' (interview 4).

Similarly, interviewee 1 describes very well quite how important it is that there is certainty provided for people in the border region regarding Brexit, for very practical reasons:

'And I've asked this question on several occasions – what happens … with those jobs both sides of the border? And the businesses on both sides of the border? Or farmers who farm on both sides of the border? … There's no one says how that's going to change or what's going happen with that when Brexit happens. …at the end of the day, there has to be a paper trail somewhere along the lines that 'such a cow crossed the border and that it came back again', you know what I mean'.

But, apart from the above (i.e. being a fundamentally definitive issue in terms of psychology and identity), the question of freedom of movement is also a practical and legal problem in terms of equality:

'Many people have lived or worked on one side of the border and enjoy their retirement on the other side of the border. Many people are accessing services or have accessed services. So, there's issues regarding pensions, issues regarding access, and what the fear is around Brexit is that the border, whether it's a physical border, becomes much more important in terms of people's lives … so, one of the things we are very concerned about is people accessing their rights. Who can provide them with the information and guidance right across the entire border region, for people on either side lof the border?' (interview 5).

A number of respondents to the online survey expressed different worries regarding other practical effects of a possible hard border. Some are concerned with the effects on the value of their pensions, the recognition of qualifications and the consequences for job mobility:

'I've been worrying about … things [I] have no control over – my British occupational pension, whether my qualifications will continue to be recognized, whether I can still apply for jobs in HSE, how will I travel to work in Dublin' (R23).

'Daily travel patterns for work, shopping and entertainment will be affected with increased barriers to freedom of movement' (R28).

Others emphasise that the possible restrictions on the freedom of movement that would come with a hard border will be reflected not only in the curtailment of rights to travel but in terms of the ability to access education and healthcare across the border:

'My daughter wants to go to university in Dublin or Galway. I fear she will not be able to do this without huge problems. Will my rights as an Irish citizens be affected as regards travel, healthcare etc.?' (R150).

The overall point is that many in the Central Border Region see the implications of Brexit as meaning the disruption of mundane, ordinary life for individuals, i.e. they can't take certain things for granted any more. But they also see the wider collective and long-term consequences:

'Travel disruption, border delays will reduce social, recreational and business travel as decisions are taken to choose travel with less potential delay, checks and disruption. As a border dweller this has economic social and cultural impact and causes disadvantage and impacts on personal freedom and human rights' (R391).

As we note below, the uncertainty of what the final UK-EU relationship will be like – plus the different information from the British and Irish governments on some matters – further exacerbates people's anxieties and the sense of future risk.

The Study

The survey

A total of 475 responses were received for the online survey, which was open for five weeks.[3] The survey consisted of 10 substantive questions, which covered the topics of what effect (if any) Brexit was having on practice and on plans, on the anticipated impact of a No Deal Brexit, and on understanding of a *'hard border'*. Respondents are self-selecting and we make no claim that the cohort is a representative sample. The purpose was to enable people to comment on these topics and share their experiences and perspectives. This is important given that those living close to the border, on both sides, will be most directly and immediately affected by Brexit.

The respondents

The largest proportion of respondents came from Fermanagh and Omagh district, with the fewest coming from those living outside the Central Border Region but working within it (5.9%). The four areas with the largest response rate are shown here; the other four had a response rate of an average 6-7%. Approximately 55% of the respondents live in Northern Ireland. 58% of respondents were male. And half were in the 46-65 age group, with 34% aged 31-45 and 9% aged 18-30.
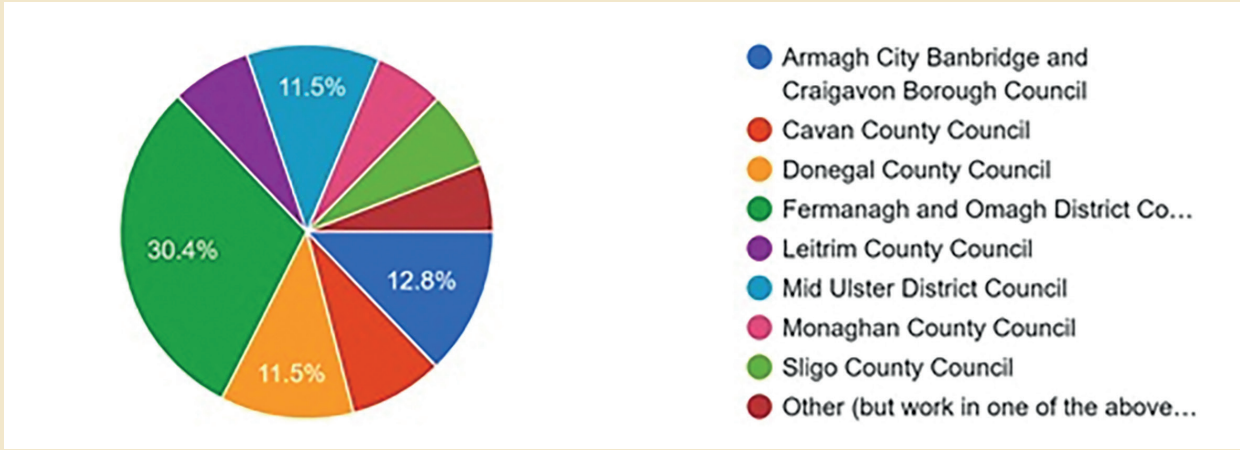
Figure 2. Place of residence of survey respondents, by local authority area

3   477 responses were received in total but two of these were deemed inadmissible.

Over two thirds of respondents hold exclusively Irish citizenship. This is to be expected given that a little under half the respondents in the survey live on the southern side of the border. In patterns similar to the previous two reports, there is a disproportionate lack of response from Leave voting and British-only citizens in the region. We acknowledge this and are careful to report the spectrum of views submitted.
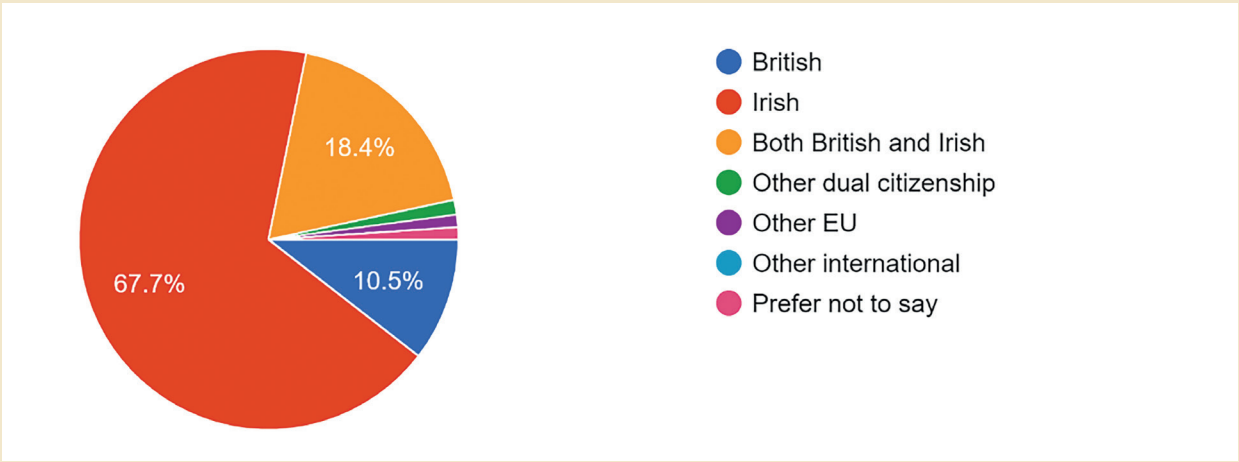
Figure 3. Citizenship of survey respondents

Around 1 in 5 of our respondents have dual citizenship (overwhelmingly British and Irish), and 1 in 10 British-only citizenship. The three NI Council areas of the Central Border Region voted for Remain in the 2016 Referendum and this is reflected in the breakdown of respondents, just over half of whom voted Remain. Just over one third had no vote. Only 9% of our respondents voted Leave, although if we set aside those respondents who were not eligible to vote in the referendum, the proportion of Leave supporters is about 1 in 8 of the voters. We are careful to report their views here, given that the survey is not intended to produce quantitatively representative but qualitative, illustrative findings.
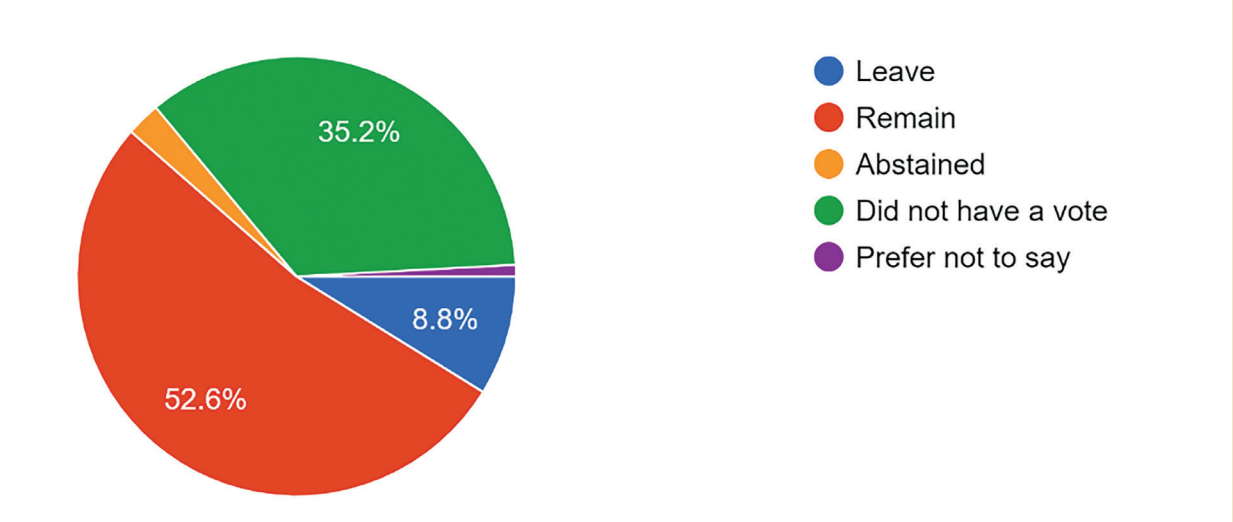
Figure 4. How survey respondents voted in the 2016 Brexit referendum

The focus groups and individual stakeholder interviews

While our online survey yielded a wide breadth of responses, we were keen to delve in greater depth and detail into respondents' understanding of the questions discussed. To that end, we conducted five focus groups in different locations around the Central Border area, to which 38 voluntary participants contributed (See Appendix 3).

Additionally, and unlike the 2017 and 2018 instalments of this research project, we conducted 12 individual in-depth interviews with professionals from key sectors in the border region, such as the community and voluntary (including organisations working with women's and migrant groups), the public (health, education and business) and the local government sectors, business (including tourism), and the local media. Focus group discussions and interviews covered questions exploring participants' understanding of the specificity of the border region, their experiences with Brexit thus far, and their expectations of how the effects of Brexit may be impacted on by the Withdrawal Agreement proposals, negotiated by the Conservative Government under Prime Minister Johnson.

A Harder Border

Growing anticipation of a hard border

We asked respondents to the online survey whether they think a hard border (between Ireland and Northern Ireland) is more or less likely than they thought last year. In our previous report, 59% reported that they thought a hard border was more likely than they had anticipated in 2017. In asking this question again, we see now that 83% of our respondents say they think a hard border is more likely than they had thought in 2018.
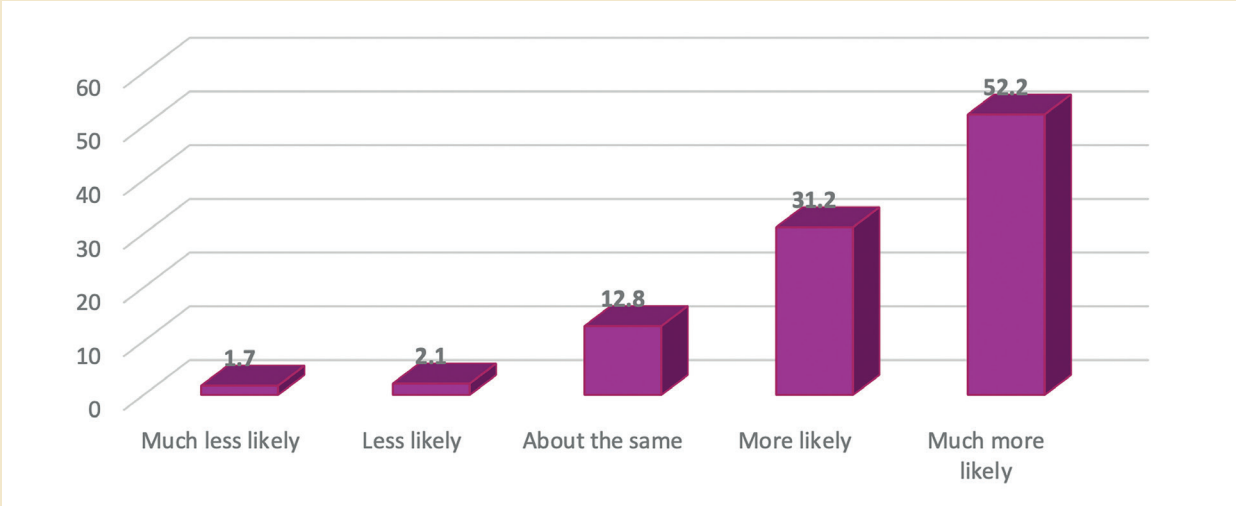
Figure 5. Do you think a hard NI/IRL border is more or less likely than you thought last year?

The 4% of respondents who say that they think a hard border is less likely than they previously believed come from an equal number of Leave and Remain voters (though proportionately, Leave voters are much more inclined to see a hard border as unlikely).

The predominant reason given for this answer by Leave voters is that they do not believe that there will be a hard border *'because it would suit ROI, NI & UK not to have a hard border'* (R357) or else that they doubt its significance: *'A hard border would not affect me in anyway'* (R320). Those Remain or non-voters who also think a hard border is less likely now similarly think it inconceivable because *'The people of both countries won't allow a hard border'* (R349). Other reasons given were that it is *'too expensive'* (R323) or, more ominously, *'Because there will be war'* (R267).

More than 4 in 5 respondents think the likelihood of a hard border has increased and the overwhelming reason given is political leadership, specifically the direction of travel taken

by the British Government to the negotiations since Prime Minister Boris Johnson came into office. Blame is also placed on the lack of a functioning Stormont Assembly and Executive. Overall, the belief that No Deal is a serious possibility drives the sense of a growing risk of a hard border.

What would a hard border mean to you?

We asked survey respondents to describe in one sentence what a hard border would mean for them. Figure 6 is a word cloud of the responses.

Figure 6. What would a hard border mean to you? A 'word cloud' of survey responses.

The complexity of the Irish border lies not only in the technical and legal challenges of managing its transition to being an external boundary of the EU, but also its continued symbolic and political significance. Fewer than 2% of responses to this question offer a sanguine analysis, arising from their view that a hard border is unlikely and/or that its effects will be minimal. Some consider the prospect negligible because of having managed a hard border in the past, e.g. *'It means border checks & checking of goods - which used to happen & I can't remember it being any hassle'* (R376); some because they believe the threat is exaggerated, e.g. *'An unavoidable consequence of fully exiting the EU. I think the extent of disruption and disorder is over-exaggerated, but any inconvenience is the*

reality of the situation between any two countries not in the EU' (R8); and some because they think it simply will not occur, e.g. *'both Irish and British governments have committed to none and despite any EU intention, neither will put one up'* (R144).

Most such answers come from Leave voters. Among our focus group participants, one fell into the same category and offered a similar analysis. His opinion that there will be no hard border on the island of Ireland is related to an overwhelmingly positive view of Brexit:

'I view [Brexit] very positively, not just from a local point of view, but it involves an evolving relationship with Britain and it also is involving Europe. … The level of engagement amongst the people of Britain and Ireland, it has reinvigorated interest in politics, which is tremendous. It has reinvigorated people engaging with the issues which are relevant. Also, a major positive is that never before in Irish history, have we had a time when everybody; from Irish republicans, right the way through to Ulster Unionists, right the way through to British Conservatives, all the way through to European bureaucrats, never before, have we had everybody in agreement – no hard border' (focus group 2).

It must be stressed, therefore, that in the above case, the positives of Brexit are seen precisely from the perspective of it providing an opportunity for a borderless relationship, i.e. agreement on the need to preserve the present-day openness of the border: *'Brexit provides for us a great opportunity for the European Union and Britain to work out how we can have a borderless relationship and we've only just begun'* (focus group 2). From this perspective, trading with the EU as a third country does not have to mean changes to other aspects of existing cross-border relationships. As the same Leave supporter explained:

'The main thing is that trade and business can proceed without any major issue. That doesn't mean that there has to be strict guarding of the border by this person or by the police or anyone else. I found it absolutely fantastic that for the past 20 years to be able to drive to Belfast and back or wherever I wanted to go. Why should there be any change in that? Something that we found seriously satisfying and easy to work. Good relationships between our friends in the north and our friends in Britain and everything being made to work to everyone's advantage. There has to be that level of approach brought to it. Incidentally, were you saying Britain was having difficulty exporting to other countries because they are part of the European Union?' (focus group 2).

It is notable that this response sits in line with much of the argument made by British ministers and Leave-supporting politicians over the withdrawal process, i.e. that it is a choice of the EU to *'erect'* a border. The majority of responses to this subject in the survey, however, come from a very different perspective – predominantly Remain-supporting. When asked

to describe what a hard border would mean to those living and working in the Central Border Region, most of the responses to our survey fall under four categories: personal, peace, practical, and political.

A hard border as a personal and emotional experience

First, there were very personal responses, showing the impact of the border on people's mental and emotional state. This can be explained by respondents' proximity to the border (and frequent movement across it) making them more affected by border controls and conscious of historical experience:

'[A hard border would mean] The end of my world. It will have a severe impact on my mental health. My anxiety is already very high as a result of Brexit' (R388)

'It's like a knife through the heart. We don't want a border and we will not stand for one' (R125)

'It would break my heart. Things have been relatively positive... hearts and minds were calmer and amenable. A hard border will wreck that' (R267).

The reality of living beside the border is reflected in the fact that several describe a hard border in terms of feeling trapped: *'Like a prisoner in my own home'* (R11) or *'It would make me feel like I'm living like a prisoner or in the eyes of big brother needing permission to move'* (R48). For a few on the southern side, the prospect reduces confidence in cross-border movement: *'If a hard border comes in we won't be travelling into the North. It's as simple as that'* (R411).

The impact of this is exacerbated by (a) the current openness of the border and (b) by the historical experience of (military) surveillance and heavy security presence in the region. As well as deep anxiety, there were strong expressions of anger and resentment at the very idea of it.

A hard border as a 'retrograde' step

Secondly, related to the above, the majority of statements focused on the sense of it being a *'retrograde'* step. One describes it as *'The end of a truce'* (R399). Most statements centre on the perceived implications of a hard border for the peace process:

'[A hard border would mean] The loss of everything I thought we'd achieved in the Good Friday Agreement: shared space; goodwill and cooperation; mutual acceptance of identity and aspirations; and a chance finally, to put the past behind us. We are at grave risk of being dragged back 20 years or more and I find that both appalling and heart-breaking' (R12).

'I truly believe that any Brexit, especially a hard border Brexit will bring austerity, division, terrorism, lack of services, increased costs of living in NI and very generally difficult times' (R327).

As we found in previous reports, many in the border region associate the openness of the border with the 1998 Agreement:

'The Good Friday Agreement has given me the right and the reassurance to express my Irish identity and as a result my family and I have enjoyed many years of peaceful co-existence with our Protestant neighbours in N. Ireland. You could rightly enjoy living here, accepting that this is quite a good place to live.

Brexit distorts all that - it challenges my identity, makes us feel uneasy and now seriously think about our future' (R279).

Similarly, though we did not specifically enquire about the Good Friday Agreement in any part of the research, a number of participants in our focus groups brought up the subject matter themselves, articulating their negative views of Brexit by contrast to what the Agreement has aimed to achieve:

'The thing about it is, that positivity and that seamlessness that we have all seen came from the Good Friday Agreement. ...young people don't remember all of those things. They just see things working well. Why break something that has been working well? That's the key. ...[it's] not only trade. It's about people's rights, people travelling. It's the Good Friday Agreement and continuing to build on it' (focus group 2).

A participant in another focus group described how they felt that the 1998 Agreement has been put under pressure by the Brexit process:

'The Good Friday Agreement was all about respecting a shared space. That was working well for years until now, and the Brexit debate has now suddenly forced choice back: Who are you? Where do you belong? Where do you want to be? What is your future? Where is your allegiance? That's opening up old wounds and I can appreciate people from further south in Ireland or Britain, not realising how deep those issues go in the borderlands and in Northern Ireland' (focus group 5).

In particular, the sense that Brexit has encouraged a polarisation in positions and a resurgence of a focus on Northern Ireland's constitutional status (about which there are such strongly opposed views) is a cause of deep concern for many respondents and participants in this research. A participant in a focus group in Glenfarne puts this very well, in terms of both what had been achieved, what harm is being done, and what high level British-Irish differences mean on the ground in the border region:

'I just think that the unfortunate outcome of Brexit for the border region is it has focussed people's minds on the hurts and differences that were there before and the 'camps' that people were in. It has also damaged that new relationship that was growing – that was showing a parity of esteem between British and Irish relations... But unfortunately, Brexit – in the popular mind or within the media – has focussed and raised and re-dredged all the stuff up from the past' (focus group 2).

This broadly disruptive process – and the undermining of connections and trust in the border region – is a matter of considerable regret and sadness for one of the interviewees in particular. For him, the whole history of his involvement in the gradual building of cross-border relationships since the times of the ceasefire, was clearly a matter of pride. He recounted his experience of building up relations through partnership and practical collaboration in a way that also poignantly spells out what is at risk:

'For me personally, I am extremely sad at it all when I think of what had been achieved over the last 25 years since the ceasefires of 1994 and the work of the councils together and the work of the [name of] Regional Partnership which was cross-border, and all of that rebuilding work. That will be fractured with Brexit' (interview 3).

The practical costs of a hard border

Thirdly, respondents summarised the inconvenience and the personal cost of a hard border. It is worth remembering that people's anticipation of what a customs border would entail is based on personal experience in the border region. For example, see these comments made in a focus group and interview which reflect how deeply-resented and how costly these potential inconveniences are seen as being:

'Just to go back [to] the holdups that were then [in the past] and you wouldn't have had a tenth of the trucks that are on the road now. So, just imagine the queues there are going to be and lads getting frustrated and getting angry and everything else that goes along with sitting there. You are knowing that you're supposed to be getting the boat in half an hour or an hour and them holding you up. Believe it or not, unless they've changed, them boys don't give a tuppenny' (focus group 5);

'But my biggest worry is the trouble that will start and all the paperwork and all the time that's lost. And that will create major problems and major expense for hauliers' companies. We cannot afford that! It's as simple as that. Time is of the essence and it's just, it's a worry. And the problem is if there's drivers held up at some place, well, we'll have to pay them the day that they're not working and just sitting about doing nothing. And it's all basic, really, and basic questions that haven't been answered' (interview 1).

The online survey is full of examples of people saying what exactly a hard border would mean for them:

'I will be out of business overnight' (R398)

'fewer [B&B] guests, less money' (R330)

'A lot more red tape' (R163).

That said, most of the responses in this section focused on more abstract than economic consequences, e.g. *'A loss of friendship'* (R148). Others used singular words to describe the prospect: *'disastrous', 'chaos', 'nightmare', 'hell', 'devastating', 'war', 'damage', 'suffering'*. One respondent put it succinctly: a hard border would mean *'Disaster. Pain. The past. Broken'* (R255). This language is also present in responses given in the focus groups and interviews, as in this response from a stakeholder in the business sector:

'We have two key suppliers based in Northern Ireland, accounting for 60% of our ingredients, and any tariff or price increases will have impacts. 15% of our exports go to Northern Ireland. A hard border would have a disastrous impact' (interview 9).

The poignant thing is that the sign of success of the peace process and of economic development is now perceived as being directly challenged by Brexit. An interviewee working in the tourism sector pointed to the cross-border connections – east-west as well as north-south – that have been fostered:

'Border counties have been developing good relationships in the [tourism] sector and have worked hard to position the county areas in sectoral offerings and investments. The Irish border counties do have a reliance on NI and UK for trade and business, particularly weddings for the hotel sector' (interview 11).

It is significant that around half our survey respondents say that they expect a hard border to mean a disruption to travel/traffic and their personal journeys and travel plans, and 1 in 6 say that this has already led them to change their anticipated plans for cross-border movement. This gives a sense of the extent to which cross-border *'travel'* is not so much an activity of its own but rather a way of life, weaved into everyday living, with people travelling across the border to/from work, to shop, visit family and friends (socialise) for leisure and sporting activities: *'What costs me no thought today, travelling across what used to be the border, will now become a "thing". Likely to cause me to hesitate'* (R63). *'Travelling across the border is easy so I tend to [do it] alot. If it becomes difficult we are less likely to do that'* (R68).

Illustrating the potentially widespread and deep effects of this change in behaviour for the border region, many participants in the focus group discussions and individual interviews described Brexit as a threat to the present-day connectivity of border life. Some commented at length on the effects of this threat in both practical terms and in terms of the harm to relationships so painstakingly built over generations. This discussion is closely related to the broader question of freedom of movement, which is seen as fundamental to the *'border way of life'*, and the preservation of which is a common wish and aim among all participants, irrespective of background or political views: *'Yes, and we're only just starting to get the young people back into the town at the weekends to visit the local hotels and go fishing and boating and that sort of thing. If there's a physicality there, it'll not take much to interrupt all that or cease that flow of people again. That's my fear, that it will just go back to...our catchment area of that circle will be sliced across the middle'* (focus group 5).

Connectivity is also important from a pragmatic point of view. Our research shows how particularly important this is at local level, with examples of relationships built across the border and between communities. For example, one interviewee from local government explains how collaboration between local authorities has been slow to build but sustained directly by common EU membership:

'The relationships have been built up over the last 25 -30 years. And certainly Brexit would be bringing the value and the potential of those collaborations into doubt because a lot of our projects are EU funded. And as such when you are crossing a frontier like the border, activity is encouraged at an EU level ... when both parties are members of the EU. When one of them isn't [in the EU], there are limitations as to what you can do in relation to promoting that kind of [collaborative] activity' (interviewee 2).

In the following interview extract, a participant discusses a wider example of relationship-building, specifically the spin-off effects of tourism development in Ireland for Northern Ireland:

'With the [new] infrastructure, people from Dublin can be in Glaslough [a border village in County Monaghan] in an hour and a half so in actual fact it's attractive for people for weekends or for two or three days away. And from Glaslough then people move about, so in actual fact there's a spin off for Caledon [north of the border], for here' (interview 3).

The interviewee goes on to note that that *'easy movement'* is already drying up and reads this as, at least in part, a consequence of Brexit.

Finally, on this point, the very nature of the integrated border region means that the practical consequences of a hard border are seen by many respondents as simply being unworkable. Many of these arguments have been well-rehearsed during the Brexit process (particularly in debates about the backstop and the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland) but it is worth repeating a couple of the points here, because they are from people living and working in the region, and they show quite how frustrating it is to be facing what is seen to be an unworkable challenge and yet to have little guidance on how to approach it:

'For the farming community along the border, farmers with land straddling the border. Sheep crossing over and back. These may seem simple things, but there is a big question out there that is being asked and they're not getting [answers]. It's very hard to understand how they're going to work it and manage their land – crossing over every day and checkpoints. How do they police it? That's the question, as far as I'm concerned anyway' (focus group 5).

A focus group participant elucidates another consequence of a jurisdictional border simply being unable to contain many risks:

'A simple example that people are facing is the issue of ammonia emissions. Emissions which comefrom cattle, don't recognise any political borders. So, you're going to be developing two different strategies and in the south, you're going to be complying with EU laws and regulations...so there's something that you're going to need an all-island strategy to tackle that issue. Potentially those emissions, say in the south of the border could be putting up the emissions in the north and then you're getting farmers penalised … It's the same with rivers...fish disease and all of that. They are big, critical issues for us' (focus group 4).

The anticipated political consequences of a hard border

Alongside the big environmental and economic and practical concerns, there are inevitably highly *'political'* responses to the prospect of a hard border. An interviewee explains that Brexit has tripped up the general progress that many felt was being made under the 1998 Agreement by renewing focus once more on the constitutional status of Northern Ireland, about which there is such differing opinion:

'What Brexit has done is thrown a significant spanner in the works for the direction of travel that the Good Friday Agreement brought to society. And … as a border community the political discourse has become increasingly focused on the national question again. That leads to increasing uncertainty' (interview 5).

This renewed focus on the national question is reflected in this research, where we noted a greater proportion of participants commenting on the matter than in the previous rounds of research in the region. A portion of survey respondents either state their opinion as to the need for Irish unity, or simply express the expectation that a hard border will lead to Irish unification – and some view this as unequivocally a good thing or a natural response to a hard border, e.g. *'I would become proactive in seeking a United Ireland'* (R17). This view was articulated in greater depth by some of our focus group participants:

'It's going to be a long conversation, what type of Ireland, what is a new Ireland? That is now an everyday conversation with people that I'm meeting. It wasn't before Brexit. We were banging our head against the wall, as republicans.

[We thought] we were never going to get a united Ireland in 100 years...people are now saying there's only one solution to this whole issue; we want back into Europe and the only way back into Europe is back through [a united Ireland]. Whether that's right or wrong, that's what is happening up that road' (focus group 2).

'I'd imagine if this deal does go through, trade could be a lot more beneficial north-south ...that it would be more economically beneficial to work within a united Ireland framework or unity of some sort. Especially with Scotland looking so powerless as well. There will be major changes coming down the line and they'll come fairly quick when they do come. Whatever about your lifetime, I think it could be a lot earlier than that actually' (focus group 1).

Still others, as discussed elsewhere in this report, express the opinion that a hard border would constitute a violation of the Good Friday Agreement and related rights and freedoms. A set of responses articulate a severe loss of trust in the British government or in the political establishment at large – a fact which some connect to the absence of a functioning Assembly and Executive in Stormont. This view is particularly concerning for those unionist voters who perceived this to be the case, as one survey respondent described a hard Irish border caused by Brexit: *'It would be the stupidest, most incompetent, and self-destructive action that any UK government has enacted on one of its member regions'* (R323).

Again, the question of loss of trust in both British and Northern Ireland politicians as well as the opinion that British politicians in particular are either ignorant of, disinterested in Northern Ireland or, in fact, both, was an oft repeated theme in focus groups and individual interviews, and arose spontaneously in the context of participants discussing the expected effects of Brexit on the border region:

'On the political side of it, there are MPs [MLAs] that are after getting paid for the last three years for doing nothing. They wouldn't even form a government, an Assembly in the north. If they weren't getting the money, they would look at it differently. I think money plays a major role in it, on both sides. I'm not talking about any particular party. They all sat on their hands and came up with excuses, arguing about trivial things. There has to be a middle ground' (focus group 5).

Another focus group participant in Pettigo summarised the lessons that have to be learned from the peace process about cooperation and bemoans the impact of Brexit on politics in Northern Ireland:

'There's one thing we have learned – at the end of the day, we've to stop fighting, sit around a table and sort it out. I mean what they've done here is throw the table into the corner and everyone is out the door. He's going that direction; she's going that direction. Who is following him and who's following her? It's not the way forward. It's a retrogressive step for society, never mind the economic damage it's going to do' (focus group 4).

Yet, there is a difference between opinions of local representatives and central party lines. More generally, in terms of the importance of the border for politics and politicians from Westminster, respondents in one focus group expressed a rather disparaging view:

'Interviewer: How does that make you feel when politicians in Westminster talk about the Irish border?

Participant 1: That we're of little consequence – and that includes those that are trying to retain the border.

Participant 2: It has been shown that [many] of the Conservative [party] membership also thinks that it would be good to get rid of Northern Ireland. That it is a 'thorn in the side'. They would rather get rid of Northern Ireland than have no Brexit' (focus group 1).

One participant in another focus group also described how little voters in Great Britain seemed to care. Quoting a recent poll from YouGov which was headlined as showing that *'4 in 10 mainland Britons don't care about Northern Ireland'*, the respondent wryly remarked:

'I think we all know that Northern Ireland isn't a priority at all. Even 47% of remainers would rather that they got what they wanted – to remain – and they wouldn't have to worry about Northern Ireland' (focus group 4).

Such a feeling of insecurity and uncertainty in the union of the United Kingdom only exacerbates anxiety for unionists about the implications of Brexit, and a keenness not to see Northern Ireland treated differently from the rest of the UK. This speaks right to the tension at the heart of the Brexit process. In Northern Ireland, all political parties and most voters (including Leave supporters) would like to see Brexit have only a fairly minimal impact on the region. This is in contrast to those in Great Britain, where Leave supporting voters

and parties would, it could be argued, actively wish to see Brexit make a major impact on life there.

Possibly with this in mind, the matter of a border poll and possible preparation for Irish unification was mentioned on a number of occasions (by about 1 in 20 respondents) in answer to the survey question asking whether there are any important issues for the border region that had not been covered and they wished to address. Examples include:

'Government planning for a united Ireland' (R3)

'Although it is being discussed in the media, I don't think the British or Irish Governments have taken seriously the idea of a re-united Ireland and how it is the best chance for the whole island of Ireland to survive. I would like to see some discussion and plans drawn up between the two governments to address this' (R92)

'We need to start thinking of what reunification means to Ireland and the UK' (R170).

These arguments could be seen as demonstration of the fact that some see Brexit as making Irish unification a pragmatic answer rather than an ideological one. Whilst this is far from a dominant narrative in the findings of this report, it is noteworthy that there were proportionately significantly more responses in this vein than in our previous two surveys of this type in the region. This is in part because there is a common perception among our respondents that multiple aspects of life in the border region depend on unlimited ability for cross-border movement of everything – from people, animals, goods and data, to citizens' rights and the associated recognition of qualifications and ability to access education, healthcare, social security and benefits, and pensions. The challenge for the UK and EU negotiators has been preserving the conditions for such cross-border movement even as the border becomes an external frontier of the EU.

A No Deal Brexit

The risks of a No Deal

There are two risks of a No Deal: no withdrawal agreement (needed to see the UK divorce the EU on a legally sure footing) and no future treaty, which would provide the legal foundations for the future UK-EU relationship. The survey for this report was conducted under the shadow of a growing possibility of there being a No Deal exit from the EU for the UK. The focus groups and interviews took place in a context in which a No Deal Brexit was seen as less likely.

We asked survey respondents about the perceived difference between a No Deal Brexit and Brexit with a Deal. One notable finding is that the responses to this question show how wide a range of aspects of everyday life are seen as being affected by No Deal. There were multiple themes and issues covered in the majority of responses to this question, often within one answer. A neat example is from Respondent 264: *'Breaking the Good Friday Agreement. Tariffs and travel disruptions. Uncertainty for future on industry, tourism.'* This shows how the practical is intertwined with the existential, if you will, for the border region. Others are more blunt and all-encompassing in their responses: *'I see it as the difference in shooting yourself in the foot and shooting yourself in the head, both will be very destructive for the country, but how anyone can countenance 'No Deal' is beyond me'* (R326).

As the above suggests, the overwhelming responses to this question were negative, in many cases extremely so. But there were a handful of answers (all from Leave voters) that suggested that, although No Deal would not bring any benefits, it would be better than not having a good deal (R32) or that it was preferable to a deal *'given the intransigence of the EU'* (R258) and what PM May had secured. That said, we can summarise the majority of responses here under three broad themes: socio-economic and practical concerns, concerns for security, and the destabilising power of uncertainty.

Socio-economic and practical concerns

First, socio-economic and practical concerns predominate, reflecting the importance of cross-border movement and also the value placed on stability for economic growth in the region. A large number of respondents mention concerns about the impact of tariffs. Others predict a long-lasting recession, in which a few predict that they will emigrate (e.g. R201). Many summarise it in general terms:

'Increased and long-term damage to local economies on both sides of the border. More changes to work, living and travel patterns. Less safe place to live and work' (R29)

'Instability for business, tourism development and economic development. Price increases. Shortages of food, medicines and other products that are currently transported north and south and through Britain... Job losses and loss of population' (R286).

Farming and agri-food are frequently-mentioned concerns: *'It will flatten agricultural sales of meat, milk and dairy produce. Here in Omagh our local dairy stand to lose 60% of their overseas markets creating unemployment almost at once'* (R319).

A slightly different perspective, in a series of questions, is offered by a vet in Fermanagh and Omagh:

'Can my clients bring their pets from Ireland for their veterinary care to me? Can I prescribe medications that are to be transported across this border and used in Ireland at the client's residence? Can my northern clients happily travel to Ireland with their pets (this is part of many clients' daily routine)? Lots of veterinary medicines are manufactured in the EU or have ingredients originating in the EU, will these still be available?' (R328).

Also mentioned as a particular concern in Northern Ireland is the loss of competitiveness vis-a-vis those in the Republic of Ireland; much of this view comes from trends already emerging and noticed:

'Business in a No Deal could go under if customers decide not to send us their business as we [in NI will be] outside EU which has already stopped new potential clients already. Brexit is not good for business on the border or in Ireland and my business is built on free movement across Ireland and UK' (R315).

Security concerns

Secondly, there are major concerns expressed for security in the border region if there is a No Deal. This is in part because the socio-economic conditions of the border region are connected to the environment in which terrorism is fostered:

'[No Deal v Deal] is the difference between being a stable prosperous area and being a jobless depressing place that encourages those most unfortunate to turn to the habits of the past' (R79).

The word *'devastating'* appears a lot in responses; for example:

'It would be emotionally devastating. A sense that my country didn't care about us at all and was willing to sacrifice the peace and prosperity of N.Ireland for some nebulous "making Britain great again". It will cost us our peace' (R13).

There is a connection made between the expectation of checks, the changed symbolic and practical status of the border, the anticipation of a rise in dissident activity, and an expected rise in criminality. It is not necessarily in the fact of the risk but in the anticipation of the risk and in the subsequent adjustment of behaviour that terrorism can have its greatest impact.

In fact, the threat to peace and the shadow of violence was particularly often elaborated on by participants in focus groups and individual interviews. Here it was specifically linked to the potential for any form of border infrastructure or physical checks, requiring stopping people in the road. We find such fears are strongly related to personal experiences in the past and, as such, both generationally-specific and often emotionally-charged, even if they often spoke of both the perceived threat itself and the emotions associated with it in indirect ways. Here two participants in a focus group explain their concerns:

'If there's a customs post put on the border here, I can assure you...there's people out there waiting to just have a go at it. It's something that cannot happen. There's only one place for a checkpoint and there's one place for customs and that's on the ports and the airports. You cannot put a line around this country again, from Donegal down. There's no way you could police the border. ...

There are people talking about the border that are living away from it, they don't understand it. It's a different world completely. If there comes customs [controls] back on this border, you will breed terrorism. People are waiting to go for it. If we have a stumbling block along the border...In Ballyconnell, there are 840 jobs. If there's comes up customs

posts again, that border will split those jobs and they cross hundreds of times from one factory to another. How do you police that?' (focus group 5).

In the following extract from an interview, conducted with someone working in the local voluntary and community sector, the threat of violence is rather euphemistically expressed, yet is very central to the respondent's perceptions of the negative effects of Brexit:

'The biggest concern I would have is that we would move back to a situation again ... to the whole element of strife. And while I don't see it happening quickly, I am interested in what's happening at different locations. It seems to me now that there's a political change and it appears to be that sort of extremism is showing its head more and more. ... there's always the possibility that there's people and factions who in actual fact thrive when there's strife' (interview 3).

The persistent existence of criminal organisations in the border region who bourgeon in an environment of conflict and community tension, and who also prosper directly from smuggling, is a point that is frequently raised by participants in this research as an important consideration when it comes to handling the consequences of Brexit.

The negative effects of uncertainty

Finally, as highlighted in our previous reports, an overriding theme in people's views of No Deal was that of uncertainty. Given the cross-border nature of life for many in the border region, respondents in the survey were keen to set out the scale of the impact of such uncertainty:

'A deal, no matter how unpalatable, will bring some certainty and allow for medium to long term plans to be made across society, both civic and business. No deal will bring uncertainty, instability and chaos' (R69).

Many of the responses on this question are similar to those in other parts of the UK or, indeed, Europe – particularly from those in business: *'We want to put in place new plans and move forward but we are in limbo at the moment. We would like to see this all finished and with a final decision being made'* (interview 9).

Given the cross-border dimensions of life for many in the border region, many respondents in this research perceived a No Deal outcome in terms of very practical implications for the border. And responses to the online survey question of *'What aspects of life for you in the*

border region would you expect to be most affected by Brexit?' demonstrate the wide range of issues raised by such a prospect:

'Environment - threats to environmental (and Human Rights) law which is enshrined in European Law and may be subject to dismissal following a No Deal withdrawal from the EU - particularly concerning in relation to the many on-going environmental threats we face locally, including those faced from the extractive industry such as toxic gold mining and fracking, factory farming, etc.' (R1).

Another response below shows – in a point that builds on from the discussion above – how the pragmatic concerns for businesses are intermingled with another dimension for many in the region, i.e. community safety:

'As a result of the lack of certainty, it is very difficult to plan for the future in terms of continuing to live in the border region, ascertaining whether community safety will become a big issue and determining whether our family business will improve its fortunes. Our family business is in hospitality, and we have identified already a drop in the number of people coming to our area on account of the political uncertainties associated with Brexit and the potential trouble that it brings' (R245).

This again points to the distinctiveness of the Irish border region – and perhaps to Northern Ireland more broadly: that uncertainty doesn't just make it difficult to plan for the future, but it also raises concerns about the security of that future in the most basic terms.

Given the perception that No Deal brings risks of potential conflict and insecurity as well as economic challenges, the sense of hopelessness when it comes to the border region having any influence over this process is all the more acute:

'We don't have any say in what happens in the north or in the UK – we are not involved in that – but what we are involved in is trying to ensure that any change that happens, happens in a planned, structured way. That it doesn't happen on the basis of an overnight sensation or an overnight curtain coming down or whatever. ...

Making sure that where unforeseen changes and unforeseen consequences are identified and do arise that there is a method to be able to deal with them. And no plan just means that there's no plan. A No Deal means that there is no plan. So, anything that ensures that No Deal is avoided is to be welcomed' (interview 2).

All this points to the importance of practical advice and accurate information on this subject matter, but which the vast majority of respondents feel to be scarce or entirely absent:

'We need fear and concern to be minimized. So, we need good people on the ground who have knowledge and can offer advice to border people. It's very, very important. Brexit's going to happen in some shape or form so we need good people on the ground and out and about, and we need them across the border region. That's the first thing I'll say' (interview 5).

Notably, uncertainty in and of itself was often commented upon as the most obvious and most felt actual impact of Brexit:

'People are very negative, they feel almost like there's a big dark cloud hanging over the border because there's so much uncertainty. So, it's on their minds and a lot of questions are being asked by local people like: What on earth is going to happen next? Where's all this going? What did Boris Johnson mean last night? When will this all be over? So, you know, a lot of uncertainty here and it is having a negative effect on local life' (interview 4).

Another interviewee, from the voluntary and community sector, explains why uncertainty can have such a corrosive effect in a society like that in the border region:

'Uncertainty leads to concern and worries which leads to and can lead to mistrust, and increasingly, what I would say is a tapering of relationships or impact on relationships, because people are inclined to go back into their own selves and their own place where they are comfortable with like-minded people. And that is what I am currently seeing. ... So, Brexit has started a process of an increasing lack of engagement and building up of concern between people and within communities' (interview 5).

Uncertainty was also a frequently mentioned concern throughout the responses to our online survey. It was often expressed in relation to the already experienced effects of Brexit and seen as particularly detrimental to the economy of the region:

'Brexit is creating enormous uncertainty and it is causing me to delay significant investment decisions' (R44)

'The uncertainty is plainly slowing down business along the border with investments being stalled until more is known about what measures are going to be in place' (R258)

'I am a small beef farmer. The issues around Brexit are causing huge uncertainty and anxiety. This is affecting the prices I receive for my stock. As costs continue to rise for meal, fertiliser etc my farm will not be viable. This will only get worse if there is a No Deal and tariffs come in' (R150).

This view, however, was still further sharpened and even more often shared in relation to the possibility of a No Deal Brexit:

'Uncertainties, without a transition period hard to plan for the unknown' (R21)

'A deal, no matter how unpalatable, will bring some certainty and allow for medium to long term plans to be made across society, both civic and business. No deal will bring uncertainty, instability and chaos' (R69)

'Increased tariffs; loss of all EU regulations governing standards; freefall of income for NI farmers; uncertainty; UK government could impose any regulations that they want, especially regarding import and exporting' (R226).

Overall, responses to our online survey indicate that uncertainty is not just a condition but a force in and of itself, in that it is having direct effects. In fact, it is these effects that are so far the most tangible and concrete forms of impact that Brexit is having. The possibility of a No Deal Brexit has served to exacerbate this sense of uncertainty in the border region and thus increase the impact that Brexit has already had on some people's experience and decision-making.

Responses to the Revised Withdrawal Agreement

The new Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland

Only two months before the beginning of our fieldwork, a new UK Conservative Prime Minster took up office and, with that, a change in the political direction of Brexit negotiations was afoot. The deadline of 31 October for the UK's withdrawal from the EU dawned and passed whilst the fieldwork was underway, to be replaced by another date for exit for the new year. A revised Withdrawal Agreement was reached between the UK and the EU on 17 October 2019, containing a new Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland which had direct implications for the experience of Brexit and for avoiding a hard border on the island of Ireland.

In summary, the Protocol avoided a hard border by treating Northern Ireland differently to the rest of the UK. However, this new agreement was not ratified by the UK Parliament before the planned exit date at the end of October. The House of Commons seemed to be in an intractable stalemate over Brexit. Under the slogan promise to *'Get Brexit done'*, PM Boris Johnson put the country into a General Election for 12 December 2019.

The revised Withdrawal Agreement hadn't been released when the online survey for this project was live, but all the focus groups and interviews were conducted after it was in the public domain. Various views were recorded during this second phase of research regarding the new Protocol of this Agreement and we summarise them here.

First, there is an overall lack of understanding about the new deal. There is awareness that although unionists are even more strongly opposed to this Protocol than to the previous version, so too are nationalist and centrist parties in Northern Ireland – although it is being supported by the Irish as well as the UK government. This means that people struggle to get a clear impression of the deal, let alone to know its full implications for the border region. There is also a certain logic in refraining from final judgement, given the experience of Brexit so far, as interviewee 9 noted: *'Very few could put store on what the final deal might look like, it's been changing so often'*. Interviewee 12 concurred: *'I would not be surprised, if this might change. I am not watching the news, as it is changing every 3 months.'*

To an extent, there is also a lack of real interest in the detail of the deal. This is in part due to Brexit-weariness and in part due (judging by various comments made in the focus groups and interviews) to a loss of trust in British government ministers regarding Brexit. This has given rise to the view that political interpretations and slogans regarding the Protocol's effects on Northern Ireland and the border region cannot be taken at face value. Furthermore, there is also a strong sense that this will not be the last word on Brexit. Given that people in the border region have had to engage with the prospect of a harder Irish land border through Brexit, it is perhaps unsurprising that our respondents also point to the potential impact of a so-called *'Irish Sea border'*:

'The questions of checks at the border or checks in the Irish sea …I think as a matter of fact when Brexit happens and we pull away from Europe that will have repercussions. It must have' (interview 3).

Participants were also keen to note that the Protocol did not resolve all issues in relation to the Irish border and that, with the potential of additional uncertainty vis-à-vis the movement across the Irish Sea, there were new concerns. This contribution from one interviewee spells this out clearly with regard to the health sector in Northern Ireland:

'Regulations between countries could become a challenge. For example, with regard to regulatory hours for those trying to work across jurisdictions. Irish and EU legislation would apply to a consultant from Letterkenny. And yet this consultant may be asked to work in Altnagelvin in Northern Ireland and where after Brexit, there may be divergences in how such legislation applies. This example could impact on service delivery.

A border down the Irish Sea might impact on drugs moving from UK to Ireland or vice versa and where standards would then be different' (interview 8).

This was elaborated further by a person in one focus group, who was rather sanguinely noting that Brexit means a border with the EU (i.e. Ireland) and that, in their view, Prime Minister Johnson had gone against his word and put that border down the Irish Sea:

'I don't agree with Brexit. I don't think there are any opportunities coming out of Brexit whatsoever, apart from maybe the smugglers… There has to be a border somewhere if the UK is going to leave the European Union, whether that's under a deal or a No Deal. It has to be across Ireland or it has to be in the sea…

The fact that it's in the sea [in this Withdrawal Agreement], I don't think the government really cares. The north is a bit of an annoying thing that always gets in the way. Boris, after saying he wouldn't, has put the border down the Irish Sea.

For here, it's the least crappy deal out of all the crappy deals. As for the rest of the UK, I know that Scotland isn't very happy either. As for the rest, I believe Brexit is bad. But there has to be a border, that's just fact' (focus group 2).

There is a common view that, although it is better than a No Deal, this Withdrawal Agreement is still damaging to the border region. This is specifically because it is seen as still threatening a form of hard Brexit. Moreover, it is seen as also managing to have reawakened the threat of violence, only this time particularly on the part of loyalism rather than republicanism. There is clear recognition among our research participants of the difficulties for unionism, including those in the Irish border region:

'We are being told that it won't have any impact on the border region. However, it's clearly had an impact on the minds and psychology of unionism. That is a concern. Yes, that is a concern. So, we are being told by PM Johnson that there would not be a hard border and that would not have any impact. But we are being told by unionism that it is damaging for them in terms of their place in a United Kingdom… It's having a negative impact on people's psychology. It's having a negative impact on a sizeable number of people's psychology and their sense of place and sense of belonging' (interview 5).

There are therefore wider psychological and symbolic and social and political ramifications from this, just as there are from the prospect of a hard Irish land border. Indeed, a border between the UK and Ireland is seen as a challenge to peace and to identity, no matter where it is:

'It's the imposition of a border and it's the challenge to identity that comes with that. It's taking away freedoms and how you live your normal life. It's a wholesale change and irrespective of whether the border is here in Cavan with Fermanagh or a sea border, it's going to have a huge impact on life here. That new border that is being considered, the ramifications of that and the concern that that causes to the loyalist and unionist communities in Northern Ireland' (focus group 5).

The revised Protocol is viewed as perpetuating uncertainty in that there is a lot still to be decided and made clear after Brexit when it comes to its practical implementation and costs:

'But there is still a lot of uncertainty, like how will cross-border opportunities and projects be affected? Will Northern Ireland projects still be eligible for EU funding? What will this mean for developing cross-border tourism relationships and opportunities that have been worked on for some time?' (interview 11).

Uncertainty is perpetuated by the new deal in another way too, in that people's trust of politicians (particularly the political leadership in Westminster) has been strained by the Brexit process and the handling of the whole topic:

'You've got so much uncertainty coming from London that generally people here just don't know what to believe, don't know which way it's going and then you find that the political leadership are actually contradicting one another. So, you know, somebody… Boris Johnson says something and somebody else says oh, that's not the case and contradicts him and that just leads to a very, very confused border region' (interview 4).

'Are we going to have to drive to Enniskillen [or] are we going to have to drive south of Ballyshannon to clear our goods? Who knows. The uncertainty is absolutely horrendous. And when you have the likes of the Brexit secretary coming out and saying well, there will be checks with goods going out from NI into GB and from GB into NI, and then the PM gets up and says there will be none, who's the fool here, you know? Do they know what's happening? I don't believe they do. They are saying what they want to say for themselves regardless of what the person here in the North in particular – they don't give a damn' (focus group 3).

So, in that sense, the new Protocol appears not to have reassured many people in the border region: they still expect disruption, still express some wariness about the messages they have received from some political leaders, and still feel uncertain and uninformed, which in and of itself only causes harm. Similarly, the (re)emergence of any border makes differences more visible and tangible. This is explained well by one interviewee, who summarises what a harder border means for community relations not just trade – regardless of whether it be a sea or a land border:

'This process is highlighting the existence of the border again. People are wondering, 'how will this affect us and our relationships?' It all feels that we will have to identify ourselves again, whereas before this issue had been lessened. It feels like we are going backwards and the concern is that this may impact on the peace process. People don't want to raise this and so it's not being talked about so much but there is the real question about how this might impact on the peace process' (interview 7).

Another interviewee summed up the bottom line:

'I hope very sincerely that whichever arrangement comes out of this will not in any shape or form result in lives being lost. For that very reason, and it's been well and truly discussed, I do not want to see anything remotely resembling a hard border on the island of Ireland again. The scars are still very much in the North from what went before and many are in the South also' (interview 9).

The Views of Leave Supporters

Leave supporters and this survey

Leave supporters are not proportionately represented in this research, despite our best efforts to encourage as much participation as possible from people across the full spectrum of views on the subject. We did not ask focus group participants or interviewees how they voted (although some disclosed that they were Leave supporters), and there were 41 Leave-voting respondents out of the 475 who completed the survey. As a proportion of the 312 respondents who had a vote at the time of the referendum in 2016, Leave voters represent 13% of the survey sample. We have taken care to analyse their responses and report on them here. They do differ in some significant ways from the majority of answers given to our questions.

When it comes to experiencing the effects of Brexit already, 24 of the 41 say that it has had no impact on them so far. Most of those who say it has impacted upon them say this has been in positive ways (e.g. devaluation of sterling encouraging shoppers from south of the border). Only four Leave-voting respondents say Brexit has had a negative effect so far, and this is primarily in relation to the effects of uncertainty, e.g. investments being put on hold and increased prices. Just one of the Leave-voting respondents in our survey expresses regret at voting Leave.

Notable in Leave-voting respondents' answers to the question of *'What aspects of life for you in the border region would you expect to be most affected by Brexit?'* is the fact that, as with Remain-voting respondents, they also perceive Brexit as posing a risk to the present-day levels of freedom of movement in the border region:

'Freedom to travel round the land of our birth without restriction is psychological need. Border restrictions of any kind are unacceptable - the border in one direction is three miles from where I live- NOT acceptable on any level-self explanatory!' (R17).

'Travelling freely in my own country [is at risk]' (R257).

But others, as seen in the example below, see the very possibility of restrictions to cross-border travel after Brexit as a positive development:

'It has reduced the number of migrant workers resulting in the first pay rises in the engineering and manufacturing sector for almost a decade' (R196).

Views on a hard border

There is a significant range of opinion among our Leave-voting respondents when it comes to the question of what a hard Irish land border would mean to them. A portion of them express strong disbelief that a hard border could exist and very much doubt that it could ever happen in reality:

'I don't believe there will be a hard border' (R58)

'I doubt much will happen. There is more traffic heading North to purchase goods than the other way around. This can only be of benefit to local businesses including my own' (R392)

'I don't believe a hard border is physically possible' (R310)

'I don't think very much will be affected - I believe it's a load of crap with the media and the EU fear mongering. We dealt with the South before joining the EU and will continue to do so regardless of the outcome. Personally, I believe we'll prosper more outside of the EU. ...I don't believe the EU has the UK's interests at heart and only a hard Brexit will cure it. [The] South of Ireland will suffer more than us and if they'd any sense they'd leave too' (R475).

Related to this, while respondent 377 expresses the view that a hard border cannot exist because no side will want or be able to implement it (e.g. *'A hard border is a unicorn; it's never existed and never will. How and who can implement one?'*), respondent 402 believes that technology can remove any visible effects of such a border and thus negate its effects: *'If using modern technology for customs while crossing it, [a hard border would mean] Nothing.'*

Another group of five respondents suggest that a hard border would mean checks (be they passport or customs) but share the view that this is either a positive thing, or that it will not affect their personal lives:

'It will be a customs border. I remember the old customs border and there was no problem' (R463)

'I have no issue with a hard border, can't see what the fuss is about to be honest' (R257)

'Better control of security and to stop illegal immigrants and to protect British trade' (R52).

It is important to acknowledge that a small minority of our Leave-voting respondents appear to come from an Irish nationalist position, and they express the view that a hard border would spur momentum for Irish unification, which they see as a positive outcome. When asked what a hard border would mean for them, they answer:

'More determined to work for an end to Westminster rule in North of Ireland' (R3)

'I would become proactive in seeking a United Ireland – [a hard border] is not acceptable' (R17)

'The remanifestation of British occupation and a new intensity to end it' (R196).

However, the much greater proportion of responses to this question comes from those who see a hard border as having negative consequences for the region. These are framed largely from a practical perspective and cover a range of issues that are (as with the Remain-voting respondents), very wide-ranging, such as disruption to travel and daily life, delays, prices rises, and securitisation/militarisation of the border:

'Extra time spent on administration, waiting times at border and financial burdens associated with above' (R472)

'The end of freedom to travel north to south' (R457)

'It will put an end of a generation of progress in trade and growing better together' (R392)

'Disaster for social and commercial cohesion' (R466)

'Violence' (R165).

Views on a No Deal Brexit

When it comes to the prospect of a No Deal Brexit, around half of the respondents in this survey who voted Leave suggest either that there is no difference between a deal and a No Deal scenario for the border region, or that No Deal is a better option (and included among these positive views of No Deal are two Irish nationalist opinions suggesting that such a situation would bring a united Ireland closer). As with the prospect of a harder border, a high proportion of these respondents are sceptical that No Deal really will have much effect on the border region:

'Don't see a difference. UK border is UK border' (R133)

'No one wants a hard border if you could call it that. If the UK doesn't put checks on the border will the EU do the same?' (R402)

'Republic will suffer but Ni will be no different than any other part of the UK' (R308).

Others are wary of giving an opinion, citing the lack of sufficient information currently available on the future Brexit border.

Those who view a deal as a better option than No Deal associate the latter with a wide range of negative effects. These range from economic impacts (*'It'll cripple the local economy as it's so dependent on cross-border trade'* [R34]) to the possibility of violence (*'The potential for increased dissident activity as a response to hard Brexit'* [R7]). Indeed, the perception that the impact could be broad and unpredictable is reflected in a few responses from Leave-voting respondents regarding what a No Deal would mean:

'At best inconvenience over border crossing; at worst economic disaster for businesses in the area' (R475)

'It will restrict daily travel, work, social life, border economy and most importantly will highlight long forgotten tension' [R17].

Preferences for representation for the border region after Brexit

It is also worth noting that, just as with respondents from all perspectives, there are a variety of views expressed among the Leave voters in response to the question of political representation for the border region after Brexit. 1 in 8 do not see a need for a greater or different form of representation for the region than exists at present, one commenting that *'we are already an over represented country in terms of politicians per person'* (R143). A few share the view that, as noted elsewhere in this report, it is widely held among respondents to this survey that what will matter is the quality of representation, which needs to be *'better'*, not the nature of it.

1 in 5 Leave-voting respondents refer to some sort of a joint British-Irish representation or one that involves representatives of the EU, including two respondents who suggests that more formal cross-border cooperation, both north/south and British/Irish, is necessary:

'Dedicated cross border body to oversee and find a best possible and sustainable long term solution to what once again it seems, is becoming a problem' (R93)

'Bi lateral representation between UK and Ireland at national government level and cross border local authority engagement' (R7).

Others express a resolute desire for a functioning local Assembly and Executive in Northern Ireland and some suggest that there is scope for greater involvement by local authorities. It is worth noting that a few participants cast a vote of no confidence in political representation at all, suggesting instead that there is scope for wider representation from sectors such as the business community, or even a greater role for the police service.

Analysis of the responses from Leave supporters in this survey reveals an interesting diversity of opinion among Leave supporters, as well as among Remain supporters in the border region. It also shows that uncertainty and lack of detail regarding Brexit (e.g. on the revised Protocol) also acts as a dampener on their confidence about the future.

The Impact of Brexit Already Experienced

Knowing from our previous report that Brexit has already been having an impact in the border region, we asked for specific examples of how (if in any ways) respondents had been affected. This took the form of two questions:

▶ What have you done/planned as a result of Brexit?

▶ What have you not been able to do/plan as a result of Brexit?

This was in order to cover the fact that Brexit could mean people having to do or prepare for things that they otherwise need not have done, and it could mean people not doing what they would otherwise have done. About 1 in 5 of the online survey respondents say that they have not yet noticed an impact (at the time of asking the UK was still in the EU). However, the majority of respondents recount specific examples of a direct impact from Brexit that they have already noticed.

Impact on business, work and investment

Many people commented on the effects of Brexit on their work and business. Perhaps most strikingly, this includes several reports of redundancies:

'Lost my job last year. Company pulled out of NI moved job to the EU' (R101)

'I have been made redundant' (R377)

'Will have to be laid off from work' (R157)

'Staff redundancies' (R473).

One respondent described his redundancy in a way that points to the pre-emptive anticipation that Brexit would make certain businesses in the border region untenable:

'Already made redundant. business decision by large employer... majority European customer base.. apparently our plant was still profitable' (R19).

In fact, 1 in 10 respondents to the survey describe a change in business plans as a result of Brexit. This covers such examples as no longer planning to import into the Northern Ireland market from EU countries, or delaying investment in Northern Ireland. The fact that this impact can be felt as much on the southern side of the border as in Northern Ireland is seen in this comment from one focus group:

'A lot of our businesses and factories have slowed down expansion. They don't know what way this is going to go or how this is going to affect them. Five years ago, they were ploughing ahead and expanding nearly every month, but that has slowed down. If it slows down, job expansions won't happen.

I know our [Irish] government has done Trojan work to give small businesses [advice] but they are still worried… A lot of businesses around here do a lot of business in Northern Ireland and England and I think they'd be worried about going out and spending another half a million or another million, [without knowing] which way does this go?' (focus group 5).

One interviewee (11) describes the effects of Brexit on business as being *'the fear factor and a lack of confidence… there is a nervousness about future investments. As an example, one business has curtailed investment plans, fearing being saddled with a debt in an uncertain market.'*

Examples of delayed investment and retraction are particularly evident in the agricultural sector:

'Brexit has a major negative impact on our daily lives and on our future. As farmers the uncertainty does not allow for expansion or investment in diversification at any level. If subsidies are not maintained at current levels of CAP [Common Agricultural Policy] we will not survive, as land here is mostly [designated as] SDA [Severely Disadvantaged Area]. …If there was no Brexit threat we would have continued our expansion plans as was before 2016' (R362).

A participant in a focus group described the impact of the uncertainty on those who are most exposed to Brexit, particularly in the border region and in agriculture:

'I have a chartered accountancy practice in Mid Ulster and the main reason I wanted to come today [to attend the focus group, is that] …I have a practice of 500 clients: a lot of farmers, a lot of builders, a lot of engineers, engineering companies. A real broad mix of clientele. In particular, with the farmers, bigger farmers with bank loans… I think the word

'terrified' is the word they would use. They are mainly large, unionist dairy farmers. Quite terrified of the consequences of what might happen' (focus group 1).

And an interviewee gave a specific example of the wider impact of Brexit on the business sector, both already experienced and anticipated:

'The exchange rate situation has been worrying, to put it mildly, for local (Irish) industry. It is expected that sterling would fall rapidly in the event of a Hard Brexit, certainly in the initial stages, and that would obviously cause problems for any product going into Britain. A further fall in the exchange rate as a result of Brexit, would be a real challenge' (interview 9).

There are also many examples given in the survey of deals falling through including those relating to farming businesses, selling of houses and offering of jobs. Here is a small sample:

'Investment in business on hold' (R6)

'Fallen through house move. fall in value of home. impact on disposable income due to [exchange rate] drop in £ [sterling]' (R81)

'Brexit may impact my job. My job is EU funded, I now don't have job security. It will therefore impact on every single aspect of my life. From paying my mortgage to my children's education and my own peace of mind' (R383)

'Had [a job offer] withdrawn because I live in the north, so employer is not willing to take the risk I'll be able to travel and work in EU' (R420)

'I need to buy farm machinery but will not do anything until Brexit is over' (R333).

Another respondent working in the financial sector explains that decisions have had to be based on their assessment as to the likelihood of Brexit occurring on the specified exit date, risking costly miscalculations:

'We have had to put serious plans into our business to accommodate us if there is a No Deal. We haven't pushed the button as yet until we know for definite. However we work in insurance and we have to issue renewal notices 30 days in advance of renewal therefore we have to make arrangements from the 1st of October and not the 31st' (R57).

The *'people dimension'* of such calculations is complicated yet crucial. People in the border region have had to consider how Brexit might have a direct impact on their daily

life and then make decisions or adjustments accordingly. For example, a British citizen living in Ireland and working in the NHS in Northern Ireland summarises the spread and the consequence of such uncertainty:

'I am applying for an Irish passport after 30 years of living in Donegal [as a British citizen]. ...I've been worrying about other things so have no control over – my British occupational pension, whether my qualifications will continue to be recognized, whether I can still apply for jobs in HSE [in the ROI], how will I travel to work in Dublin [crossing the border in the shortest route]. I haven't applied for a senior level job in my field in NI that I might have without Brexit' (R24).

Respondents also describe withholding of personal investment or spending plans. These range from anything from renovating one's kitchen to going on holiday, buying a house (especially but not exclusively on the other side of the border), or taking out a loan. Specific examples of concerns about the consequences of Brexit that have led to people making these negative decisions include problems in data sharing, in recruiting employees, and the downside of the devaluation of sterling. A good illustration of this is from a business person based in Northern Ireland:

'I own a business and take data from Ireland, France, USA and UK. But now with Brexit I need a Standard Clause Contract to receive this information/data from all my EU customers outside the UK. It's deterring these customers from sending us their business and data and looking elsewhere. I may have to open a premise in Ireland and the cost associated with that' (R315).

Another example of a loss of business comes from this vet in Fermanagh and Omagh:

'Border controls will affect everything... We certainly already have many clients who have made it clear that they are not willing to bring their pet through border controls to visit our vets, even though we are the closest emergency veterinary care they have. These clients have already requested their notes be sent to another vets in Ireland [on southern side of the border]' (R328).

Another issue raised by a number of responses in the survey, focus groups and interviews is the long-term effects of Brexit on reducing the availability of labour in Northern Ireland, including *'likely emigration'* (R21), *'families leaving'* (R15) and a reduction in the pool of migrant workers seeking employment:

'The Craigavon industrial base, particularly food processing is heavily dependent on migrant labour. The workforce has a high turnover and in the event of a hard Brexit /

restrictions on EU workers coming in to NI, industry is facing a resourcing cliff edge. Fewer people coming in means potential factory closure, leading to economic depression in the area' (R12).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, people from other EU countries in Northern Ireland are experiencing Brexit as a highly significant force already, as this interviewee (12) working in the migrant community explained:

'People are really confused, they don't know what will really happen. People have been returning to their home countries - Brexit has impacted on their plans.'

This is particularly poignant given the acute lack of political representation that such individuals have in these circumstances:

'Migrant communities don't have a vote, yet they pay taxes and spend in the local economy. They are speechless on the big decisions affecting them' (interview 12).

As we discuss below, these decisions will have long-term consequences, regardless of the final outcome from the changed UK/EU relationship.

In outlining the current and future consequences of Brexit, interviewees from the business sector also took care to explain what it has been like trying to deal with the situation of *'limbo'*. This indicates a hiatus and lag in planning and expansion that could be seen to have actually had an effect. This is particularly notable given what Brexit will mean to this business:

'We have gone to seminars on Brexit organised locally. We have been putting in place new plans and this has involved some financial outlay. But at the minute we are in limbo, and have done as much as we can.

Brexit would mean that we have to expand our markets, from beyond exporting to NI and to consider new markets. This will mean widening delivery routes. We will have to examine research and development and consider employing new staff.

We want to put in place new plans and move forward. But we are in limbo at the moment. We would like to see this all finished and with a final decision being made' (interview 1).

This type of experience is echoed by another interviewee working on the business side of the agri-food sector in Ireland:

There is a certain weariness with the continuing uncertainty. People are saying 'I wish this would be over very soon'. The food industry is the big one… it is on a limb if [Brexit] goes ahead in the form of a hard Brexit. The entire food sector in Ireland is really concerned.

The weariness has become greater. People in business are afraid. Many don't know what to do and some are changing existing plans' (interview 9).

This interviewee goes on to note that this already means an eroding of carefully-built relationships between businesses across the Irish land and sea border:

'For example, businesses are now sourcing suppliers from the continent, and those relationships built up over many years with UK and NI suppliers have now gone. To go further afield into non-English speaking markets is particularly challenging for small Irish exporters' (interview 9).

Of course, it is not just business relations that people are concerned could be damaged by Brexit, as we discuss in the section below.

Impact on social relations and connections

There are two types of impact on social relations that Brexit is already having in the border region. The first is with regard to daily life and planning. Some report that they have been considering a change in employment, residency, or place of study, in a way that minimises the need for cross-border travel. In relation to this, many describe personal/family decisions in expectation of Brexit:

'Two of my children have decided not to do 3rd level education in NI due to Brexit threat as they want to remain connected to Europe - this threat is making the brain drain from border counties even worse than it was' (R38).

Such decisions are reminiscent of the *'back to back'* experience known in the past in the border region, with the sense of there being different if not competing interests on either side of the border, and lacking a joined-up approach to common concerns. This was only overcome by the slow embedding of the peace process and the normalisation of cross-border relations. This process – and the threat to it - was described well in one of the focus groups:

'I think that following the Good Friday Agreement that most people thought 'that's the end of that problem' and got on with living as normal and doing their business and cross-border work and friends [and] cross-border partnership. Do ordinary political stuff and promote the projects. But Brexit reawakens this; it has not gone. There's a big threat to it there, we have to be vigilant' (focus group 1).

'Over the past years there has been a movement away from back-to-back working towards working collaboratively and in an integrated manner. If any of this changes, that would be a regression' (interview 8).

The second is in relation to the socio-political or communal tensions that persist in the region. Brexit is largely seen as a divisive, polarising topic: *'I didn't think that it would be so binary. It's so oppositional'* (focus group 1). This has particularly negative effects in an already-divided society. One respondent living in Northern Ireland, and who abstained in the 2016 referendum, described the impact of Brexit in these stark terms:

'It is causing me and my family untold stress. My Protestant work colleagues are openly supportive of the No Deal and saving the union whilst the Catholic staff try not to say much to avoid tensions building. I am actively seeking work opportunities in ROI' (R17).

And it would be remiss not to recognise that such tensions and differences can be fuelled and exploited by paramilitary organisations on both sides. No doubt because of the concerns expressed publicly in Northern Ireland about the revised Withdrawal Agreement, the spectre of loyalist violence was mentioned in focus groups. For example, in Caledon:

'There have been very dangerous comments from loyalist paramilitaries and it's not surprising that they're doing that and threatening that they're going to blow up the south. What is worrying is the lack of reaction to that. Does that sadly mean that we haven't moved on an awful lot in 20 years? That the establishments, the governments, the police, the military are saying "they're working away there, recruiting". They're destroying their own communities…it's sad that nobody is taking an interest in loyalist and unionist communities that are worse off probably now than ever' (focus group 1).

The effect of Brexit in a nutshell, according to many respondents, will be to change the direction of travel for Britain, and this is viewed as having knock-on effects for politics and identity as well as economics in Northern Ireland. In particular, the deepening insecurity felt by some unionists in Northern Ireland is well expressed by one participant in a focus group:

'They [the UK political establishment] are quite happy to cut unionists away. So that's bound to make them ask 'who do we belong to anymore?' The UK don't want us anymore.

We decided we don't want to be part of the EU. We want the union at all costs. ... So, it's alienating people. This whole thing is alienating people. ... It's making people turn around and say 'who are my friends anymore? Who can I rely on?'. ... It is forcing people into corners that I don't think they should be in. ...this started out as a theoretical economic argument [but] it's got really dangerous for us here. Unless it gets resolved' (focus group 4).

More broadly, others emphasise a fear of associated isolation for communities in the border region of all backgrounds, north and south – and isolation that comes within the UK and Ireland and across social, political and economic spheres:

'[I fear] Isolation from Ireland – a major, major part of our lives, travel, leisure and business. And also I feel further isolation from the people in the rest of the UK. Having worked in England, I truly realised how the everyday person has no knowledge of Northern Ireland, with many not even knowing it was part of the UK!

This isn't going to improve. Our products and services become less and less attractive to both southern customers and UK customers.

Three times in the past month I have been told that prices to courier items for my business have tripled in costs making it completely unjustifiable to order these items' (R328).

Others fear there are increasing challenges to community cohesion and the threat of a resurgence of violence. Some fear this for the future, others see it as already occurring:

'Not visiting Northern Ireland, for shopping & social events, as often as I would like because of rising social tensions' (R255)

'Fear of being divided again, it controlling us and leaving it harder to cross the border. Also the fear of violence starting up again' (R48)

'Safety concerns - we have already had one bomb in our area and other bomb scares. This is a real life fear that other parts of the UK do not have to think about on a daily basis' (R328).

Again, it is important to remember that the fears of isolation, tensions and violence expressed by participants in this research in the Central Border Region are not completely abstract or academic concerns – they arise from lived experience and memories that for many remain vivid and real.

Looking Ahead

The complexity of the interrelated consequences of Brexit

One thing that is very striking across all the research data from this project is that 'Brexit' is not viewed in singular terms or timeframes. The complexity of the issues that arise reflects the connectivity and sensitivity that exists in the region. These in turn are signs of integration that have happened between the UK and Ireland, as well as across the Irish border itself. And so, it is difficult to categorise the issues under set headings because so many issues are closely interrelated. In fact, people's greatest concern is best summarised as being one of a chain reaction of *'unintended consequences'*, as a respondent from focus group 1 put it. And so, when the survey asked respondents to name three aspects of life in the border region that they expect to be affected by Brexit, the range of areas covered are very illuminating. This example is a good illustration of the range of interrelated and complex issues that arise from Brexit for people in the border region:

'1. My family spans the border. The prospect of having to go through physical infrastructure to visit them is already re-traumatising me. I'm having flashbacks and bad dreams about the British army terrorising us again.

2. I go to GAA matches and my brothers who play in England frequently have matches here in Ireland - what's going to happen there?

3. I'm not a farmer but I'm seriously worried about the possible collapse of farming in the north and the widespread consequences that will have on all of us as agriculture is such a big part of our economy' (R426).

The web-like nature of Brexit consequences was also well articulated by participants in focus groups. Here the multitude of negative effects that people fear Brexit would bring – from terrorism and violence to loss of business and EU funding – are enumerated in detail in two participants' comments:

'Every business along the border is going to be hit, every business in Ireland is going to be hit the same way, if they have to start filling in all this paperwork. I'm in the farming business. ...For one of the biggest dairies in the country, probably 75% of their product

comes from Northern Ireland and goes back into Northern Ireland, and maybe comes back again. The PEACE money that has done Trojan work, the [Cavan] Burren, the Border Uplands [Project] - all that was funded through Europe. If that stopped, we go back to where we were before. If they bring a border in any place, there's a crowd only waiting to start thuggery... The people that brought this in weren't thinking' (focus group 5).

'I would worry that...there have always been partnerships and relationships across the border and with the EU money that helped to formalise it. I wonder, with that gone, will those relationships start to fall away. I work in the arts and we would have a lot of cross-border relationships, we rely on artists/performers to come across and work with us, facilitate sessions; will all that be gone?' (focus group 1).

Finally, what also comes through very clearly is the overall expectation of a detrimental effect on rural areas in particular – stemming from the interrelated nature of things – a chain reaction of decline. At the heart of this challenge is the question of population levels. Keeping and growing the population in the Central Border Region has been a basic ambition for representatives there, being a first step in economic development. This is why the letter from the First and deputy First Minister to Prime Minister May in August 2016 made specific mention of the need to keep skilled and unskilled EU workers in Northern Ireland. There are particular concerns that migrants will leave the border region, thus leaving certain industries suffering from a diminished labour market. This matter came up quite often in the survey and the focus groups – more than in previous rounds of this research. This was clearly explained by one interviewee:

'We, as a local economy here, rely on people being attracted to work here, to come to live here, to take up jobs and opportunities here, in our house sector, in our manufacturing sector. And I see people who no longer feel welcomed and either not coming to live here or deciding not to- maybe other communities are more welcoming. So, I actually already see a negative impact in terms of our local economy here, as ability to attract labour' (interview 5).

Another interviewee, working in the migrant community sector, summarised the sense of confusion which is leading to people leaving the region:

'People are really confused, they don't know what will really happen. People have been returning to their home countries - Brexit has impacted on their plans...There are not as many migrant communities coming here, in comparison to the past...People are just fed up with it all and don't know what's going to happen' (interview 12).

The fact that this issue is not confined to just one sector or industry but has knock-on effects into the public sector is articulated by one focus group participant:

'There is one issue that straddles both sides of the border and that's our newcomer families and they're very much in this area. I just wonder what they think of this. Large schools that have newcomer families, particularly in the Dungannon area. If they start to leave, teachers and classroom assistants may leave their jobs. They are watching and wondering what to make of all this. I don't know how big that community is on the southern side of the border...but they support the agri-food industry in large numbers here, we couldn't do it without them. ... some have been here a long time. Some have started their own businesses. I'm concerned for their wellbeing' (focus group 1).

As those comments showed, this experience can be felt across generations, but particularly among the young. For example, at school level:

'It will, I think, accelerate the decline of those rural areas where people live because they want to live, because their relative live, because they want to do a bit of farming, you know, want to keep the land, want to have their kids grow up there.

Our school's had increasing rural numbers. That could just as easily go the other way, you know, in a small rural school. That's because people of my generation that lived in England have come back to have their families and they want to support that. But, equally, it could go like it did in the '70s and '80s. People could get up and go again if they decide the jobs aren't there and the services are declining and the schools are closing and, you know, and that could have another generational effect on the population of people' (focus group 3).

And it also has an effect known as the *'brain drain'*, when young people choose to depart the area for work or further study. One parent from Northern Ireland illustrated what this meant in her own family:

'I have three kids – two are in college. ...And I doubt either one of those three would come back to be employed in the Fermanagh border region. Although they love where we live and they love the community, there's going to be no opportunities for them and as much as we talk about brain drain, I think that has even worsened it, you know, for people that are coming out qualified or whatever, you know, they're not going to have the opportunities to come home at all... And that is very sad' (focus group 3).

This sense of despair is all the more acute because things had been steadily improving. There is a lot of reporting from our respondents of negative trends in business in the

region. For example, this interview with a governmental official working to develop the business sector:

'The weariness has become greater. People in business are afraid. Many don't know what to do and some are changing existing plans. For example, businesses are now sourcing suppliers from the continent, and those relationships built up over many years with UK and NI suppliers have now gone. To go further afield into non-English speaking markets is particularly challenging for small Irish exporters' (interview 10).

What makes things worse in Northern Ireland, as we found in the previous reports for ICBAN, is that there is a loss of business to just south of the border in some instances because it is very easy for investors and business leaders to find security there, compared to Northern Ireland which is expected to leave the EU shortly with the rest of the UK:

'I've talked to scores of small business people in and around Lisnaskea [Fermanagh] that are looking to move to Ballyconnell [across the border in Cavan]' (focus group 2).

While issues of rurality are central for the border region, one focus group participant was careful to outline the effects of Brexit on working people in particular:

'There seems to be a bit of disconnect between working class people and the institutions that represent them, or the institutions that set up to help them. … The politicians that are in this network would have a business-orientated, real politic outlook – 'if we can help businesses get over this, everything will be tickety-boo'. Whereas, working class people have a totally different struggle. There is no CAP [Common Agricultural Policy] payment for workers: we're out here on our own. Sometimes, it seems that the problem, when it gets stirred up is usually issues relating to the alienation of working-class people. If that's not addressed across the border, I think that's the elephant in the room, so to speak' (focus group 4).

How should the border region be represented after Brexit?

The above participant mentioned representation. A question we asked in the survey is *'After Brexit, what type or level of representation do you think the border region would need?'* Responses are revealing of how people in the border region view not only what is needed of political representation itself but of how they assess the system of political

representation to be working at present, as well as, importantly, of the extent to which they see their own voices and the border region represented at this crucial time.

It is Interesting to note here that a little over 1 in 5 respondents chose to respond to the question above not by describing a specific level or type of representation but rather by way of the quality of representation required. Half of these respondents state simply that what is required is *'more'*, *'better'* or *'stronger'* commitment and leadership in representing the border region. The extent to which such responses also reflect disappointment with the current level of representation is reflected in opinions such as: *'Anything would be better than what we have nothing at the moment'* (R326), *'NI is not well represented anywhere at the moment so anything would be an improvement'* (R343), and *'There is none at present so to get any government services working would be good'* (R347).

Equally, those respondents wishing to see an improvement in the quality/character of representation of the border region describe the type of representation required as *'non-tribal'*, *'impartial'*, *'balanced'* and *'representing people, not ideas'*. Many respondents express deep frustration with the nature of Northern Ireland politics in particular, and its polarised green/orange tinge:

'Someone to speak for the majority and I don't mean DUP or Sinn Féin. I'd personally like to nominate a neutral representative who'll leave the tribal politics behind and argue for us all' (R10)

'Impartial, not based on orange & green' (R25)

'Get a party to represent people not ideals' (R132)

'The same representation that we've needed for 20 years and not had. The border regions in the south west/west have been left to dwindle. But it's NI politics, so the representation will be chosen based on whether they go to mass or church. Ridiculous' (R134).

Relatedly, a number of responses under this category also described the required type of representation as being *'collaborative'* and *'non-self-serving'*, and delivered by *'informed'*, *'knowledgeable'* and *'pragmatic'* representatives.

The bulk of respondents, however, do indicate a particular level (rather than quality or characteristic) of representation that they would like to see for the border region in the future. Of those, nearly the majority (or over 1 in 8 of all respondents) indicate they would like to see some form of cross-border and cross-jurisdictional representation. Despite the criticisms of Northern Ireland politics, the loss of Stormont is keenly felt, and in a way that

goes far beyond Brexit and to the nitty gritty of basic electoral politics and democratic responsibility:

'The fact that we don't have any proper administration in the North at the moment, the fact that we don't have a parliament in Belfast (which in actual fact hasn't operated for a couple of years now) – that in itself is a serious detriment. And in relation to services and the development of services, education, health or whatever, all these things are being seriously affected. ...If good sense prevailed, really people should be finding and leaders should be finding a better accommodation with each other rather than keeping wounds open and division' (interview 3).

'I think at this crucial point you feel like there's nobody speaking up for the country. People that you voted for are not there in that respect, you know – the fact that there's nobody in Stormont, the fact that cuts are coming to health and education and other services and that you've got nobody to lobby anymore and nobody to speak up for you. ... So, I do think that that position is really untenable but nobody seems to be able to break the deadlock to get them back' (focus group 3).

'People really don't feel they have anybody speaking for them. Again comes back to no Stormont and very little, limited ability. It's like paralysis – you're sitting here waiting on another country deciding on what the future is going to be. As people we can't really influence it. ... You can't really change what's going in in Westminster, you know' (focus group 3).

The idea of a *'rural parliament'* as a model of representation was suggested by a participant in one of the focus groups:

'I believe there's a European concept, it's a rural parliament and I think that is something that we definitely should explore. .... It brings together rural groups, politicians, they act like a voice in terms of policy development and so on. I think that is something that should definitely be explored and perhaps it should be maybe an agriculture and rural parliament. Because farming is cross-border as well. It's a safe space for people, whether you're a unionist or a nationalist. It's a safe space and keep it non-political. Yes, of course, you need politicians there, as they develop policies...When you reflect on it, we do have a lot of politicians outside Belfast, in rural areas. Unionist, independents, nationalists, republicans – but they really need to come together and it's not happening. You get the dominant voice maybe in Belfast, we don't feature as a voice, I feel. You need to consider rural and the impact on the border, but it's not getting lifted. That's my worry, that's what I see. If you go around doors, talk to neighbours, they're starting to get switched off to

Brexit and we're saying, 'don't get switched off, you need to be listening very carefully to this stuff' (focus group 4).

This is worth quoting at length because her comments bring together three key arguments that serve to highlight persistent problems for representation in the border region. First, the cross-sectoral, non-combative operation of a rural parliament could be a novel addition to what currently exists among politicians in the rural region. Second, that it would counteract the dominant focus on the urban centres in regional policy-making. Finally, that it would help maintain focus on issues of particular, pragmatic concern for the border region, rather than the campaigning falling to local civic or community groups, which even then struggle to have an impact at regional level, let alone national UK or Ireland levels.

Related to this point is a comment from an interviewee, who was keen to point to the role of non-political actors:

'The other thing I'll say which is very, very important, is that we cannot take the civil society and community and voluntary organisations as being the leading lights for relationships on both sides of the border, for villages and towns, we cannot take this as just read. Those relationships need to be resourced and need to be facilitated to reduce fear and tension and continue to build relationships right across the border. ... that's an area which would need facilitated right across the border during the Brexit process' (interview 5).

It is a theme that came up in focus groups too, and we quote it here because it points to the potential of the community and voluntary sector but also its fragility. No relationships, no form of cooperation, across the border and for common good can be taken for granted or can persist without proper support and resourcing. Another interviewee summarises what civic organisations can provide in terms of essential services to the local population at such a critical time: voice, an ear, non-partisanship, information:

'Our members feel absolutely voiceless. In the whole Brexit debate in general women's voices have been fairly minimal and certainly rural women's voices have been and they've been relying on us to try and communicate for them.

The other thing our members are looking for is accurate information because they very much feel that they are.. it's another orange and green issue in which the political parties take very different views. And because they take different views it became very politicized... and yet that's not how our members see it. ...

And also then the media are not necessarily providing the kind of information that our members want. And that has been very challenging for us to be able to provide people

with the right information and not to actually frighten them even more. ...there's been so much uncertainty coming out at the other end' (interview 6).

What issues relating to Brexit require further discussion

Our online survey 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. Even though nearly 1 in 10 respondents indicated that no issues needed further discussion, the majority of responses made points that were all-encompassing, e.g. *'everything'*, *'there is no honest discussion'*, and *'issues are not take seriously'*. For example:

'There are no issues around Brexit [that are] being addressed in this area – we are completely unprepared' (R174)

'The reality of the need for a hard border in the event of No Deal is still not being taken seriously, nobody will honestly explain how they square the circle without a border' (R21)

'British have not considered anything Irish related seriously' (R60)

'I think the issues have been highlighted but the powers involved appear not to take them into account' (R286).

A more specific, frequently mentioned response included concern with the future of healthcare after Brexit and its particular effects on the supply of drugs and medication: *'The disparities in health inequality continue to be ignored at public service and civil service and government level, these are set to become more stark with brexit afoot'* (R19). Healthcare was also frequently mentioned as part of a group of cross-border services that are perceived to be under threat by Brexit. Separate but linked to the question of healthcare, concern over access to medication was expressed by a number of respondents:

'Access to medicine and medicinal products including recognition of drugs/legal status of medications acquired over the border and professional bodies/recognition' (R79)

'There is joint procurement operating between North and South, which generates economies of scale and this is at a mature stage. This value could be lost in the event of things being done differently after Brexit' (interview 8)

'Medicines not being available after Brexit' (R127)

'Border patrols when shopping, medication, cross-border hospital appointments etc.' (R139).

An additional topic that we raised in the survey was that of the potential of the UK and Ireland (as an EU member-state) being in different time zones for part of the year. This arises from the fact that the EU Commission has put forward a proposal to abolish seasonal clock changes. On 26th March 2019 the European Parliament voted in favour of the proposal by 410 MEPs to 192. The Northern Ireland Civil Service has not yet taken an official position on the proposal but are maintaining a watching brief should there be any signs of movement. The Irish Government has consulted with various stakeholders on the potential impacts of the abolition of daylight savings. The conclusion of that study was that, whilst in principle Irish people were in favour of a change in daylight savings, this was inconceivable if it meant a time difference on either side of the border.

In order to assess public opinion in the border region, we asked the question in the survey: *'How might a time difference of one hour between one side of the border and the other affect you, if at all?'* The general response can be summarised as a mix of disbelief and concern at the practical implications. One respondent's answer reflects this combination perfectly:

'As someone who regularly travels throughout the island of Ireland, and can see no benefit to the British border on the island, this is something that is completely nonsensical, and stands to benefit no one. Travelling to appointments/ concerts/ sporting events, checking into hotels/B&Bs - all of this would be thrown into chaos when factoring in a time difference across such a small land mass' (R2).

Many respondents simply answer with comments which show they simply cannot conceive of such a scenario – *'ridiculous'*, *'ludicrous'*, *'stupid'*, *'absurd'*, *'madness'* etc. A few respondents suggested that the challenge would not be insurmountable. One respondent from Sligo stated, *'I'm sure folks on both sides will adjust. It would be just another inconvenience and another barrier to trade'* (R422) and others pointed to international examples, e.g. *'They do this in different states in the United States so [the effects here would be] none. Just need to add or take away one'* (R403). A few who were not concerned

saw it as being surpassed by a successful border poll: *'In the long term we will be in a United Ireland, so does not matter'* (R61).

The main reasons for viewing the matter as potentially problematic come under three themes: coordination in the home, managing frequency of cross-border movement, challenges for business. First, coordinating commitments within one household given cross-border nature of life:

'It would mean my husband starts work at 7.30 in Ireland and I start work at 8 in the UK but we use the one car as he can't drive; one of us is going to be either very early or very late' (R474)

'Ridiculous. 30,000 people a day cross that border every single day for work. Thousands of freight traffic cross the border to make time deliveries or catch ferries. Can you imagine the chaos? Just crossing the border to take my dad to hospital appointments in a different time zone.' (R70)

'Doesn't even bear thinking about. I have children who I regularly go to schools events etc. with [on other side of the border]. Different time zones would put pressure on my family time as well as work time.' (R187).

Secondly, the difficulty of managing a time differential when you are crossing a border so frequently is also raised:

'Complete nightmare!!! Not even sure how you could function in that circumstance when you're crossing the border 6 times a day for work! Wear two watches?! Funny if it wasn't so serious." (R409).

'It would mean that my life would be totally disrupted as I tend to go across the border for shopping, entertainment and sporting occasions. The time difference would be an added complication which would lead to more separation' (R417).

Public transport is a particular concern, often tied into worries about the knock-on effects on other aspects of daily life and business in the border region:

'It could affect those who are dependent on cross border public transport. It could also affect children attending school in the other jurisdictions as well as the farming community in respect of bulk milk collections and abattoir services and many cross community projects' (R397).

Thirdly, the challenges for business were noted, especially given that businesses in the border region often work with suppliers, customers and competitors on both sides of the border:

'I have lived in an area elsewhere where dual time zones operated for six months a year and it was hell. Businesses will have to have two appointment books. Travel will become unnecessarily complicated - especially for those using public transport and it will also impact things like schools, work and deliveries' (R411).

Overall, the concern was that increasing difficulty in managing cross-border movement and coordination will simply lead people to be less likely to attempt to do so. Given the importance of cross-border movement to the growth of the economy and the embedding of peace in the border region, any additional difficulty can be seen as having a longer-term negative consequence.

Perhaps one thing that remains overriding from all the research data gathered in this project is the sense of insecurity and uncertainty that exists in the Central Border Region when it comes to the overall consequences of Brexit. As one interviewee working in a rural civic organisation clearly articulated, this leads to a silence and a lack of voice that causes longer term harm and risk.

'I think there's a lot of frustration amongst our members that the things that they want to talk about in regards to Brexit are not being discussed. It's all about trucks ... and very little about the impact on real people and real people's lives and people are very, very fearful.

You know, one of our members said to me, actually from a unionist community, she said it's just become one more thing we can't talk about. I think that's an issue. People are nearly afraid to talk about it because you are seen as one camp or the other politically, with a big P, and yet it's one of the biggest political things with a potential to impact on our lives for generations. And yet because of our history it is a lot more emotive and people are scared to talk about it' (interview 6).

It is our hope that research of this nature and at this time, a report like this which seeks to summarise and relay findings from the Central Border Region can make a positive contribution towards amplifying the voices of those who feel otherwise unheard. And, in turn, can thus go some way towards improving understanding of their concerns and strengthening the means of addressing them if action is taken now – as the UK and, thus, the Irish border region, moves further into Brexit.

The lay of the land after 'the Brexit election'

As we finalised this report, the results of the General Election of 12 December 2019 became known. The large majority for the Conservative party means that there is now no obvious obstacle to the Withdrawal Agreement published on 17 October being ratified by the UK Parliament in time for the UK to exit the EU on 31 January 2020. This contains the revised Protocol on Ireland / Northern Ireland, which means that specific arrangements for Northern Ireland will come into play at the end of the transition period (currently set for 31 December 2020). The extent to which this will mean friction in the movement of goods between Great Britain and Northern Ireland cannot yet be determined. It is notable that all 18 MPs in Northern Ireland stood on a platform of opposition to this process – either from the standpoint of Remain (Sinn Féin, the SDLP, Alliance) or from that of a desire to see the Withdrawal Agreement renegotiated. There is, therefore, substantial common ground between all Northern Ireland's MPs, although their capacity to act from that common ground is limited by the fact that they are in a small minority vis-à-vis the pro-Leave, pro-Withdrawal Agreement majority in the House of Commons.

What does this all mean? There is minimal risk of a No Deal exit from the EU, and the Protocol in the Withdrawal Agreement being ratified means that there is a sure and legal way of managing Brexit without seeing the worst fears about a hard Irish land border come to pass. There will be no need for checks and controls for customs or product standards at the land border, and thus no need for new physical infrastructure, procedures or resources for the movement of goods across the border. However, there will be consequences of Brexit that are still felt in the border region, not least because Northern Ireland will no longer be part of an EU member-state. The full extent of the consequences of this won't be known until the future UK-EU relationship is settled, and that could be some years away. And, of course, there is also a possibility of a No Deal at the end of the transition period. In that scenario, however, the hardest impact will be on the movement of goods between Britain and Northern Ireland, given that the Protocol sees Northern Ireland de facto being in the EU's customs union and single market for goods.

In addition to Brexit, there will also be consequences from the policies that are made by the Conservative government that have an impact on cross-border movement. These may cover the movement of people and their right to live and work in the UK, which could in turn affect experience of movement around the Common Travel Area, and potentially both the land border and the Irish Sea border. It may see policies which affect human rights' protections and enforcement in the UK and this too will have consequences for Northern

Ireland. We also do not know how many of the other practical issues raised by respondents in this research will be affected, e.g. in terms of environmental policies, data-sharing, or security cooperation. There is so much yet to be worked out.

In sum, even though the divorce of the UK from the EU is to take legal effect, what the new relationship between them will be like is going to take years to be revealed. And this new relationship will not only affect relations between Northern Ireland and the practical significance of the Irish land border, it will also change relations between Britain and Northern Ireland and the practical significance of the Irish Sea border. Borders all around Northern Ireland are going to be under pressure, with the general trend being towards a hardening effect.

In light of this, trust-building and cooperation, north-south and east-west, will be more important than ever. And the models and examples of such relationship-building and communication that have been demonstrated in recent years in the Central Border Region – in various forms and at various levels of representation, from the ground up – should be ones to inspire and to build upon.

Appendix 1:
The Border Into Brexit
online survey

Preamble to survey

With Brexit drawing nearer, we invite you to complete a 10 to 15-minute survey on the impact of Brexit and a possible *'No Deal'* scenario on the Central Border Region. We welcome responses from anyone living or working in the areas of Armagh City Banbridge and Craigavon; Cavan; Donegal; Fermanagh and Omagh; Leitrim; Mid Ulster; Monaghan; and Sligo.

[...]

This follow-on study aims to take account of recent developments and discussions on the issue of the Irish border a mere two months before the exit date of October 31st 2019. It is a non-political and non-partisan study.

We are keen to gather responses from the widest possible group of people from the Central Border Region. The purpose of the study is to create an opportunity for the voices of local people on both sides of the border to be heard.

All data from the survey and focus groups will be gathered in accordance with strict research ethics and will remain anonymous. [...]

Survey questions

1.   Area of residence *

        ....

2.   Please tell us what age group you are in *

        ....

3.   Gender

        ....

4.   Citizenship

        ....

5.   How did you vote in the referendum on the UK's membership of the EU in June 2016?

        Leave

        Remain

        Abstained

        Did not have a vote

        Prefer not to say

6a.   What impact (if any) is Brexit already having on you and on your plans? Specifically, is there something you have done or are planning to do that you would not have done otherwise?

        ....

6b.   Is there something you have NOT done or are NO LONGER planning to do as a result of Brexit? Please give specific examples.

        ....

7.   What aspects of life for you in the border region would you expect to be most affected by Brexit? Please suggest up to three aspects and briefly explain why.

....

8.   Please describe in one sentence what a hard border would mean to you.

....

9a. Do you think a hard border (between Ireland and Northern Ireland) is more or less likely than you thought last year? Likert scale 1-5 1: much less likely, 5: much more likely.

....

9b. Please give reasons for your answer.

....

10a. What difference, if any, does the prospect of a *'No Deal'* Brexit make to you, compared to Brexit with a deal?

....

10b. How do you think the effects of a *'No Deal'* Brexit in the border region will differ from other parts of the UK and Ireland?

....

11. There is a possibility that, in a few years' time, the UK and Ireland (as an EU member-state) will be in different time zones for part of the year. How might a time difference of one hour between one side of the border and the other affect you, if at all?

....

12. The findings of this survey will be released before what might be the UK's final European Council meeting in October. If you could give a message to the UK and EU governments at that meeting, in one sentence, what would it be?

....

13. After Brexit, what type or level of representation do you think the border region would need?

....

14. Finally, are there any particular issues relating to the impact of Brexit that you feel are not currently being addressed and which you would consider important for your area?

....

Appendix 2:
Theme guides for interviewing

In conducting the focus groups and individual stakeholder interviews we used theme guides rather than a set questionnaire. This ensured that the discussion would cover all questions we wanted to explore in greater depth, and that there was flexibility to explore themes that arose naturally, reflecting the different professional experiences of participants.

Focus group guide

▶ What does the border region mean to you?

▶ Is it different/distinctive and worth particularly considering in light of Brexit? If so, how?

▶ Why/how does the border matter to you?

▶ Has the unfolding of Brexit been as you expected or have there been dynamics you had not anticipated?

▶ What are the impacts of Brexit on the border region that you have already observed?

▶ Can you give specific examples?

▶ Are there upsides/positive effects?

▶ What difference, if any, has the revised Withdrawal Agreement negotiated by PM Johnson's government made on your expectations of the consequences of Brexit for the border region?

▶ Finally, are there any particular issues relating to the impact of Brexit that you feel are not currently being addressed and which you would consider important for your area?

Individual stakeholder interview guide

▶ Please explain briefly what is the nature of your work in the organisation you represent?

▶ How important, would you say, is the subject of Brexit for your organisation?

▶ And for the sector you are involved in?

▶ What impact, if any, has the Brexit process had on your organisation?

▶ What impact, if any, has the Brexit process had on your wider sector?

▶ Can you provide some examples of such (an) impact(s)

▶ Have you had to change any plans as a result of such current impacts?

▶ How might the new Protocol impact – what are your thoughts on this?

▶ Is there anything that isn't being discussed so much, and which is particularly impacting upon your organisation and sector?

▶ Is there anything finally which you would wish to add on the subject?

Appendix 3: Codes used in referencing data

Focus Group codes

We conducted five focus groups containing participants covering areas on both sides of the border in the region. There was an average of 7 participants at each focus group.

The code used for these groups in the referencing is as follows:

Caledon (Co. Tyrone) (focus group 1)

Glenfarne (Co. Leitrim) (focus groups 2 and 3)

Pettigo (Co. Donegal) (focus group 4)

Castle Saunderson (Co. Cavan) (focus group 5)

Interview codes

Interview 1: business sector

Interview 2: local council official

Interview 3: community and voluntary sector, local partnership

Interview 4: business sector

Interview 5: community and voluntary sector, umbrella

Interview 6: community and voluntary sector, umbrella

Interview 7: community and voluntary sector

Interview 8: public sector (health)

Interview 9: business sector

Interview 10: public sector (business)

Interview 11: public sector (tourism)

Interview 12: migrant community sector

THE BORDER INTO BREXIT:

Perspectives from 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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