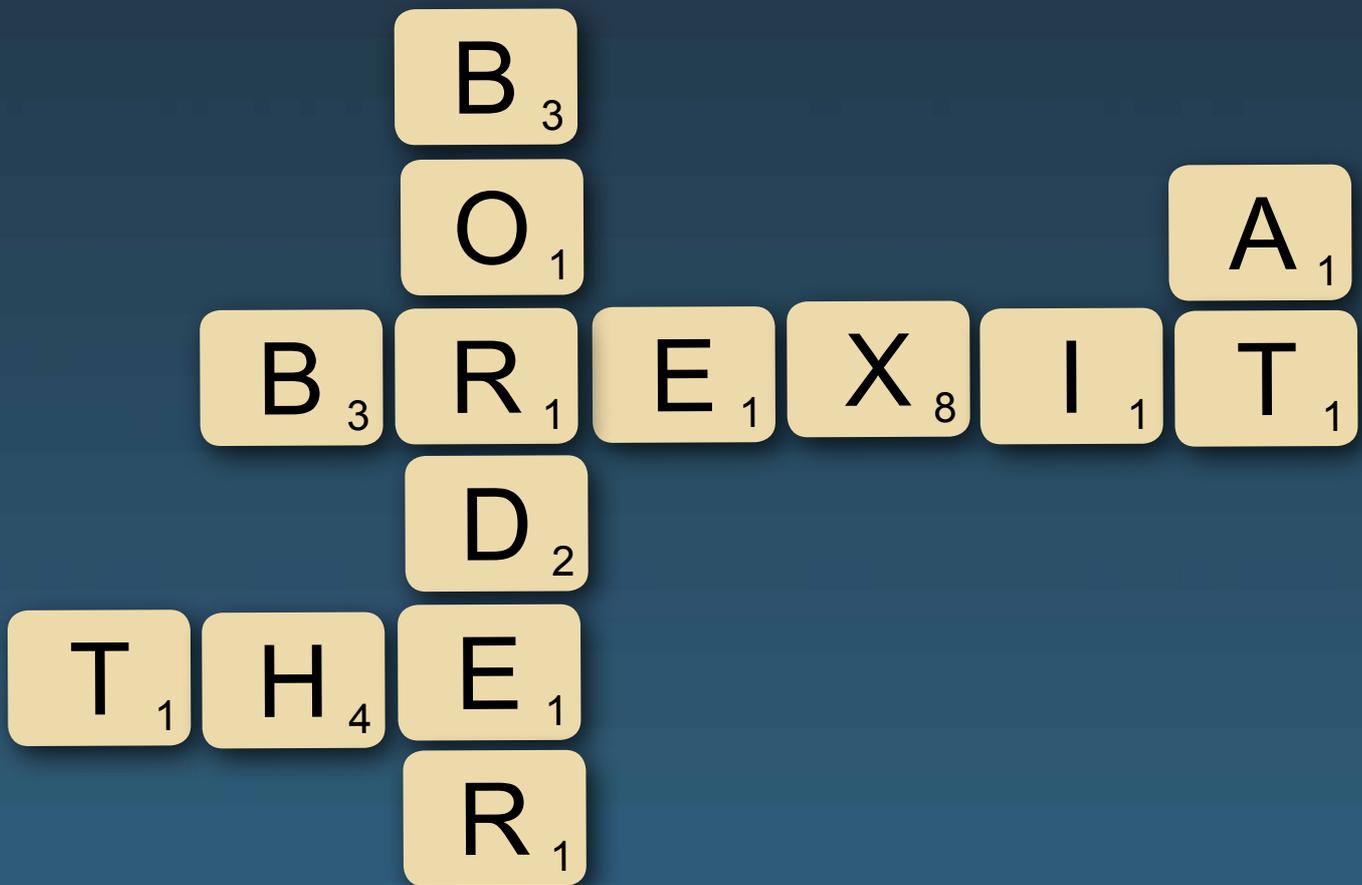


BREXIT AT THE BORDER:

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

Executive Summary



BREXIT AT THE BORDER

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

A report prepared for the Irish Central Border Area Network

By

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June 2018

ISBN 978-1-909131-69-9

Foreword

On behalf of the Management Board of the Irish Central Border Area Network (ICBAN) Ltd. I wish to commend to you this *Brexit at the Border* 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.

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 25 elected representatives from this border region, believe it is incumbent upon ICBAN 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.

This is the second such project of this type which ICBAN and Queen's University Belfast (QUB) have completed. As a Board we are mindful that there are many other reports and opinions in the public domain about Brexit and we have been determined to ensure that anything we do only 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 help complement this. Whilst the Board recognise that there is a programme of civic dialogue led by the Irish government, they identified an absence of local community consultation on both sides of the border. The input of ICBAN has been to lead with QUB on these initiatives to listen to and record the opinions of local people, concentrating on the Central Border Region, and to share these with our member Councils and with those involved in the high-level negotiations currently underway. We will endeavour to disseminate and promote this report widely, across these islands, Europe and internationally. Indeed, the previous report continues to receive widespread coverage.

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 Mirjam de Jong 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 and attended the focus group meetings. 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 Paddy O'Rourke,

ICBAN Chair, June 2018

Acknowledgements

This report was authored by Dr Katy Hayward (Queen's University Belfast), with invaluable research assistance from Mirjam de Jong (Radboud Nijmegen University, the Netherlands). Mirjam was a visiting research associate in 2018 in the Centre for International Borders Research at Queen's University. We would like to thank Professor Hastings Donnan, Director of the Senator George J. Mitchell Institute for Global Peace, Security and Justice, for his endorsement of her visiting position.

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 and Andy Hallewell in ICBAN for their invaluable assistance in the preparation of this report, particularly in the organising and transcribing of the focus groups.

We would like to thank each of the local authorities represented in ICBAN for their support for this report and for helping to publicise the survey.

This initiative is part of the wider 'Border Compass' project and has been made possible through assistance from the Reconciliation Fund of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, which has been greatly appreciated. The funders have had no influence at all in the design or conduct of this report, which has been performed independently by researchers from Queen's University, with the facilitating role of ICBAN staff in the distribution and promotion of the survey and the organisation of the focus groups.

Finally, sincerest thanks to all 591 respondents to the survey: your detailed and illuminating responses to the questions have revealed in new and memorable ways the implications of Brexit at the border. We regret that there has not been space to do them all 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 six focus groups, who 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 enabled that. Unfortunately only a small fraction of responses can be included here, but we have read and analysed them all and will continue to draw upon them in other publications and presentations.

The negotiations on the UK's withdrawal from the EU entail decisions that will have enormous, long-lasting implications for the Central Border Region of Ireland/Northern Ireland. The nature of cross-border integration and the Good Friday (Belfast) Agreement means the effects of leaving the EU will be felt by residents and workers on both sides of the border (of all ages, backgrounds and identities), across multiple aspects of their daily lives.

In this report, 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, to find the predominant themes and common issues. We have kept interpretation of the data and subsequent recommendations to a minimum in this report. This is, first and foremost, a presentation of views from the Central Border Region: a region in which the memories of violence and a securitised border are still vivid, and in which the experience of a 'seamless' border is a both a symbol and a benefit of hard-won peace.

Executive Summary

1. The study

- 1.1. This is a follow-up to the **Bordering on Brexit** report which was completed in November 2017 (<https://go.qub.ac.uk/bordering>). The research for the previous report was conducted one year on from the UK referendum on EU membership of 23 June 2016. It revealed that people in the Central Border Region of Ireland/Northern Ireland felt uninformed about Brexit, unrepresented in the process, and had deep fears about the consequences of it, particularly relating to the peace process and the ‘frictionless’ border.
- 1.2. The research for this **Brexit at the Border** study was conducted in March-May 2018 - approximately a year away from the withdrawal date. It is unique in terms of: its focus (as a border region), its scope (covering both sides of the border) and its methods (gathering two types of qualitative data on a substantive scale for what is a largely rural and sparsely populated geographical area).
- 1.3. It was conducted jointly between Queen’s University Belfast (lead: Dr Katy Hayward; Research Assistant: Mirjam de Jong) and ICBAN (Irish Central Border Area Network of local authorities: Armagh City Banbridge and Craigavon, Cavan, Donegal, Fermanagh and Omagh, Leitrim, Mid Ulster, Monaghan, Sligo).
- 1.4. It is funded by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Reconciliation Fund).
- 1.5. The study entailed two empirical components: an online survey (receiving almost 600 responses) and a series of focus groups in the Central Border Region (over 40 participants).
- 1.6. The responses to the survey were sought from those who live or work in one of these Central Border Region districts; the largest number of responses came from Fermanagh and Omagh (29.4%).

2. Information levels

- 2.1. Most respondents feel more informed than they did last summer (**Bordering on Brexit** findings) about the possible consequences of Brexit for the border region. 50% of respondents to the survey said they felt quite well informed or fully informed on these matters, compared to 40% last year. 15% of respondents admitted to feeling 'very uninformed', compared to 21% of the respondents to the 2017 survey.
- 2.2. The coverage of the Irish border issue as a consequence of it being to the fore in the negotiations in Brussels surely helped in this. As one survey respondent (R44) commented, 'it is in the news nearly every day'.

3. A hard border

- 3.1. When asked to compare their personal views from 12 months ago to their current assessment of the situation, most respondents (59%) reported that they now think that a 'hard' border is more likely than they previously anticipated.
- 3.2. This suggests that, although conspicuous efforts have been made by the UK and EU negotiators to reassure of their commitments to 'avoiding a hard border' (ref. the Joint Report of 6 December 2017), public debate on the border and Brexit has almost had the counter effect. People are not reassured. Only a small proportion (13.8%) of the survey respondents think that the progress made makes a hard border less likely than it seemed to be last year.
- 3.3. There is a wide scale in people's definition of what a 'hard border' would mean, running from any change in the current situation to the presence of soldiers to secure the border.
- 3.4. Most respondents define a 'hard border' with terms like 'checkpoints', 'a physical border' and 'customs checks'. It is seen as an end to the free movement of people and goods that exists at the moment.
- 3.5. Such changes concern respondents due to the cross-border nature of their lives (work, family, social, access to services etc.).

- 3.6. There is a concern among respondents that a hard border will mean a step back in the peace process, that it interferes with the Good Friday (Belfast) Agreement and is like going back to the ‘old days’ (of the Troubles) (also a finding in the **Bordering on Brexit** report).

4. Access to services on the other side of the border

- 4.1. Examples of services accessed on the other side of the border focus mostly on visiting family/friends, shopping (esp. groceries and fuel), recreational purposes (e.g. holidays, sport), travel (esp. the use of airports) and accessing health facilities.
- 4.2. Health and emergency is mentioned by more than 20% of the respondents as an example of accessed cross-border services. More than 30% of the respondents cross the border to work or for educational reasons.
- 4.3. In the category ‘other’, some people mention that they don’t cross the border for any services, or at least don’t rely on those services. On the other hand, some other respondents try to show that they don’t consider the border at all when accessing services and that they live fully ‘cross-border’ lives.
- 4.4. Most respondents cross the border because services there are cheaper/better and/or are more convenient/closer to home. Many mention that at their side of the border, the services are simply not available or else would entail travelling a much longer distance to access.
- 4.5. 10% of respondents cross the border out of necessity, e.g. for their job or accessing vital services [e.g. health treatment]. Of those that say they do not rely on services on the other side of the border (7%), this is mainly because they do not live that close to the border or else because they find the services more expensive on the other side.

5. Impact of Brexit already

- 5.1. $\frac{3}{4}$ of respondents already see an impact of Brexit in their lives and plans for the future.

- 5.2. Over a third of respondents refer to their living standards (exchange rate, food prices) and difficult choices (concerning cross-border jobs, business investments, farming land, education etc.) they are having to make as evidence of the impact of Brexit. Such decisions show that life closely lived by/across the Irish border is surely the most directly affected by the UK's withdrawal from the EU and by any change in UK-Ireland cooperation.
- 5.3. 3 in 10 survey respondents refer to this time with such words as 'worried', 'uncertain', 'stress', 'anxiety' and 'concern'.
- 5.4. Some respondents and focus group participants highlighted some positive aspects to Brexit. These primarily relate to the change in currency exchange rates. Specifically-identified opportunities seem to be either in competition with the other side of the border or far from it (e.g. global trade partners). Some respondents point to the potential of Northern Ireland's distinctive position and the opportunity to 'have a foot in both camps' after Brexit.
- 5.5. Some respondents say that they are considering moving to the other side of the border or another country because of Brexit. In both the survey and the focus groups, detailed examples are given about people not being able to sell their house close to the border, not being able to get a mortgage/loan to buy a house or land on the other side of the border, or not being able to expand their business near the border given the uncertainty arising from Brexit. There is a sense (this came through in the focus groups) of decisions about the future being in suspension as a result of Brexit (e.g. businesses are not expanding).

6. Concerns about security of the Central Border Region

- 6.1. The largest portion of respondents (30%) refer to a situation with a hard border; thus, the priority is open borders, no queues, no tariffs and checkpoints. A 'closed' border is the main concern, including closing roads again. Respondents write about the time it could take to cross the border, the impact on business and tourism and the inconvenience of customs checks. A few respondents want the situation to stay as it is now, since there are no problems with the current border (so not linked to Brexit).

- 6.2. c.42% respondents mention the peace process, division, return to the Troubles, conflict, protest, soldiers on the border, paramilitary activity etc. as their main concern and focus. Around a third of these refer directly to violence, targets or (terrorist) attacks as their main concern around the security of the border.
- 6.3. 15% respondents see crime in the border area as a main concern. This includes smuggling (by some specified to human trafficking or drugs trade) and criminals 'jumping' over the border to escape.

7. Technological border controls

- 7.1. The majority of respondents (48.5%) say that they would not be willing to accept 'technological' means of border control if these were introduced in place of manned border checkpoints and away from the border itself.
- 7.2. The 'Maybe' responses (30.4%) to this question are accompanied with statements saying that it would be heavily conditional on the details: What kind of technology? What will be done with the data? Is it just number plate checks or mobile data surveillance as well?
- 7.3. Those saying they might accept technology on the border say that it's better than the alternative of a closed border and checkpoints. Thus, they see it more as a compromise (between how it is now and the 'hard border' they remember from the past). It is better than actual facilities on the border (no delays and restrictions). The response of R196 is typical: "Would prefer technology to soldiers!"

8. Priorities for the Central Border Region in the Brexit process

- 8.1. By far the most popular priority for the Brexit negotiations coming from the participants in this study was the continuation of the border being as open and seamless as it is now. This is closely followed by (and connected with) the protection of the peace process.
- 8.2. Priorities for future funding in the region are: Transport and roads (c. 25% respondents); followed by Healthcare (20%) (e.g. hospitals, cancer treatment); Education (11%). Plus, general investment in economic development, businesses and jobs (including broadband).

- 8.3. Some people are sceptical of the idea of cross-border funding after Brexit: who would pay or invest in an area outside of their own country without EU- framework?

9. Representation of the Central Border Region

- 9.1. In contrast to their sense of being well informed, the vast majority of people do not believe that the border region is being well represented in the Brexit process (33.8% say not at all, 30.1% say only a little).
- 9.2. People feel removed from the whole process and not taken seriously by politicians in negotiations, since the vote to remain seems to be ignored. They feel as if they live in a forgotten area (“London/ Dublin don’t care about us”).
- 9.3. Many say a sign of representation would be consultation and contact with the local border community and visits from (British) politicians involved in negotiations.
- 9.4. The lack of a functioning government in Northern Ireland exacerbates the sense among respondents in Northern Ireland that they are not being heard. The confidence and supply arrangement between the DUP and the Conservative government, plus Sinn Féin not taking their seats in the Westminster Parliament, are also seen as signs of there being inadequate formal political representation of the Border Region at this juncture.
- 9.5. A fear of the border becoming “collateral damage” in the whole Brexit debate is mentioned a few times, suggesting a correlation between a sense of being dealt with from a distance and fears about the potential outcome.

10. Comparing Leave and Remain voters in the Central Border Region

- 10.1. We note that the proportion of the survey respondents claiming to hold both British and Irish citizenship is high at 13.2%. This is only slightly more than the 12% in the **Bordering on Brexit** study of 2017 (which had around half the sample size). It suggests that the Good Friday (Belfast) Agreement’s recognition of being both British and Irish has a very real meaning in the Central Border Region.

- 10.2. This small but significant integration of British and Irish identities is reflected in the profile of the Leave- and Remain-voting respondents, who show how mistaken it is to assume a simple binary of Leave/British/Unionist and Remain/Irish/Nationalist identities in Northern Ireland.
- 10.3. Contrary to expectation, 42% of the Leave-voting respondents claim Irish citizenship (either single or dual). 27% of the Remain-voting respondents claim British citizenship (mainly dual with Irish, but also single).
- 10.4. Analysis of responses to the online survey indicates that Leave voters in the Central Border Region are also anxious to see the preservation of the status quo in terms of the experience of the seamless border. Over half of the Leave-voting respondents gave this as their top priority from Brexit.
- 10.5. Remain voters are much more likely to greatly rely on services on the other side of the border (45% of them), while Leave voters are much more likely than Remain voters to say that they do not rely on them at all (24% of them). That said, the data shows that Leave voters in the Central Border Region are fairly equally distributed between those who rely little and rely a lot on services on the other side of the border.
- 10.6. On the prospects for a hard border, Remain-voting respondents are much more pessimistic than Leave voters. Leave voters are much more likely to be willing to accept technological solutions for border controls in place of manned checkpoints.

Peace seems normal in the Central Border Region, but it does not seem invulnerable. This study has revealed that peace is at the forefront of people's minds in the Central Border Region with regard to the Brexit process. This is not to say that everybody agrees equally about what a 'hard border' would mean or about the potential for a return to violence. But the current openness of the border is widely regarded as a product of the peace process.

The complexity and realities of cross-border life in the Central Border Region exemplify the complexity and realities of the Brexit process. Disentangling the UK from the EU inevitably means drawing greater distinctions between the UK and its closest neighbour. This report explains how this process takes material, tangible form in the everyday experience of people in the Central Border Region.

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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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An Roinn Gnóthaí Eachtracha agus Trádála
Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade



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