

# The Border into Brexit:

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



## SUMMARY OF INTERIM FINDINGS

### The project

- These are results from the first part of *The Border into Brexit* project run by Queen's University Belfast in conjunction with the Irish Central Border Area Network of 8 local authorities in the Central Border Region of Ireland/N. Ireland.
- It offers preliminary analysis of a large online survey of residents across the region, from both sides of the border.
- The survey 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.

### Impact of Brexit

- Respondents to the survey report wide and significant experience of Brexit having an impact already on their experience and on their plans. This ranges from the economic (e.g. redundancy, business downsizing) to the social (e.g. relocation, community tensions), and is worsened by the lack of political voice and speculation about the future for the border.
- 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.

### 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.' (R344)
- The *impossibility of separating the practical from the peace 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.' (R168).

### A No Deal Brexit

- 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' (R2).
- The fear of a return to violence is ever-present in this survey, particularly so in relation to a No Deal.

### Why is the border region most affected and most vulnerable?

- Whatever happens to the border in symbolic and in practical ways has consequences that go to the heart of politics and society in the Central Border Region, 'Because the border cuts through our parishes, neighbourhoods, farms and homes, it will affect us in every single thing we do.' (R70)
- There is a feeling of political lack of 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?' (R279)



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# The Border into Brexit:

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

**The project:** These are the interim 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 8 local authorities in the area known as the Central Border Region.

These findings are from the first part of the project, an online survey; the second phase, conducting focus groups in the region and a series of stakeholder interviews, is about to commence. The final report will be issued in December. This work contributes to ICBAN's 'Border Navigator' project (<http://icban.com/border-compass/>) funded by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's Reconciliation Fund. The research analysis presented here is funded by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council through the 'UK in a Changing Europe' (<https://ukandeu.ac.uk/>).

This is the third initiative in a series of reports on Brexit and the border region. The first report, *Bordering on Brexit*, was published in November 2017 (<https://go.qub.ac.uk/bordering>) found that people in the Central Border Region felt uninformed about Brexit, unrepresented in the process, and had deep fears about the consequences of it.

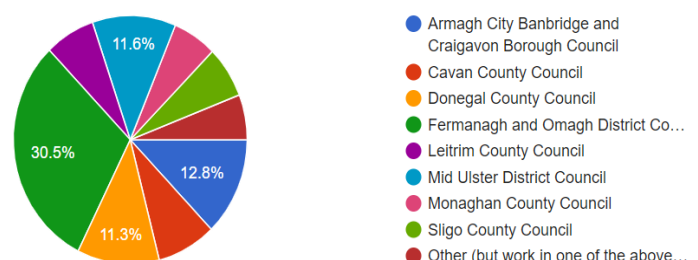
The second report, *Brexit at the Border*, published in June 2018 (<https://go.qub.ac.uk/brexitborder>), showed that ease of access to transport, health, education and other services was greatly valued by the majority of people on both sides of the border in this region. It also revealed that Leave and Remain voters in the region share a common priority for the border to remain as 'seamless' and 'frictionless' as it is today.

**The Central Border Region:** This cross-border region covers eight local authority areas: Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon; Cavan; Donegal; Fermanagh and Omagh; Leitrim; Mid Ulster; Monaghan; and Sligo.



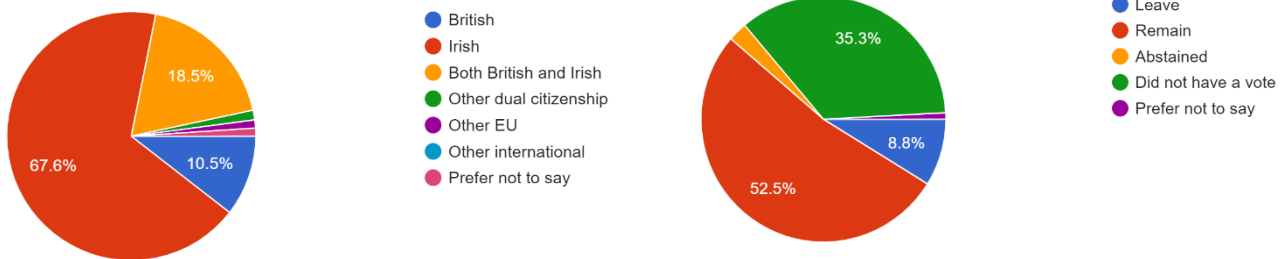
**The survey:** A total of 475 responses were received for the online survey, which was open for 5 weeks. The survey consisted of 10 substantive questions, which covered the topics of what effect (if any) Brexit was having on practice and on plans, on the anticipated impact of a No Deal Brexit, and on 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%). 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.



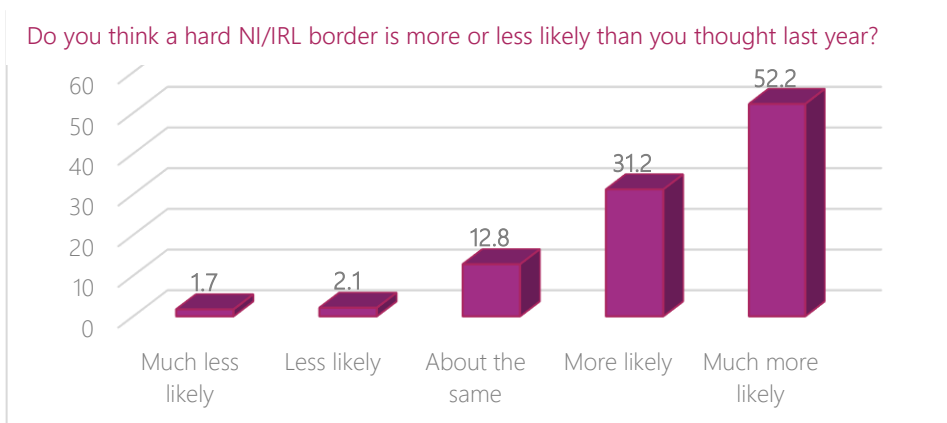


Over two thirds of respondents hold exclusively Irish citizenship. This is to be expected given that a little under half the respondents in the survey live on the southern side of the border. In patterns similar to the previous two reports, there is a disproportionate lack of response from Leave voting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



Around 1 in 5 of our respondents have dual citizenship (overwhelmingly British and Irish), and 1 in 10 British-only citizenship. These NI district areas voted for Remain in the 2016 and this is reflected in the breakdown of respondents, just over half of whom voted Remain. Just over 1 third had no vote. Only 9% of our respondents voted Leave. We are careful to report their views here, given that the survey is not intended to produce quantitatively representative but qualitative, illustrative findings.

**Anticipation of hard border:** We asked respondents 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.*



The 4% who say that they think a hard border less likely than they previously believed come from an equal number of Leave and Remain voters (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?** 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 more 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.

Responses to the question of what a hard border would mean to those living and working in the Central Border Region reflect this. They fall under four categories: personal, peace, practical, and political.



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 of them.

'[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)

'*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.

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)

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)

Thirdly, respondents summarised the *inconvenience and the personal cost* of a hard border. '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).

Finally, there are some '*political*' responses to this question. A portion 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). Another 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.

**A 'No Deal' Brexit:** We asked 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.

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.

We can summarise the majority of responses here under three broad themes. 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. Many respondents raise 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 currently transported north and south and through Britain... Job losses and loss of population.' (R286)

Farming and agri-food is a frequently-mentioned concern: '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 veterinarian 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 NI 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)

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, often combined with a sense of powerlessness:

'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 republican 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.

Finally, as we would expect, an overriding theme was that of *uncertainty*:

'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)

**What have you not been able to do/plan as a result of Brexit?** Knowing from our previous report that Brexit has already had a fallout in the border region, we asked for specific examples of how (if in any ways) people have been affected. About 7 in 5 respondents say that they have not yet noticed an impact yet (at the time of writing, the UK is still in the EU). However, the majority of respondents recount specific examples of a direct impact of Brexit already. We summarise them under key themes:

*Change in business/trade plans:* 1 in 10 describe a change to own business/trade plans. This covers such examples as no longer planning to import to NI market from EU countries, to delaying investment in NI. There are other examples given of deals falling through, including farming businesses, selling of houses and offering of jobs.

'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 mostly [here designated] SDA [Severely Disadvantaged Area]. ...If there was no Brexit threat we would have continued our expansion plans as was before 2016'. (R362)

'We have had to put serious plans into our business to accommodate us if there is a No Deal... 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)



*Loss of work and business:* many people commented on the effects of Brexit on their work and business. Most brutally this includes *redundancies*: 'Lost my job last year. Company pulled out of NI moved job to the EU.' (R101); 'Already made redundant. business decision by large employer.. majority European customer base.. apparently our plant was still profitable.' (R19), 'I have been made redundant' [R377] or 'Will have to be laid off from work' (R157), 'Staff redundancies' (R473). A British citizen living in Ireland and working in the NHS in NI 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 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 [in the ROI], how will I travel to work in Dublin. I haven't applied for a senior level job in my field in NI that I might have without Brexit'. (R24)

*Deterrence of business investment, expansion:* Respondents also describe withholding of personal investment or spending plans (for anything from renovating one's kitchen to going on holiday, buying house, taking a loan or doing bigger purchases. Specific examples include: problems in data sharing, in recruiting employees, and the downside of the devaluation of sterling. These decisions will have long-term consequences, regardless of the final outcome from the changed UK/EU relationship.

'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)

'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)

*Travel:* about 1 in 6 respondents described the effect of cancelling plans to travel to/from or through the other side of the border as a result of Brexit. 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 life, with people travelling across the border to/from work, to shop, visit family and friends (socialize) 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).

*Regression in social relations:* Some report considering a change in employment, residency or place of study in a way that minimises the need for cross-border travel. Many describe personal/family decisions in expectation of Brexit that recall 'back to back' experience in the past, which was only overcome by the slow embedding of the peace process:

'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)

'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 – a respondent who abstained in the 2016 referendum).

Others emphasise a fear of associated isolation, risks to community cohesion and the threat of a resurgence of violence: 'Not visiting NI, 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)

*What makes the border region unique:* The interconnectedness of the border region means that the ramifications of Brexit are not confined to N.Ireland: '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). Fundamentally, 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: 'if the border goes through your farm or your town, then it's part of your everyday reality' (R9). As another explains: '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)

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). In all the answers, 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).