



Irish Rural Link
Nasc Tuaithe na hÉireann

Irish Rural Link Report on ERP ROAD Project on Brexit Workshops

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Introduction

Irish Rural Link carried out three workshops on Brexit and how links can be maintained between the UK and the EU following Brexit. Two of these workshops took place in Border counties – namely Co. Leitrim and Co. Monaghan. The third workshop took place in Co. Limerick, in the south of the county which is highly dependent on the agriculture sector.

A lot of the same issues were raised in all three workshops, with workshops in Leitrim and especially Monaghan placing more emphasis on the issues a return to the border would have for communities in their areas. This was especially true for Monaghan as you cross the border into Northern Ireland a number of times while travelling through the county. Similarly, for communities in Leitrim that are on the border, travelling over and back is an everyday occurrence for majority of people. This is the concern for every person who cross the border to access employment, education, sporting clubs, medical appointments, shopping etc. and how accessing these will be affected following Brexit. The Peace Process and Good Friday Agreement were raised as one of the main reasons links must be maintained with Northern Ireland and the UK following Brexit and it must take precedence over whatever type of deal Brexit will be.

Why is it important to maintain links with the UK and Northern Ireland after Brexit?

There are endless reasons why it is important for the UK and Northern Ireland to maintain links with the EU and in particular Ireland and vice versa. From the Irish perspective there are economic, social, cultural and political reasons for maintaining links. There is a long history of interactions with people from both sides of the Irish border and relations have greatly improved over the years since the Good Friday Agreement and there is more growing contact with community groups from both sides since then.

- **Economic Reasons**

For Agriculture and other businesses, especially SME's and Micro businesses, it is important that links are maintained. The UK and Northern Ireland is the biggest market for Irish exports of agricultural produce but also for other Irish businesses. In terms of agriculture produce – beef and dairy – it can cross the border a number of times during the production process. How this will happen after Brexit is a concern for a lot of people involved in the sector. Also, in border counties, farmers land can cross the border and how this will be dealt with after Brexit was raised.

The UK is used as a land bridge to the rest of the EU as it reduces the time of getting goods, especially perishable goods to the single market. Exporting goods directly from Ireland to the rest of the EU would be too time consuming and following Brexit,

if no agreement, will cause delays with increased custom checks and administration work.

Tourism is a key sector for the Irish economy with the majority of the visitors coming from the UK. Continuing these links will be important for both countries.

- **Social Reasons**

There is a long history between UK and Ireland and good relationships have developed and grown over many years. The Good Friday Agreement was mentioned in all workshops and the benefits this has brought to communities on both sides of the border but also with the wider UK. The relationships and work that has been achieved since the Good Friday Agreement must be maintained.

PEACE funding has helped build relationships and working on cross border projects together has helped build these relationships and continued networks between community groups have come out of these projects. Likewise, Interreg projects have helped build relations between educational institutions and other organisations as well as networks between the UK, Ireland and rest of the EU and networks have formed as a result of these.

People living on the border can access health care, dental care etc on both sides of the border. Hospital in Derry was built on the predication that people living in Donegal can access this hospital for Cancer Treatment instead of having to travel to Galway or Dublin for the treatment. The Children's heart healthcare for the whole island is located in Dublin. Children from Northern Ireland must continue to be able to access this service.

Third level students have accessed education in the UK and Northern Ireland for many years and the freedom of students to study and through the Erasmus programme has been beneficial for both students and educational institutes.

It is not only third level students that access education from either side of the border. This was raised in the workshop in Monaghan, where those attending the workshop having experience of this. The supports for students, especially for students with learning difficulties are much better in Northern Ireland than in the South and people often send their children to the school for these reasons. They can often live closer to the school in the North also. There is concern now if these students can remain in these schools or if their younger siblings be allowed go to the same school following Brexit.

Sport was raised in all three workshops and the All Island sports teams such as Rugby, Hockey, and all Ireland Gaelic league and championship. At a local level this was also an issue for people in Monaghan and Leitrim and if there were checkpoints would they continue to bring their children to the club over the border due to the extra time it would take.

Likewise, with shopping, people travel back and forth and would a return to a border make people go elsewhere because it would be easier to do so.

- **Political Reasons**

It is paramount that The Good Friday Agreement be protected and remain in place and take precedent over whatever Brexit deal/withdrawal agreement is done. Relationships have strengthened since the Good Friday Agreement and these must continue.

- **Culture and Heritage Reasons**

The PEACE funding programme enabled a lot of cross border cultural projects develop since its inception. Bringing communities together through such projects has allowed communities to become more integrated. Also new communities and citizens that have moved to areas become involved in such projects. The links and relationships that have developed must be maintained.

With outdoor activities becoming more popular among people and families, the development of water ways and greenways between Ireland and Northern Ireland and these should continue to be accessible for people on both sides of the border. Mountain climbing and hiking is also a popular activity and Slieve Beagh are situated on the border, spanning Co. Monaghan in the Republic of Ireland and Co. Fermanagh and Co. Tyrone in Northern Ireland. Peatlands and wetlands also cross the border and these must remain accessible to everyone.

What kind of links need to be maintained?

The networks that have been built over the years especially since the Good Friday Agreement must be maintained. This is at business, social and political level. It was common among the workshops that open borders are needed to ensure that links are kept.

The Leitrim Workshop gave an example of a choir that was set up – Choir of Ages. This was done as part of a TV series and mixing younger and older people together. People from Co. Leitrim and Co. Fermanagh took part and there is concern they would not be able to continue with this.

Links between community groups from cross border PEACE Projects must be maintained and be able to continue to engage with one another. Exploring new projects, which may need to come from a different funding stream, on how these links can be maintained. This can be true for other current projects, such as Interreg, EU LIFE projects and working with each other on how similar projects could continue.

Business links must be maintained and trade between Ireland (EU) and UK & Northern Ireland must continue and this must be done as seamlessly as possible. Both markets must remain available to each other following Brexit.

Geographical Links – The closeness of Ireland to the UK and especially Northern Ireland means that people must be able to travel as seamlessly. This would be especially true for people living in counties that cross into Northern Ireland and journeys must not return to the burdensome journeys they were in the past.

Educational Links and Healthcare – Students attending second level school on either side of the border must continue to be able to do so. Such students should also be able to continue to access third level education from either jurisdiction without imposing International student fees.

The same is true for Healthcare especially specialist healthcare – cancer treatment, heart health care for children as mentioned above. But also dental, mental health services, opticians, physiotherapists, etc. currently accessible by people must continue.

How can these links be maintained?

There was a number of ideas that were identified as ways of maintaining links between the UK and EU following Brexit. Again a lot of these focused on the maintaining the links between Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland and how links that have been created should be maintained. While some people in workshops favoured that things stay as they are while another workshop identified that new solutions may have to be explored to maintaining links and should be explored. The following are the main ideas that were discussed as how links can be maintained:

- Change nothing was identified as one way of maintaining links - continue as things are in terms of the community groups and exchanges that have developed regardless of Brexit outcome.
- Encouraging communities and networks, whether social, economic, cultural or political to maintain the links, networks and relationships that have already been formed over the past number of years is needed. Brexit should not dissolve the work already done in forming and growing these links and relationships.
- The Backstop Agreement was mentioned in one workshop as a way of maintaining links between Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland and having this honoured would ensure that links can be maintained.
- Northern Ireland must continue to benefit from EU initiatives as the south – PEACE projects can continue to build communities.
- Communities must be encouraged to continue to carry on integrating with one another both sides of the border. This could be done through regular cross border meetings/conferences/dialogues among community groups and regular cross border activity. It was raised among the people in one workshop of the fear of the ‘us and them’ coming back after Brexit and this needs to be avoided.

- Town twinning that already exists between towns in the UK and Northern Ireland and EU towns must be maintained and encouraging this into the future.
- Maintaining school exchanges between UK and EU second level education can also be a way of maintaining links and continuing the programme beyond Brexit.
- The Erasmus programme for third level students, allowing them to study in a college/university for part of their course, is another means of maintaining the links between the UK and EU. The Erasmus Plus fund for projects addressing adult learners and continuing to be able to access this by organisations from the UK and Northern Ireland was also identified as a way of maintaining links but also developing new links.
- The churches can play a role in maintaining links and building on the work already done, especially in border counties.
- It was noted in one of the workshops that maybe following Brexit new solutions instead of maintaining what is there will have to be explored – recognising that not all links and relations will be able to be maintained.

Who needs to maintain these links?

The three workshops gave the same feedback on this question that links must be maintained at all levels – Government, Local Authorities, Communities but also as individuals. Government must provide leadership in maintaining links and building on relationships that have been formed and provide the necessary supports to help communities maintain the links. Local Development Companies, PPN's – Public Participation Networks in each county and Local non-profit organisations were also identified as key players in maintaining links and linking in with counterparts in Northern Ireland. A similar process could be done with the UK and rest of the EU.

Universities, colleges, schools, sporting clubs and churches were also identified as groups that could maintain links that already exist but also building new links and relationships,

More work by Government in the Border counties to maintain links and develop new links will be needed as people in communities in these counties will be most affected.

Conclusion

While there was a small turnout in some of the workshops, the ideas that were shared in the workshops were valuable for this report. One of the main concerns among people was the retention of the Good Friday Agreement and no return to hard borders, especially for those living in the border counties and travel over and back to Northern Ireland, for many on a daily basis.

Irish Rural Link the Organisation

Irish Rural Link (IRL), formed in 1991, is a national network of organisations and individuals campaigning for sustainable rural development in Ireland and Europe. IRL, a non-profit organisation, has grown significantly since its inception and now directly represents over 600 community groups with a combined membership of 25,000.

The network provides a structure through which rural groups and individuals, representing disadvantaged rural communities, can articulate their common needs and priorities, share their experiences and present their case to policy-makers at local, national and European Level.

Irish Rural Link is the only group represented at the national social partnership talks solely representing rural communities' interests.

'Our vision is of vibrant, inclusive and sustainable rural communities that contribute to an equitable and just society'

Irish Rural Link's aims are:

- To articulate and facilitate the voices of rural communities in local, regional, national and European policy arenas, especially those experiencing poverty, social exclusion and the challenge of change in the 21st century.
- To promote local and community development in rural communities in order to strengthen and build the capacity of rural community groups to act as primary movers through practical assistance and advice.
- To research, critique and disseminate policies relating to rural communities including issues such as sustainability, social exclusion, equality and poverty
- To facilitate cross-border networking between rural communities

'Our mission is to influence and inform local, regional, national and European development policies and programmes in favour of rural communities especially those who are marginalised as a result of poverty and social exclusion in rural areas.'