

# **Emergent Cross-Border Functional Geographies on the Island of Ireland: pre- and post-Brexit**

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**Abstract:** The notion of ‘functional geographies’ has gained momentum across academic and policy communities in recent decades. In an EU context, the elevation of territoriality and functionality in policy-making has drawn attention to ‘spatial context and distribution’ (Faludi and Peyrony, 2011) and ‘place-based’ approaches (Nosek, 2017) for nurturing a more just distribution of opportunities in places, across various spatial scales and between European territories. Following twenty years of peace, the island of Ireland has witnessed a degree of convergence around governance structures and the expansion of relational cooperative spaces that reflect complex socio-economic functional relationships that stretch across territorial geographies. The associated policy making and institutional mechanisms can operate through traditional ‘hard’ bureaucratic procedures or through innovative ‘soft’ spaces that work with, and operate across, ‘fuzzy boundaries’, negotiating mutual thematic policy areas. Reflecting on the legacy of social, economic and infrastructure integration and policy convergence to date, this paper explores the vulnerability of existing cross-border functional geographies given the uncertainties posed by Brexit. In considering the pre-Brexit – and an uncertain post-Brexit – context, the paper examines empirical findings from key actors about cooperation and the activities, flows and linkages that occur in cross-border functional geographies on the island of Ireland.

**Keywords:** *‘soft’ spaces; functional geographies; cross-border; planning; Brexit*

## **Introduction**

The Irish border region and cross-border cooperation were shaped by socio-economic, cultural, political and spatial conditions long before the result of UK's European Union (EU) membership referendum in June 2016. Since the peace agreement (Belfast/Good Friday Agreement) in 1998, cross-border relationships have created a context in which the Irish border is *de facto* invisible. In this context, North-South (Northern Ireland and Ireland) and East-West (Ireland and UK) relationships have evolved to work towards shared interests and outcomes across the British Isles. In particular, since the 1998 Agreement, governments, institutions, cross-border organisations and many other actors in Ireland and Northern Ireland have painstakingly tried to untangle various complexities to address place-making and deliver services that straddle the Irish border to mutually enhance social, economic and environmental well-being.

Against a backdrop of EU membership and functional interdependency, the last decade has witnessed substantial reform that has led to a degree of policy and governance convergence across the island of Ireland (Rafferty and Lloyd, 2014). In more recent years, both jurisdictions have undertaken significant local government reorganisation. In Northern Ireland, in particular, a transfer of some spatial planning, economic and tourism powers from central government to local government has generated opportunities for better coordination of place-based policy co-design, alignment and cooperation, creating symmetry with local government in Ireland. The significance of such change, before the emergence of Brexit, cannot be ignored. However, Brexit has reemphasised the socio-political significance of the territorial frontier between the Northern Ireland (UK) and the Ireland (EU).

This contribution focuses on cross-border regionalism and cooperation on the island of Ireland prior to, and during the emergence of, Brexit and argues how decades of governance modernisation and European policy have led to a period of convergence on the island of Ireland. The paper critically discusses how such convergence has facilitated the emergence of functional geographies and supportive structures, as 'soft spaces' with a degree of institutional 'thickening', to co-design and co-manage relational spaces along the Irish border region. After presenting a conceptual framework and outlining recent developments, the paper draws upon the North-West City-Region case and empirical findings from a local stakeholder survey to discuss how Brexit represents a potential disruptor to the ongoing pathway toward greater cooperation and convergence.

## Functional Geographies across Relational Spaces

While notions of Functional Economic Areas have been around since the 1960s (Morphet, 2019), chiefly conceptualised around economic flows and commuting patterns at sub-state scales, the notion of *functional geographies*, particularly on the island of Ireland, include socio-spatial relations beyond purely economic ties. The conceptualisation and operationalisation of such functional geographies have been influenced by territorial cooperation – a goal of European Union (EU) regional policy for coordinating sectoral programmes that address spatial disparities to foster territorial cohesion. For Taillon (2018: 5-6), this illuminates the ‘importance accorded to relations between territorial players across national frontiers’. Although trans-boundary cooperation and territorial cohesion have been present from the beginning of the project of European integration (Colomb, 2017; Faludi, 2009), it was the Lisbon Treaty (2007) which placed greater emphasis on access to services and ‘functional geographies’ that would complement economic and social cohesion (European Commission, 2016; Nosek, 2017). The EU’s Territorial Cohesion agenda has elevated the significance of territoriality in policy-making, drawing greater attention towards ‘spatial context and distribution’ (Faludi and Peyrony, 2011) and ‘place-based’ approaches (Nosek, 2017) for nurturing a more just distribution of opportunities across different spatial scales. Similarly, the legal instrument of the European Groupings for Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) and associated regional (or cohesion) policy funding programmes (e.g., INTERREG) have been developed to overcome ‘border effects’ (Colomb, 2017) and promote new approaches to transnational interregional multilevel governance (Taillon, 2018). In effect, the cumulative ambition of such policies, instruments and approaches is to enhance socio-spatial functionality and policy alignment that addresses spatial inequalities and enhances social, economic and environmental well-being.

In the context of EU territorial cohesion, understanding the causes of territorial disparities, the coordination and impact of sectoral policy and the development of policy instruments, particularly at regional and sub-regional spatial scales requires greater appreciation of the intricacies of networked activities functioning over a particular spatial area. Faludi and Peyrony (2011) consider ‘functionality’ to be important as an extension of *cohesion* and *joined-up thinking*, which tries to ensure sectoral policies across different scales/territories form a coherent whole. The translation of European spatial logics, such as territorial cohesion and cooperation programmes, present theoretical and empirical challenges for the operationalisation of such concepts into national and regional agendas (Sá Marques *et al.*, 2018; Peel and Lloyd, 2015).

In particular, ‘functional geographies’ may differ amongst stakeholders, across various spatial scales and between countries. Keating (2017) argues how the rise of the concept of ‘region’, whether at supranational and sub-state levels or across inter-state spaces, often has references to functional imperatives or drivers. Moreover, the functional logics informing regional geographies tend to be normative and teleological, ‘explaining change by reference to its effects’ (Keating, 2017: 10), which perhaps do not address wider causes of ineffectiveness or fragmentation associated with governance approaches and policy outcomes. Walsh, *et al.* (2016: 3) identify the following imperatives or drivers framing functional geographies: ‘(1) promote economic development, strengthening vertical and horizontal linkages in the regional economy and developing critical mass; (2) achieve efficiencies and synergies in the provision of public services, promoting a ‘shared services agenda’; (3) mitigate environmental impacts and promote socially and spatially just outcomes; and (4) achieve a better understanding of functional relationships, working across and beyond administrative boundaries, supporting evidence-informed planning and policy-making.’

The conceptualisation and operationalisation of functional geographies have *vertical* and *horizontal* dimensions; the authors though would argue that in cross-border contexts there are additional *lateral* dimensions, which are fundamental for nurturing ‘soft spaces’ that facilitate new spatial imaginaries around cross-border regionalism. Vertical dimensions can refer to the notion that rationalities for devising functional geographies may emerge from interactions across different administrative (spatial) scales, i.e., micro, meso and macro, chiefly within a nation state, to produce understandings of logical interrelationships across certain functions, such as transport, economic flows or environmental assets. Actors across different governance tiers may view the functionality of places and services through different socio-spatial lens. Approaching an understanding of functional geographies through sectoral policy cooperation can be considered a horizontal dimension. In particular, much of this horizontal activity is aimed at addressing fragmentation and institutional insularity. Central to this dimension is collaborative working that spans professional and sectoral boundaries to co-design innovative policy solutions that can be operationalised across administrative boundaries, but unusually within a given jurisdiction. An expression of such working is ‘community planning’ in Northern Ireland. This structural change has become equated with ways for agencies (‘partners’) – operating beyond the administrative unit of the local authority – to overcome sectoral barriers to co-design policy interventions and achieve collaborative gain for enhancing social, economic and environmental well-being. However, achieving such structures, working and outcomes in a cross-jurisdictional, cross-border context entails a strong lateral dimension, one which connects

both the vertical and horizontal governance systems in respective jurisdictions. While vertical and horizontal components that help frame functional geography operations can be challenging within a state's administrative governance model, the lateral extension to cross-jurisdictional design and application can present additional complexity. It may require additional political and macro-level cross-institutional commitment to initiate and sustain momentum alongside micro-level local authority exchanges and local community buy-in. Such geo-political support, socio-spatial relationships and cross-border institutional/departmental 'thickness' may be conditional factors in influencing the abilities of policy-makers and spatial planners to conceptualise and operationalise functional geographies, particularly those that occur beyond a nation's administrative border.

With this in mind, the understanding of functional geographies requires consideration of, and distinction between, *territorial* and *relational* spaces. Territorial spaces can be considered political geographies, which relate to notions of a 'nation' or the internal institutional mechanisms of managing a country's land territory. Perhaps globalisation, with decades of people, goods and capital moving more easily, has created internal 'territorial' challenges for the nation state, reaffirming Barca, *et al.* (2012: 136) thesis that globalisation 'has made space and place more rather than less important.' Dühr (2007: 73) acknowledges how 'emerging new relational geography...regards space as a network of relations and functional interdependencies', in which connectivity is more relevant than proximity. Arguably, relational spaces reflect more complex temporal and social interactions that stretch across different geographies (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2009: 169, cited in Allmendinger *et al.*, 2015). This distinction is subtle, yet significant. The stronghold of territorial-based thinking in framing contemporary politics and policy making cannot be dismissed. The outworking of Brexit represents significant challenges to such thinking given the complexities of decades of hyper-connectivity and growing lateral integration, particularly on the island of Ireland. However, in the Northern Ireland context, given the provenance of the peace process, arguably there has been a shift towards appreciating relational spaces as a way to consider functionality that reflects the complex socio-spatial relational dynamics on the island of Ireland. Yet, this is not unique just to this island – the value of relational spaces resonates across the globe. For example, previous work by OCED (2002: 3) captures the essence of relational spaces in such contexts, articulating functional geographies or regions as:

*'...a territorial unit resulting from the organisation of social and economic relations in that its boundaries do not reflect geographical particularities or historical events. It is thus a functional sub-division of territories. The most typical concept used in defining a functional region is that of labour markets.'*

Labour markets are just one of many relational characteristics framing functional geographies. Another emerging cross-border relational sector is health, particularly in the EU context, which has been occurring across the island of Ireland in recent years, too. Research demonstrates the opportunities and challenges of cross-border collaboration for improving the health outcomes for those living in border regions, although its feasibility is context-dependent (Glinos and Baeten, 2015; Migge and Gilmartin, 2011). For such joint ventures to be successful, the cross-border collaboration should respond to local need, align partner interests, nurture institutional-thickness and apply innovation to go beyond the priorities, rules and incentives of domestic health systems (Glinos and Baeten, 2015). These arguments similarly apply to other sectors, such as planning, transport and education, for example.

These sectoral considerations illustrate the high frequency of both economic and social interactions across relational spaces that constitute functional geographies, which can occur both within and across administrative boundaries. Like territory, functional geographies are conceptualised and operationalised as socially constructed models, spaces and practices (Schejtman and Berdegué, 2003, cited in Berdegué *et al.*, 2015). Thus, the concept of 'functional geographies' can be a useful framework, or construct, to make sense of the complex set of evolving relationships between rural areas, urban centres and the global economy. Earlier research has argued that the 'increasing connections and interactions between places, regardless of official borders, means that the traditional way of seeing cities and towns need to be augmented by a network approach, which assesses the functionality of individual urban centres' (Gleeson *et al.*, 2010). In many ways, such augmentation has been occurring in recent years on the island of Ireland, particularly along the Irish border region, because of a degree of policy and institutional convergence.

### **Convergence in the Irish Border Region**

It is against the backdrop outlined above that in recent years both jurisdictions on the island of Ireland have embarked on significant local government reorganisation (Rafferty and Lloyd, 2014), consisting of a radical reduction from 26 to 11 local authorities in Northern Ireland in

April 2015. In addition, the East-West and North-South strands of the Good Friday Agreement have nurtured unprecedented positive relationships across the British Isles, which has dismantled border infrastructure and facilitated free movement of people and goods across the Irish frontier. In this context, regional development has tended to focus on reducing geographical disparities within, and across, both jurisdictions through economic and infrastructure interventions. This has framed the understanding of what constitutes a functional geography, in terms of recognising it through economic flows or infrastructure connections/corridors. However, arguably, on the island of Ireland context, regional development and the framing of functional geographies have had a strong social dimension, recognising the need to address spatial inequalities and enhance social wellbeing following a period of protracted conflict. Indeed, social wellbeing aspirations have entered the policy discourse in Western democracies, expanding performance measures beyond Gross Domestic Product (GDP) to incorporate indicators of a society's standard of living and description of social progress, in terms of measuring advancements in quality of life, material conditions and sustainability (Stiglitz *et al.*, 2018).

The 'de-bordering' effects of EU and Single Market membership, the Common Travel Area and the outworking of the Good Friday Agreement have produced a symmetry to the policy landscape, council structures and competencies that previously did not exist. Much of which, according to de Mars *et al.* (2018: 12), have standardised rules and regulations on either side of the Irish border. For example, some of the areas of cooperation emerging from such 'de-bordering' have facilitated a shift from collaborative competition to inclusive cooperation (shared responsibility) that can be illustrated by the establishment of cross-border institutions such as *InterTrade Ireland*, *Waterways Ireland* and *Tourism Ireland*, which represent greater uniformity towards both policy and practice. While sector-based transnational collaborations are not without difficulties, the above cross-border institutional structures provide mechanisms to synchronise thinking across functional geographies beyond administrative boundaries. In particular, Peel and Lloyd (2015: 2218) note how *InterTrade Ireland* can be 'considered an institutional sponsor for the idea of a cross-border strategic spatial planning framework.'

From a spatial planning perspective, there is an appreciation of the functional realities across social, economic, environmental, spatial and infrastructural relations on the island of Ireland. This awareness has been significantly bolstered by policy advances in recent years, including Northern Ireland's *Regional Development Strategy* (RDS) (DRDNI, 2010) and Ireland's recent *National Planning Framework* (DoHPLG, 2018), along with the joint departmental *Framework*



*for Cooperation – Spatial Strategies of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland* (DRDNI and DECLG, 2011), all seeking to encourage working together on issues that transcend (local and national) jurisdictional boundaries, particularly in balancing any economic prosperity with social progress. Of significance is Ireland's *National Planning Framework* that has a dedicated section on 'Working with Our Neighbours', which acknowledges the potential of Brexit to significantly change the nature of the relationship with neighbouring countries, chiefly the four nations of the UK. In responding to such uncertainties, the framework contains policy objectives to further support and develop the economic potential of the Dublin-Belfast Corridor, building on longstanding work in this relational space. Significantly, the framework also strengthens the need for both governments in Ireland and Northern Ireland to support the newly developed relational space in the Northwest of the island, emerging as the North-West City-Region concept.

A degree of local authority convergence now accompanies policy complementarity created in the above strategic spatial frameworks. Local government in both jurisdictions have undertaken reform to reposition this governance tier as one that is more responsive to local need, promote inclusive economic growth, support community development and improves the connection between regional and local levels (see Rafferty and Lloyd, 2014 for further details). In Northern Ireland, in particular, a transfer of some spatial planning, economic and tourism powers from central government to local government has generated opportunities for better coordination of place-based policy co-design, alignment and cooperation. Significant place-shaping and service coordination functions have been transferred (e.g., local spatial development planning) from central government or introduced through new legislative powers (e.g., community planning, to coordinate and deliver public services). In Ireland, governance reorganisation brought with it new local administrative structures for greater efficiency and effectiveness in local and community development programming, for augmenting the delivery of public services, and for enhancing enterprise support and economic growth (e.g., establishment of Local Community Development Committees (LCDCs) and Local Economic and Community Plans (LECPs)). This symmetry enables councils in the Irish border to consider better ways of coordinating services (through 'community planning' in Northern Ireland and 'local economic and community planning' in Ireland) and managing socio-spatial change (through 'spatial planning'). These formal, 'hard' structures are underpinned by separate legislation in both jurisdictions but present a shared set of policy instruments that equip local authorities with the mechanisms to co-manage relational functions and activities that operate across the border.

The degree of convergence arguably strengthens the leadership role of local government for nurturing stronger cross-border cooperation, particularly between those councils along the Irish border. This institutional change, before the emergence of Brexit, is significant. In fact, such local government symmetry had not existed on the island of Ireland since the early 1970s. This has enabled further institutional thickness to occur between border councils to cooperate on shared socio-spatial interests, which is important for building trust and constructing mutual rationalities around collective endeavours (Amin and Thrift, 1994: 10, cited in Pike *et al.*, 2017: 48). Much of this ‘thickening’ has emerged over decades of de-bordering associated with peace-building, EU membership and policy alignment, in which the border can be conceptualised as a ‘bridge’ (Taillon, 2018) that involves:

*‘...a significant degree of cross-border contact, communication and cooperation across public, private and Third (voluntary and community) sectors. The outcomes of this...include institutional and policy development, economic initiatives with mutually beneficial outcomes and community development across the border’*  
(McCall, 2011: 222, cited in Taillon, 2018: 86).

The degree of cross-border ‘thickness’ particularly in relation to local authority contact, communication and cooperation has been supported through collective cross-border networks (Creamer and Driscoll, 2013), chiefly, East Border Region Ltd. (EBR), Irish Central Border Area Network (ICBAN) and the North-West Region Cross Border Group (NWRCBG). These networks tend to adopt constructivist approaches to encourage interaction between local governments that nurture bi-lateral cooperation, for example, to deliver shared services. Creamer and Driscoll (2013: 16) articulate how these cross-border networks demonstrate some essential components of what constitutes functional geographies and provide ‘soft’ supportive spaces to assist local government:

*‘The model employed by the networks has been relatively successful, and there are undoubtedly aspects of these processes which should be considered for future shared service programmes being led by local government, including initiatives in biodiversity and energy (in which EBR has experience), and GIS and data capture and analysis (in which both NWRCBG and ICBAN have expertise). The networks thus demonstrate how local authorities can work together for mutual benefit and provide specialised and shared service to local governments.’*

These lateral cross-border constructs represent ‘soft’ spaces to overcome border effects and for understanding the complex socio-spatial functional geographies that operate across administrative boundaries and jurisdictional borders. Their operational scale incorporates much larger geographies and provides a spatial scale for considering distinct cross-border regionalism.

### **Functional Geography Instruments: ‘Hard’ and ‘Soft’ Spaces**

The symmetry of ‘hard’ governance structures and the growth of ‘soft’ spaces supporting the understanding of functional geographies on the island of Ireland is contemporaneous with what is occurring elsewhere. Recent research from ESPON’s ACTAREA (Thinking and Planning in Areas of Territorial Cooperation) project reveals how ‘soft’ territorial cooperation has grown to manage specific cross-border/cross-administrative opportunities and challenges, and to build strategic approaches to create mutual benefits. ESPON (2017: 2) describes how soft territorial cooperation contains some of the following features:

- ‘Define the sectoral scope and geographical boundaries in an “open” or “fuzzy” way;
- Have a medium- to long-term integrative perspective (i.e., they are not limited to the implementation of a single project);
- Seek to enhance the capacities of involved players, making them actors of their own development;
- Renew relations between institutional levels, sectors of activity and types of actors (e.g., NGOs, private companies, local and regional authorities, agencies).’

At the core of soft cooperation is the desire to operate at the level of functional geographies, providing complementarity with, not being an alternative to, formal ‘hard’ governmental structures that operate within jurisdictions. With a maturation of spatial and strategic planning occurring across most European countries, there appears to be a growing appreciation for the need to plan across ‘messy geographies’ (Pike *et al.*, 2016) and ‘fuzzy boundaries’ (Walsh *et al.*, 2016). Experimentation of spatial planning not only across European member states, but also within countries, and across devolved nations (e.g., in the UK), illustrates different ways for addressing the complexities of ‘spatial edges’ at administrative boundaries within existing governance models. In effect, this reflects the complex, interrelated cross-boundary (and cross-

border) relationships that form functional geographies. Many authors describe these types of activities as operating within ‘soft spaces’ (Walsh *et al.*, 2016; Walsh, 2015; Allmendinger *et al.*, 2015), occurring outside or parallel to existing formal ‘hard’ spaces of bureaucratic procedures, diffusing power and policy design beyond the rigidities of existing administrative boundaries.

In many ways, the joint departmental *Framework for Cooperation* (DRDNI and DECLG, 2011), co-created by two government departments, offering bilateral support and commitment for cooperation, can be considered an expression of a ‘soft’ territorial cooperation framework. Peel and Lloyd (2015: 2223) conclude how the framework can be an example of ‘the positive re-imagining of cross-border regionalism through a number of layers of spatial public diplomacy,’ which is indicative of how nations articulate a shared agenda for addressing structural and cognitive barriers to manage functional geographies in cross-border regions. Furthermore, the cross-border working relationships between both Donegal County Council (Ireland) and Derry City and Strabane District Council (Northern Ireland), and their co-designed *North-West Strategic Growth Plan*, endorsed by both Governments during a North South Ministerial Council (NSMC) Plenary Meeting in July 2016, can be considered outputs from soft cross-border cooperation. Recent outworkings of this growing cross-institutional ‘thickness’ has been the joint report analysing the challenges and opportunities of Brexit (Donegal County Council and Derry City and Strabane District Council, 2017) and the creation of a North-West City-Region spatial vision that is to be included in the forthcoming Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy (RSES) for the Northern and Western Regional Assembly in Ireland. These examples illustrate particular spatial (territorial) policy and institutional dimensions that build a social constructivist approach to cross-border ‘region-ness’ (Perkmann, 2003) and contain various degrees, or scales, of ‘soft’ governing. The content of these ‘softer’ co-operative mechanisms express shared strategic rationalities and ambitions to co-manage a particular functional geography, in this case, the wider urban-rural relationship in the North-West of Ireland, and perhaps begins to solidify soft trans-boundary cooperation alongside existing formal, ‘hard’ institutional structures and statutory processes.

Soft cooperation models provide a conceptual approach to define, understand and coordinate cross-border ‘functionalities’ between people and place over an emerging functional geography. Functional geographies can constitute social, economic and environmental inter-dependencies that occur beyond socially constructed administrative boundaries. Across the Irish border region, encompassing urban and rural geographies, such functions can be

understood to mean economic flows and connections (labour markets), the access to and provision of public services, commuting patterns, and the movement and social connections of people across particular geographies (Gleeson, 2017). For example, evidence from the All-Island Research Observatory (AIRO), published in *The Atlas of the Island of Ireland* (2015: 54), illustrates how 14,800 persons regularly commute across the Irish border for either work or study, with 2011 census data revealing how ‘44% (6,500) were travelling from Northern Ireland to Ireland and 56% (8,300) were travelling from Ireland to Northern Ireland.’ This data captures the increasing socio-spatial functional dynamics operating in cross-border geographies, particularly in the North-West of the island, along the ‘Letterkenny-Derry/Londonderry corridor where more than 30% of all local workers in parts of the Inishowen peninsula work in Northern Ireland’ (AIRO and ICLRD, 2015: 54). Moreover, the backdrop presented above has allowed for the creation of collaborative working and cooperative instruments, particularly in the fields of spatial planning, energy, tourism, agri-food and health care. The potential consequences of Brexit to daily life and economic prosperity along the Irish border, and recently established institutional structures, require careful consideration to avoid disruption to the delicate balance that has been nurtured across the island of Ireland – in what is its most peaceful period in modern history.

### **Cooperation Challenges posed by Brexit**

Much of the commentary surrounding Northern Ireland, as the UK progresses on its Brexit journey, has exposed the socio-economic interdependencies that now occur across the Irish border. Both the emergence of cross-border functional geographies and associated governance approaches which represent ‘soft’ spaces have been supported by deep economic and social cooperation on the island of Ireland. However, following the June 2016 referendum result in the UK, after many years of a global economic crisis, Brexit has generated febrile debate in the UK and Ireland – and beyond – about cross-border dynamics on the island of Ireland, particularly along economic and trade arguments.

The post-Brexit referendum aftermath is having an impact on people living and working along the border (Hayward, 2017). This is further evidenced in an *International Centre for Local and Regional Development* survey conducted during 2017 to capture local insights into key stakeholders’ perspectives on existing cross-border cooperation and the potential impact of Brexit. Twenty-four participants responded to the survey from across public administration,

civil society, the private sector and the academic community. Survey respondents raised multiple concerns associated with Brexit's impact on the Irish border region across social, economic, policy, security and political spheres, even before the UK exits. The stakeholder responses indicate a broad range of issues and perceived implications, including possible:

- Policy divergence (e.g., trade regulations, environmental legislation)
- Severance or disruption to cross-border council collaboration
- Disruption to service delivery arrangements
- Negative impacts to economic and business performance
- Restrictions to social mobility and 'everyday' movement of people
- Reductions to community cohesion along border communities
- Hardening of identity politics.

Respondents pointed to the potential – and emerging – social implications surrounding Brexit to the Irish border region. In particular, one respondent (Public Admin, Ireland) stated how Brexit could have '*implications for community connectivity and interaction. Border controls may result in social disorder, disobedience and a reintroduction to the black economy along the border*'. Increasingly, concerns remain in relation to a potential deterioration of social cohesion, given the uncertainty around any future border controls and infrastructure, whether they emerge within the island of Ireland or along the Irish Sea. Some respondents noted how the political discourse on Brexit is having a polarising effect within local communities and may lead to a hardening of identity politics. Decades of peace and EU funding has facilitated positive social progress along the Irish border region, improving socio-economic relationships and allowing functional geographies to emerge. However, the survey respondents' views describe how the divisive nature of Brexit, particularly along the Irish border region, presents an unsettling juncture to the positive journey that has been painstakingly nurtured over recent decades.

Uncertainty remains whether there will be divergence of the existing regulatory context, particularly in relation to economic and environmental regulations. Across the survey responses, many stakeholders raised concerns that any policy divergence along the Irish border could '*represent disrupters to social, economic and political activity*' (Public Sector, Ireland) and cause '*fragmented approaches to regional and local development*' (Academic Sector, Northern Ireland). Reflecting on joint ventures recently developed in the health sector, particularly in collaborative cancer trials with a range of stakeholders on both sides of the

border, a public sector (Northern Ireland) respondent candidly acknowledged that any ‘*divergence of policy and/or regulation could see such valuable collaborative endeavours end*’. Therefore, pragmatic approaches are needed to sustain, and perhaps nurture new, collaborative inter-jurisdictional working. This may entail, for example, local memoranda of understanding (MoUs) or other local arrangements that are underpinned by or supported through statute. A recent example has emerged from the educational sector recognising the functional geography in the North-West of Ireland, acknowledged in a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between Ulster University, Letterkenny Institute of Technology, North West Regional College, and Donegal Education and Training Board. Coming into effect on 23 February 2018, and operating for five years, the purpose of the MoU (Ulster University, et al., 2018: 3) between the different academic institutions is to:

*‘...further develop and consolidate existing collaboration between the institutions which cements the civic and economic role of these four institutions within the context of the emerging Regional Growth model for the North West City Region. The MOU represents an articulation of the role of its partners as anchors for growth within the North West City Region place-based leadership model, which is driving a long-term and ambitious agenda for the region with global, national and regional reach and impact. Additionally, the MOU provides a mechanism for both governments to engage with the institutions to deliver on our shared further and higher educational ambitions and commitments.’*

In relation to the emerging North-West City-Region context, respondents alluded to potential Brexit impacts on this functional geography with its strong relational dynamics between Derry city (Northern Ireland) and eastern parts of Donegal (Ireland), especially urban settlements (e.g., Letterkenny) and surrounding rural hinterlands. Gleeson’s (2017) research, noted earlier, highlights the extensive cross-border commuting patterns operating across this functional geography. A private sector (Northern Ireland) respondent drew attention to the strong interdependency operating between labour markets and commuter patterns across this city-region, suggesting ‘*this makes the implications of Brexit for the NW region particularly stark compared to other parts of the border region*’. The implications of Brexit on healthcare provision in this city-region and along the Irish border region are of concern to the continuation of delivering services across different functional geographies. An academic sector (Northern Ireland) respondent commented how ‘*it is crucial that we work together to maintain and further*

*develop the solid working relationships that are now an everyday experience in the health services, North and South’.*

Stakeholders acknowledged the benefits of identifying – and continuing to nurture – functional geographies for advancing social and economic wellbeing in cross-border regions and across the island of Ireland. A public sector (Northern Ireland) respondent claimed how *‘the border region does experience higher cross-border economic linkages than areas further from the border. Barriers to this functional relationship would undermine the progress in cross-border trade established to date’*. While relational dynamics around economics and trade are so embedded now along the Irish border region, so too are social and environmental relations, which represent challenges for spatial planning and service provision. Local authority planners on either side of the border acknowledge how functional geographies are important for preparing mutually beneficial spatial strategies, with one public sector (Ireland) respondent arguing that *‘functional areas, in terms of spatial planning, need to be the effective basis for producing spatial strategies. To enable long term capacity to respond to activities, flows and linkages it is essential that collaborations continue’*. Likewise, a public sector (Northern Ireland) respondent stated how *‘cooperation always needs nurturing. In the world of planning, there is always the danger of failure to cooperate across boundaries’*.

Challenges remain in making this happen. Whilst the concept of functional geographies, reflecting the complex ‘messy’ socio-spatial relations operating across the border, is generally accepted, inherent challenges exist, including, for example, who takes responsibility for actions, and making difficult decisions? One public sector (Ireland) respondent stated that *‘it will take an extreme effort on both sides of the border to continue to nurture the existing collaborations’*. There is the need to convince both Irish and UK government officials that the design of soft governance arrangements are necessary, with a private sector (Northern Ireland) respondent arguing that soft spaces must be *‘fit for purpose’* and *‘heavily connected to local government governance in order to work effectively on a place-based model’*. This demands both strategic support and local action. Therefore, leadership in the public sector is necessary, principally from central government in Belfast and Dublin, to establish the ‘harder’ top-down strategic context for ensuring cooperation continues. However, ‘softer’ bottom-up cooperative activities are required too across local economic development, community initiatives and public service delivery to ensure functional relations, such as healthcare and education, continue uninterrupted across administrative boundaries post-Brexit. A public sector (Northern Ireland) respondent argued how *‘formal statutory instruments can have value, however they should include the*



*whole island rather than placing boundaries within the island to trade and co-operation. Informal approaches are currently in operation and should continue to be supported post-Brexit*. Furthermore, each functional geography along the Irish border region (e.g. the North-West and the Eastern seaboard) will require innovative and bespoke governing arrangements to reflect particular place-based dynamics. It remains unclear what degree of ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ institutional arrangements will be required to support functional geographies post-Brexit.

Respondents indicated that a combination of both formal (statutory, often ‘hard’) instruments and informal (non-statutory, ‘softer’) cooperation will be preferable to navigate the post-Brexit landscape. However, significant commentary emerged around the value that ‘softer’, non-statutory governance arrangements can play in managing relational dynamics in functional geographies, particularly in relation to existing cross-border regional bodies, such as NWRCBG, ICBAN and EBR. An academic sector (Northern Ireland) respondent posited that *‘local authorities should have a duty to collaborate with each other’* and a public sector (Ireland) respondent acknowledged the North-West City-Region Partnership as an emerging exemplar of ‘soft’ cooperation, but argued that *‘an opportunity exists to provide for a regional approach along the entire length of the border’*. To an extent, current regional/local planning policy and practices offer the right conditions for considering the Irish border region as a functional geography or set of functional geographies. Many respondents acknowledged that operational frameworks and practices are already in place, such as the National Planning Framework and the North-West Strategic Growth Partnership, with a public sector (Ireland) respondent claiming how *‘the North-West initiatives to date indicate that the effective collaborations have occurred at a local level with the support and buy-in from government. This has influenced and helped shape the approach to the North-West within the NPF and will also inform the RSES being developed at the regional level’*.

The emergence of such effective cross-border cooperation has been built on the ‘thickening’ of inter-professional contact and cross-institutional communication. The outcomes from now established practices of soft cooperation need to continue, as a civil society (Ireland) respondent argued in any post-Brexit context *‘the most important determinant of suitable policies and practices will come down to the quality of the relationships between key individuals and their staff with their partner local authorities’*. The importance of soft cooperation and proper resourcing of it will be required post-Brexit. Many respondents noted that such resourcing should include leadership at local, regional and national levels to continue to drive cross-border cooperation, progressing functional geographies logics and models that embed resilience to

respond to the uncertain impacts of Brexit. Building on the changing institutional and converging governance context noted above, a public sector (Northern Ireland) respondent referred to how recent local government reforms in Ireland and Northern Ireland offered the potential for further alignment and integration, which should not be the sole responsibility of central government, stating *‘alignment and integration (where possible) of local development plans and planning policies will assist with promotion of functional geographies – local and central government should collaborate on this issue’*.

Arguably, there is a role for other actors beyond central and local institutions in each jurisdiction. An academic sector (Ireland) respondent underscored the need to *‘develop mechanisms to facilitate civil society and lay public engagement/co-development in cross-border planning/environmental issues’*. Mobilising and empowering local citizens to play a role in co-producing future cross-border initiatives will be crucial to create the social capital and local community infrastructure necessary to respond to place-based challenges posed by Brexit. Perhaps now is an opportune time to consider the development of more sophisticated cross-border civil society networks, which could be embedded into, or, at the very least, complement existing civil society infrastructure such as Public Participation Networks (in Ireland) and other participatory structures used by local authorities in Northern Ireland. Focusing on more local approaches to cross-border development and proactively nurturing forms of participatory democracy align with current ideas associated with ‘place-based’ thinking and leadership (Iriss, 2015) and reflect the growth in the deployment of citizen assemblies.

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

While the stakeholder survey reveals an overwhelming degree of uncertainty in relation to the likely impact of Brexit to the functional geographies emerging along the Irish border region, many respondents recognise the value of considering institutional thickness and the role of civil society in managing the complex socio-spatial dynamics in these relational spaces. Clearly, functional geographies need to be better appreciated, nurtured and resourced along the Irish border to offer some resilience to any negative outcomes emerging from Brexit. It should be acknowledged that the adoption of ‘soft’ cooperation solutions to support functional geographies has grown out of a long-shared history, much of which has been supported by EU membership and operationalised through recent governance reforms. The continuation of nurturing appropriate cross-border regionalism is highly dependent on the degree of

institutional thickness and the regulatory frameworks that emerge post-Brexit, on either side of the Irish border. Local government reforms in Ireland and Northern Ireland, and the maturation of policy and planning instruments, have created a complementary landscape on the island to facilitate ‘soft’ cooperation that has commenced with operationalising ways to manage functional geographies, such as in the North-West City-Region. The suite of powers and responsibilities of local authorities have reached a degree of convergence, and perhaps, with the possible implications of Brexit, it is time to further capitalise on this unique governance convergence to better coordinate shared responses to common cross-border challenges.

Prior to the Brexit Referendum, the *Framework for Cooperation* (DRDNI and DECLG, 2011) had been significant in highlighting the operational realities of facilitating cross-border planning and governance between Ireland and Northern Ireland. It continues to assert a joint commitment to securing a cooperative approach between the two states through a non-statutory framework and provides the overarching construct to nurture functional cross-border structures and relationships. The quality of the lateral relationships among actors and institutions will be crucial for avoiding (a return to) ‘back-to-back’ planning, particularly post-Brexit. In many ways, this framework is even more significant in a post-referendum, post-Brexit landscape, as it frames a partnership approach based on the principles of ‘subsidiarity’ and pragmatism that prioritises ‘soft’ territorial cooperation to manage functional geographies.

The motivation for regional and local actors to participate in transboundary cooperation tends to be highly pragmatic (Colomb, 2017) and this is presented in the examples above, particularly the emergence of the North-West City-Region instrument, and by the stakeholder perspectives captured through this research. While EU membership and the peace process has positively changed the relational dynamics between Northern Ireland (and the wider UK) and Ireland, recent governance convergence and a growing institutional ‘thickness’ on the island now provides the foundation to perhaps re-conceptualise how ‘soft’ spaces can play an important post-Brexit role in managing functional geographies. Intensifying lateral integration and cooperation will remain core to addressing the socio-spatial dynamics across ‘fuzzy’ boundaries along what is now an invisible jurisdictional border. While institutional and regulatory regimes operating through formal, statutory mechanisms (‘hard spaces’) will likely dominant in any post-Brexit context, the value of voluntary forms of ‘soft’ cooperation offer an alternative, yet complementary, way for ensuring connections between places and interactions between people regardless of official borders. This is particularly problematic given a nation’s formal administrative structures that tend to encompass a traditional territorial logic that view

administrative/territorial edges as hard borders. Arguably, functional geographies represent a post-industrial, post-territorial concept for moving beyond the traditional confines of bounded territorial administration to govern more ‘messy’ geographies that better reflect contemporary cross-jurisdictional functional interdependencies, particularly given the uncertainties of Brexit. On the island of Ireland, such spatial logics offer a degree of structural resilience to co-manage contemporary relational spaces that have emerged over recent decades and deepen the lateral thickness between vertical and horizontal governance systems on either side of the Irish border for avoiding any ‘re-bordering’ effects post-Brexit.

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