



ALL-ISLAND STAKEHOLDER FORUM: MOBILITY ACROSS THE ISLAND OF IRELAND AFTER BREXIT

Updates and analysis from civil society organisations, workers and employers

11/06/2025 | FROM 9:30

DUNDALK INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY, CO. LOUTH, IRELAND



Background

An All-Island Stakeholder Forum was **organised by the European Economic and Social Committee together with an All-Island Advisory Group** of nine representative workers, employers and civic organisations from both Ireland and Northern Ireland. The focus was on the theme of ‘**Mobility across the island of Ireland after Brexit**’. The Forum was in two parts: (i) plenary sessions in the morning in hybrid format, and (ii) in-person breakout sessions in the afternoon at which stakeholders discussed specified topics in more detail.

This 2025 All-Island Stakeholder Forum has been an **ambitious EESC initiative feeding into the development of the EU-UK relationship** and complements the European Commission and the UK Government commitments to stakeholder engagement in the Windsor Framework. It gathered the widest possible range of business, worker and civil society stakeholders on the island together to share insights and expertise.

Such evidence and experience were translated during the Forum into **specific recommendations for the EESC’s EU-UK Follow-up Committee** to share with relevant EU institutions and bodies, with the UK Government and the joint EU-UK bodies managing Windsor Framework implementation and the wider EU-UK relationship.

Participation was warmly encouraged from worker, employer and civil society organisations across the island, with the recognition that this was a unique opportunity to raise awareness and knowledge of the topic, as well as to identify outstanding opportunities and challenges. In person and online attendees were encouraged to submit comments and raise questions so that evidence- and experience-based insights was shared. The objective was for specific requests and action points to be passed on, as appropriate, to the EU, the UK and Irish governments and the institutions established by the 1998 Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement.

Summary

The Forum **identified new and deepening difficulties for north/south cooperation and mobility post-Brexit**, despite the Windsor Framework's objective to address the unique circumstances on the island of Ireland. This includes the administrative burdens for employers hiring or moving staff across the border (e.g. visa requirements, work permits, social security coordination, recognition of professional qualifications, currency fluctuations). The recruitment and retention of workers is particularly difficult for those in Northern Ireland, which puts employers in the jurisdiction at an immediate disadvantage given how relatively easy it is for workers to pursue job opportunities on the southern side of the land border (i.e. in the EU). The Forum also identified the difficulties in navigating the increasing differences in employment law, health and safety standards, and worker's rights between Northern Ireland and Ireland. Such difficulties are compounded by the lack of clarity and support in understanding the evolving legal obligations for businesses, especially SMEs, despite the good efforts of InterTrade Ireland.

Perhaps the most striking outcome from the Forum was the **recognition of the commonality of concerns between business, workers and civil society** – they are trying to tackle the same problems albeit from different angles – and thus *the inherent value of cross-sectoral problem-solving discussions, particularly when cross-jurisdictional* (be that north/south or east/west).

Overall, it is clear that there are already increasing negative effects in Northern Ireland arising from divergence from Great Britain and from Ireland. Tackling them requires action at three levels: north/south, east-west, and EU-UK. The flourishing of NI requires this. Better monitoring and coordination is therefore needed not only by Stormont, Westminster and the Oireachtas but also from the plethora of bodies which play a part in the multilevel governance of Northern Ireland. In this sense, **the 1998 Agreement continues to hold the key to the practical as well as the political challenges facing the region.**

Main points & key messages in the structure of the Forum

9:30-9:45 Introduction and welcome remarks

Katy Hayward, Queen's University Belfast, Chair

- Welcome to this first of what we hope will be an annual All-Island Stakeholder Forum.
- The idea of the Forum came a few years ago, the the need to recognise the impact of Brexit beyond focusing on the Windsor Framework, considering the island of Ireland as a whole.

Dr Annaleigh Margey, Head, Department of Humanities, DkIT

- Many of the topics that are going to be tackled today impact our students.
- The topics which are going to be discussed are very welcome.
- Looking forward to the recommendations which are going to emerge from the event.

Séamus Boland, President of the EESC's Civil Society Organisations' Group and Designated candidate of the Civil Society Organisations' Group for the EESC Presidency 2025-2028

- A few years ago, there was no desire to have anything to do anymore with Britain, we were in the mood of a divorce. But the situation has changed, also thanks to Jack and Cillian who have been working hard to bring the topic back into European discussion.
- The EESC will be used much more: we know that given the geopolitical situation in the world, the UK and EU need to work together.
- Massive challenges in terms of the "All island perspective". Geopolitical realities will affect the Good Friday Agreement and the Windsor Framework. The situation has forced everybody into a reality of thinking how this affects us, independently of London or Brussels. We as citizens are to be part of future agreements. We are here to listen to you and our job is to bring your ideas back to Brussels.

9:45-10:30 The new post-Brexit conditions for the island of Ireland

Katy Hayward, Queen's University Belfast, Chair

David Phinnemore, Queen's University Belfast

- Important how mobility and cooperation work.
- From 1973 – 2020 : Irish and UK were in the EU (we had mobility and cooperation on services, agriculture, transport, development of infrastructure, there were shared regulations).
- Post-Brexit
 - UK-EU relationship: Trade and Cooperation Agreement
 - Protocol on Ireland / Northern Ireland, Windsor Framework
- UK-EU relationship, TCA
 - Minimalist agreement... but with potential
 - UK-EU Summit – 19 May 2025: Joint Statement

"We reflected on the need to develop an ambitious, dynamic relationship which meets the needs of our citizens...

This summit is the first step in our new Strategic Partnership. We agreed to hold annual summits to strengthen our relationship... driving progress on a renewed agenda for

[EU-UK] cooperation... and ensuring opportunities for future cooperation are maximised".

- A renewed agenda for EU-UK Cooperation: Common understanding – 19 May 2025
"The United Kingdom and the European Commission share the view that... it is in the mutual interest to deepen our people-to-people ties, particularly for the younger generation... it is in their interest to strengthen their economic relations and generate prosperity".

New language ! Reset ! Shift.

- Protocol on Ireland / Northern Ireland Windsor Framework¹
- Bilateral Ireland-UK relationship²
- There are mechanisms that can be used to address the impact of Brexit.

¹ "This Protocol sets out arrangements necessary to address the **unique circumstances on the island, to maintain the necessary conditions for continued North-South cooperation**, to **avoid a hard border** and to **protect the 1998 Agreement** in all its dimensions" (Article 1(3))

"Consistent with the arrangements set out in Articles 5 to 10, and in full respect of Union law, this Protocol shall be implemented and applied so as to **maintain the necessary conditions for continued North-South cooperation**, including in the areas of environment, health, agriculture, transport, education and tourism, as well as in the areas of energy, telecommunications, broadcasting, inland fisheries, justice and security, higher education and sport." (Article 11(1))

"The joint Committee **shall keep under constant review** the extent to which the implementation and application of this Protocol maintains the necessary conditions for North-South cooperation. The Joint Committee **may make appropriate recommendations** to the Union and the United Kingdom in this respect, including on a recommendation from the Specialised Committee." (Article 11(2))

² "The United Kingdom and Ireland **may continue to make arrangements between themselves relating to the movement of persons between their territories** (the "Common Travel Area"), while fully respecting the rights of persons conferred by Union law." (Article 3(1) Protocol/Windsor Framework)

"In full respect of Union law, **the United Kingdom and Ireland may continue to make new arrangements that build on the provisions of the 1998 Agreement in other areas of North-South cooperation on the island of Ireland**" (Article 11(1) Protocol/Windsor Framework)

On a duly justified request from Ireland... the Council may authorise [Ireland] to negotiate bilateral agreements with the United Kingdom in areas of exclusive competence of the Union. Such authorization may only be granted if:

(a) [Ireland] has provided information showing that the agreement in question is necessary for the proper functioning of the arrangements set out ... in the Protocol...

(b) it appears that the envisaged agreement is compatible with Union law

(c) the envisaged agreement would neither put at risk the attainment of an objective of the Union's external action in the area concerned nor be otherwise prejudicial to the Union's interests.

(Council Decision (EU) 2020/135, Article 4(1))

Annmarie O’Kane, Centre for Cross-Border Cooperation

- The Centre for Cross-Border Cooperation is a think-and-do-tank which tries to recognise what already works, the cooperation that already exists on a cross border basis and gives support to organisations. It tries to understand what's happening between the different parts of the island.
- Recently, the Centre was lucky to be part of a cohort study that looked at what has been working concerning the labour market for all-island. People move for many reasons, not only for work. Statistics show that 25 000 people cross the border to work or to study.
- There are many people on the island confronted with 2 taxation systems, 2 educational systems, etc. However, people are confronted also by a lack of information, and this is a big challenge. People are crossing the border every day to go to sports events, cultural events, to access healthcare, and Brexit is following them.
- When we look at Brexit, it is not easy to follow: for example, what happens to consumer rights when you go shopping on the other side of the border?
- The preamble of the Protocol says that the situation should impact the daily life of citizens as little as possible. How do we measure that?
- Workers' rights: employees discriminated; employers are worried about the regulations. No safety-net from the EU, but there is a citizens' protection.
- Annual conference of the Cross-Border Cooperation scheduled in Dundalk in September, where the topics discussed today will continue.

10:30-11:15 *The new conditions for workers*

Celine McStravick, Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action, Chair

Gerry Murphy, ICTU

- Brexit fallout continues to be felt across economy, society and politics, with workers taking the brunt of the effects. The case can be made for improvements, but Brexit-driven improvements for workers in Ireland have yet to emerge.
- Worker mobility is very important: well-integrated labour markets are key for sociopolitical and economic reasons.
- But, the degree and scope of worker mobility is hard to define accurately, since workplaces may vary, people work from home, and not all cross-border work is declared.
- All this obscures the figures of workers who are travelling.
- The report declares that between 2016-2022 there is an increased number of people travelling daily from North-South for work.
- Economies, however, are not harvesting the benefits fully because there are considerable impediments.
- Primary concerns (mostly for workers, trade union members, and those not unionised): A mixture of those which existed prior to Brexit (taxation, pension accessibility, social welfare, skills recognition and qualifications), and these same issues but sharper and amplified post-Brexit.
- The changing world of work – a new concept, further complicated by Brexit (flexible working arrangements, changing working patterns etc.).

- Reforms in the pipeline, like the proposed NI Good Jobs Bill, could see the rights and entitlements of NI workers supersede those available to Republic of Ireland workers – further complicating and fragmenting working environments across the island.
- Workers have much to gain from mobility, but to realise these benefits we must address a number of administrative, constitutional, and communications issues.
- Politically, it entails unpacking a whole web of arrangements between 4 administrations and devolved governments, all the while ensuring the 1998 agreement is protected.
- The trade union movement has to be central to the discussion.

Rob Tubman, A&L Goodbody

- Brexit was an opportunity (cynically, from a lawyer's perspective) because it provided a new immigration system and ended free movement of people, immediately creating doubt over mobility and jobs.
- UK Immigration White Paper has doubled down on the UK government's position where they aim for net migration numbers to go down.
- Entails making it less attractive for employers to recruit foreign workers.
- Increasing costs (salary thresholds, cost of visa application process, residence periods, etc.).
- This is on the radar of employers in the North, but there is also a lack of understanding and guidance from an employer's perspective, which is creating issues.
- Since the devolved administration in Ireland does not have competence over immigration, they are waiting on government in London to recognise the issue for the island of Ireland.

11:45-12:30 *The new conditions for Civil Society*

Anthony Soares, Centre for Cross Border Studies, Chair

Tara Farrell, Longford Women's Link

- Persistence is a notion which is hardwired into the DNA of the community sector.
- Since Brexit, we noticed a risk of civil society to be excluded from the negotiation table.
- 30% of cross-border residents are not from Ireland.
- Exclusion of women from cross-border activities, as a problem of clarity and perception.
- We (civil society) must be at the table when decisions are made.

Kate Clifford, Rural Community Network

- Rural communities network covers 6 counties of Ireland.
- A big part of what they do is in development, peace-building and community development.
- Rural communities are often at the border.
- The structures that we assumed were in place, adapted and lived, and suddenly disappeared with Brexit.
- There is no legislative responsibility on the Department of Agriculture to undertake rural development. Over the last 10 years, the Department has developed a rural framework, but it lacks resources.
- Post-Brexit and post-COVID has changed working patterns.
- Need for a strategic roadmap that recognises self-help and puts development back in the hands of people that know their community best.

- The healthcare system is losing professionals who are going elsewhere for a better life.
- Our economy depends on smooth cross-border supply chains.
- Price shifts between borders create long-term economic impacts.
- We have no border-proofing in place in Northern Ireland.
- Need for a framework that ensures economic sustainability and prevents rural isolation.
- Loss of EU funding closed many vital services, which is extremely visible.

12:30-13:30 *The new conditions for employers*

Stuart Anderson, NI Chamber, Chair

Joanne Stuart, Tourism Alliance

- The major change for us is the approach of the UK to secure the border. Now you require a pre-travel authorisation. This is a permission which is challenging, since before it was just passport.
- Most of direct flights arrive in Ireland, Canada, US etc., and there is now an obstacle to tourists when they want to go to Northern Ireland, if they don't know how to do an ETA. If you get caught without an ETA, you can face bad legal consequences.
- School students are very impacted, especially from Europe, since their requirements changed and they need a passport. We found a solution with France but it needs to be extended to others.

Colin McCabrey, InterTrade Ireland

- Three prongs to oversee to the Good Friday Agreement: 1) democratic institutions; 2) north/south implementation bodies; and 3) British-Irish cooperation.
- Our (employers') mission is to for business competitiveness, entrepreneurship, and investment to thrive, and cross-border mobility is essential to that.
- There were more than 25000 cross border workers. Lost a lot of employees post-Brexit.
- Disparities between Ireland and Northern Ireland economies at risk of growing.

Aidan O'Kane, Ulster University

- Challenges for business in the border region.
- Northwest is probably the poorest region of the border region.
- Brexit, COVID, geopolitical shift, supply chain issues, cost of commodities - all had a challenging effect on businesses and employers,
- Labour mobility, as a business, is essential. Sometimes 25% to 30% were domiciled as cross border workers. After Brexit, contribution of both went down.
- The personal tax issue for workers who wanted to work from their home during COVID hurt a lot of businesses.

14:30-15:30 *Breakout Groups [in person only]*

[Convenors: David Phinnemore; Annmarie O'Kane, Anthony Soares]

Each one covered:

- (i) What have the new post-Brexit challenges been?
- (ii) What solutions have been found?
- (iii) What is needed to make future problem-solving and cooperation work better?

15:45-16:15 Report from breakout groups & discussion

- *Moderated by Jack O'Connor, Vice-Chair of the EESC's EU-UK Follow-up Committee and Member of the EU DAG under the TCA*

Reporting back from the Group chairs included the following points:

- Still uncertainty five years after, especially for workers, and this is having an impact on cross-border cooperation. What can be done with the CTA to address issues around movement of workers generally, not just Irish and UK citizens?
- Recognition of professional qualifications still a problem and there is a reliance on individual professions to address, e.g. architects' MoU between ROI and UK
- Accessing skills is increasingly difficult in NI
- Business dependent on EU labour likely to set up in ROI rather than NI.
- Salary differentials north/south
- Need capacity building and investment in talent
- Rights and protections need to match north and south

- Greater clarity needed about what is going on, monitoring is needed
- Don't just engage with mechanisms of the Protocol but other EU bodies e.g. EESC Committee of the Regions.
- Extension of cross-border bodies in light of the new context

- Regulatory divergence between UK/EU affects Irish businesses too, e.g. capacity to export to GB
- Divergence between jurisdictions increasingly apparent, e.g. waste management

- Removal of funding post-Brexit, especially in agriculture, has north/south impact and thus all-island
- EU funding lost- short-term fire fighting rather than long term strategy in civil society sector
- Additional costs as a consequence of managing the effects of Brexit

- Lost opportunities for a younger generation currently hidden, e.g. loss of experience, comparative examples, talent growth

- Welcome opportunity to share experiences across sectors
- Strength in common message from civil society and business
- A lot of overlap and common issues between business and civil society, therefore need to have space to discuss together
- Business and civil society need to have structures to identify priorities. Need to resource and have capacity to use such structures
- Business tends to arrive at solutions before politics, and civil society is usually there first.

16:15-16:30 *Closing remarks*

Cillian Lohan, Chair of the EESC's EU-UK Follow-up Committee

- Today has been very productive, not least to bring us into one room
- The EU-UK Follow Up Committee established in part because of the recognition that majorities in NI and Scotland voted to remain
- Optimisation is in the interests of the citizens of the agreements which have been concluded
- We will be interrogating the results from today to see if we can usefully play a role in addressing the points raised
- The need for a structured approach going forward is evident
- Ireland's presidency of the Council plus the TCA review 2026 should present once-off opportunities for us
- The message of hope to continue to give is some examples of things to move forward, Copernicus, Horizon, Erasmus Plus. There are possibilities we can cling to. The biggest fear is that we sit here next year with same problems
- Important to continue to engage and apply ourselves more energetically and we need to be precise on next steps.

Social media coverage



Recommendations

Following the All-Island Stakeholder Forum which took place in Dundalk, on 11 June 2025, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) and the Advisory Board on Ireland/Northern Ireland (with nine representatives of workers, employers and civic organisations from both Ireland and Northern Ireland):

- Fully endorse, in light of reinforced commitment to continue EU-UK cooperation and to promote tangible, forward-looking benefits, **the organisation of an annual Follow-Up Stakeholder Forum** on a theme associated with the unique circumstances on the island of Ireland in the context of the EU-UK relationship, with the 2026 edition being held in the context of the Irish Presidency of the EU Council (July-December 2026);
 - Clearly identify the need for the establishment by the UK and the EU **of a transparent and accessible information hub to support stakeholders on the island of Ireland** in their understanding of obligations under the Withdrawal Agreement, including the Windsor Framework, the Trade and Cooperation Agreement and the evolving EU-UK relationship;
 - Strongly **encourage and enable the fullest possible engagement of stakeholders from among employers, workers and civil society on the island of Ireland with the institutional structures** provided for in the Withdrawal Agreement, the Windsor Framework and the Trade and Cooperation Agreement, in particular with the Domestic Advisory Groups (DAGs), and, in line with Political Declaration on the Windsor Framework (2023), the ‘regular engagement’ opportunities ‘at each level of the Withdrawal Agreement’s structures and with the co-chairs of the Joint Committee’;
 - Gladly acknowledge the **importance of engagement of Members of the Northern Ireland Legislative Assembly** with a wide range of relevant stakeholders.
-