

# Exploring Shared Opportunities in the North West: Findings from Focus Groups

RESEARCH PAPER

No.25 October 2022



NESD

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta Eacnamaíoch agus Shóisialta  
National Economic & Social Council

An Oifig Náisiúnta um Fhorbairt Eacnamaíoch agus Shóisialta  
National Economic & Social Development Office NESDO





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Caitríona Mullan

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**Note:** This research paper on exploring cohesion and collaboration in the North West Region of Ireland/Northern Ireland documents the views expressed by participants in the focus groups and does not necessarily reflect the views of NESC.

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# Abbreviations

**ACEs**

Adverse Childhood Experiences

**AFBI**

Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute

**AI**

Artificial Intelligence

**AIRO**

All-Island Research Observatory

**CAP**

Common Agricultural Policy

**CAWT**

Co-operation and Working Together

**CFI**

Community Finance Ireland

**CTA**

Common Travel Area

**ESG**

Environmental, Society and Governance Services

**ETBs**

Education and Training Boards

**EU**

European Union

**ERDF**

European Regional Development Fund

**FDI**

Foreign Direct Investment

**GDPR**

General Data Protection Regulation

**ICLRD**

International Centre for Local and Regional Development

**IDA**

Industrial Development Agency

**MOU**

Memorandum of Understanding

**NI**

Northern Ireland

**NSPCC**

National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children

**NWRDG**

North West Regional Development Group

**NWSGP**

North West Strategic Growth Partnership

**PCI**

Percutaneous Coronary Intervention

**R&D**

Research and Development

**RDP**

Rural Development Programme

**SME**

Small and Medium Enterprises

**STEAM**

Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, Mathematics

**UC**

Universal Credit

**UCC**

University College Cork

**UK**

United Kingdom

**UU**

Ulster University

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# Executive Summary

NESC has been undertaking a Shared Island research programme to contribute to building a shared knowledge base and understanding about possible ways in which greater co-operation can emerge across a number of economic, social and environmental areas on the island of Ireland. As part of this work a place-based inquiry was undertaken in the North West to explore in-depth the ways in which co-operation worked, the barriers and the enablers. The focus was on the lived experience of people in the border areas, with the aim of exploring two integrated thematic issues – sustainability and connectivity.

The North West was selected as the area to undertake this more detailed work for a number of reasons:

- It has a long tradition of cross-border co-operation;

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- An innovative place-based governance framework has been developed;

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- The North West region faces a number of challenges in terms of its development lagging behind other regions in both Ireland and Northern Ireland, as well as experiencing unemployment, poverty and deprivation; and

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- Despite these challenges there is potential for growth and development.

The North West City Region comprises Donegal County Council, and Derry City and Strabane District Council, with a wider geographic and economic sphere of influence for the north west of the island of Ireland. When taken as cross-border functional region, the North West is the fourth-largest agglomeration on the island of Ireland, incorporating Letterkenny, Derry and Strabane, with a population of approximately 400,000.

To gain a more in-depth understanding of the issues and elements of co-operation in the North West four online focus groups were held in September/October 2021, facilitated by Caitriona Mullan, on: Good Jobs; Green Transformation; Poverty and Mental Health; and Mechanisms for Co-operation. Approximately 60 individuals from across a range of civic, public, community/voluntary, and business sector organisations in the North West participated in these focus groups. The main findings from these focus groups are as follows.

## Good Jobs

This focus group considered how good jobs have been created in the North West, or in border areas in general; the obstacles which have had to be overcome; changes to current arrangements for creating jobs in the border region; and how these jobs can be made sustainable. The importance of FDI was highlighted with reference to IT security and FinTech, and the need to take a collaborative approach to attracting FDI. Part of attracting good jobs to an area is to have a good infrastructure, with the need for improvements in broadband, plus rail and road transport. Providing the skills required for good jobs is seen as necessary, with the need to broaden education systems for a wide range of opportunities, especially for those with lower levels of education and for more vulnerable groups. Support for entrepreneurship was seen as important, especially for those in non-traditional sectors.

Overall, a holistic growth model, building on the assets of the area, and which can accommodate the people of the area was seen as necessary. In this context, additional attention should be given to the needs of those most distanced from the labour market and, in particular, to developing pathways to good jobs for young people from communities with high levels of complex deprivation. Social enterprise plays a role in this context, and an example is Creggan Enterprises in Derry, which adopts an intermediate labour-market model.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The intermediate labour market is a way of supporting people who are long-term unemployed into the waged labour market through specially designed programmes and supports.

## Green Transformation

This group focused on the challenges of doing green transformation work on a cross-border basis, what would make things easier, and what needs to happen to help deliver that. There was a recognition that climate breakdown does not recognise borders, and of the importance of adopting a science-led approach. Such knowledge and experience should be shared across national governments, local authorities, and those working to address environmental issues – such as water quality and climate mitigation. It was recognised that there is a need to focus on transformative change and policies that look at wellbeing and health outcomes, and not just at economic growth, as an indicator of success.

There is the potential to take a cross-border look at agriculture, regenerative farming, and renewable energy, as well as considering a just transition – with work in Inishowen cited as an example.

Cross-border working in water quality and river basin catchments is supported through EU regulation, notably the Water Framework Directive, and EU funding such as INTERREG. A body of knowledge exists amongst agencies in the environmental sphere in the border region as to how cross-border approaches can and should be taken. However, the challenge of sourcing funds for collaborative environmental research and practice was noted. Sharing and aligning data was identified as a significant issue. Data gaps exist in relation to greenhouse gas emissions, and ecosystems services; and it is not always possible to compare NI and Irish data directly.

## Poverty and Mental Health

This focus group considered the relationship of the border to poverty and mental health. It also looked at what we need to specifically understand poverty and mental health in border areas, such as the North West. The focus group also considered the kinds of solutions that have worked well in tackling the root causes of poverty, and health inequalities including poor mental health, and in supporting people towards a better quality of life and improved health outcomes.

A number of poverty issues specific to the North West were highlighted. These included cuts to Universal Credit in Northern Ireland, food and fuel poverty across the area, and the need for a greater awareness of rural poverty and disadvantage – particularly for children and young people. Transport links are vital for children and young people's access to activities, and poor and disconnected public infrastructure exacerbates poverty in the North West. Lack of childcare provision is also a factor which affects everyone, but especially lone parents.

On health, the importance of a public health model that responds to health inequalities was highlighted. This applies especially to the health inequalities experienced by Travellers, and other ethnic minority communities and groups. The further exploration of the cross-border shared services agenda in the areas of health and mental health was thought to be beneficial, e.g. building on models like the North West Cancer Centre. In an environment with poor economic opportunities and little hope for young people, poverty and mental health issues present a specific risk to young people vulnerable to involvement in paramilitary or criminal activity. Thus, healthy alternatives to damaging risk-taking behaviours need to be provided, such as the arts and music, sports, and outdoor pursuits.

The community and voluntary sector plays a vital role in supporting disadvantaged communities. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the most successful and resilient responses were those developed by this sector working with local government, in keeping with an asset-based, locally-connected model. However, the community and voluntary sector has borne a particularly challenging burden over the last three decades in the border region, and there is a need to address succession and sustainability in the sector.

## Mechanisms for Co-operation

This focus group discussed what has been achieved to date through shared mechanisms for co-operation; the emerging challenges that may require new thinking; the limits of current mechanisms and enablers of co-operation; and what is needed to overcome these. There are a wide range of co-operative relationships in the North West, some of which have been formalised. The North West Strategic Growth Partnership (NWSGP), and the North West Regional Development Group (NWRDG), have been established to support sustainable economic and social development in the North West. There is joined-up spatial planning in the North West through the NWSGP, with the assistance of the International Centre for Local and Regional Development (ICLRD), and liaison between senior planners.

In relation to the business sector there is co-operation between the Londonderry and Letterkenny Chambers of Commerce, formalised in a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) in 2020. There is also co-operation between

economic development actors in the North West in terms of attracting FDI. The Cross Border Local Enterprise Partnership, a network of SME support agencies in the wider border region, has played an important role in fostering relationships for enterprise support. In addition, Community Finance Ireland, an integrated north south social financing organisation, helps to build community and business cohesion.

There is a connected approach to education, training, and research through the North West Strategic Education Alliance, which signed a MOU in 2018. Some of this work is supported through the North West Regional Development Fund. Co-operation and Working Together (CAWT) is an important cross-border partnership of health and social services; while the Loughs Agency, a North South Implementation Body set up under the Good Friday Agreement (derived from one of the longest established cross-border bodies on the island—Foyle and Carlingford Lights commission, 1952), undertakes environmental conservation, management, promotion and development of the fisheries and marine resources of the Foyle and Carlingford areas.

Brexit has the potential to challenge some of these collaborative approaches, with efforts at local level to maintain good co-operative relationships and practices that have been built up over the years. However, the institutional framework enabling ongoing co-operation across the Northern Ireland/Ireland land border is a significant factor in preventing and mitigating potential disruption caused Brexit.

#### **Contribution to *Shared Island, Shared Opportunity*: NESC Comprehensive Report**

In compiling its Shared Island comprehensive report NESC work took the form of ‘listening and learning’ across all the main communities and traditions on the island in the areas pertaining to its remit of economic, social, and environmental development. These focus groups in the North West were a key input in shaping the work and informed the content of the comprehensive report and its conclusions and recommendations.



## Chapter 1

# Context and Introduction

This report provides an overview of the issues arising, and findings emerging, from the NESC Shared Island Research Focus Groups which were held during September and October 2021, as part of a wider research initiative conducted by NESC on behalf of the Government's Shared Island Unit. Four focus groups were held, focusing respectively on Good Jobs, Green Transformation, Poverty and Mental Health, and Mechanisms for Co-operation.

In the course of NESC's shared island research a number of themes emerged which NESC wished to explore further with selected stakeholders through the mechanism of focus groups, using a 'deep dive' approach to intensify enquiry on these themes. NESC's overall focus has been to identify areas of potential good practice which exist or are emergent within the wider North West Region, which may offer opportunities for both learning and/or upscaling/adaptation/replicability in a general Ireland/Northern Ireland cross-border and regional development context.

NESC and the Shared Island Unit engaged Caitríona Mullan, specialist facilitator and cross-border co-operation expert, to plan, facilitate and report on findings from the discussions. This process was supported by NESC personnel.

Participants were invited from across a range of civic, public, community/voluntary and business sectors. The invitation lists, registration lists and research records were managed by NESC in accordance with GDPR. Discussions were recorded, and notes taken, for research purposes only. Participants were assured of confidentiality in their contributions and of anonymised reporting of the research. Chatham House rules were put in place for the focus groups themselves.

Four online focus groups were held, as follows:

- Shared Island Good Jobs – Tuesday 28<sup>th</sup> September;

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- Shared Island Green Transformation—Wednesday 29<sup>th</sup> September;

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- Shared Island Poverty and Mental Health—Tuesday 5<sup>th</sup> October;

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- Shared Island Mechanisms for Co-operation—Thursday 7<sup>th</sup> October.

The focus groups were formally introduced by Dr Helen Johnston of NESC who also provided closing remarks for each discussion. Members of the NESC Research Team – Dr Damian Thomas, Dr Jeanne Moore, Jenny Andersson and Elaine Kennedy—provided notes for each of the discussions and these have complemented the facilitator's record.

The focus group administration and stakeholder communication process was supported by Edna Jordan, Gaye Malone and Paula Hennelly of NESC.

The following chapters provide a summary of issues arising in the focus groups, structured according to the agreed enquiry process for each focus group. The findings are presented in a narrative form which is intended to reflect the key points, the language and underlying logic offered by participants in the course of the discussions.

Chapter 2 deals with the theme of Good Jobs, chapter 3 covers the Green Transformation focus group, chapter 4 outlines the discussion on the theme of Poverty and Mental Health, and chapter 5 presents the issues from the discussion on Mechanisms for Co-operation.

## Chapter 2

# Good Jobs

## 2.1 Research Questions

Participants were asked to consider the following questions:

- How have good jobs been created in the North West or in the border region in general?

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- What obstacles have you had to overcome?

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- What would you change about current arrangements for creating jobs in the border region and who needs to be involved?

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- How can these jobs be made sustainable?

## 2.2 Discussions

### 2.2.1 How Good Jobs have been created in the North West or the border region in general

Since the 2008 economic crash, FinTech has become a significant sector in the North West, and the North West is seen as a region of good practice, particularly in the last five years. Another emerging area of growth is Environmental, Society and Governance services (ESG). This sector is likely to grow between now and 2030 as an essential component to ensure that ESG solutions are developing and available within every sector of the economy and society. The North West business and higher/further education sectors have a potentially significant role to play in this, particularly within an Ireland which features strong regions and a Post-Covid regionally-balanced economy.

The recruitment ‘Academy’ models operated by several companies in the North West, in partnership with higher and further education providers, have proven successful—in some cases supporting the recruitment and specialist training of twenty new graduates per month, through registration pathways offered by the North West educational institutions (e.g. FinTru Academy in partnership with North West Regional College). Companies which have chosen to locate in the North West have indicated that the relationships with, and between, the North West educational institutions have been a key factor in their decisions to invest and locate.

Much of existing success in the area of good job creation comes down to both education policy and research and development policy, and how these interact in a geographical place. In places where the relationship is dynamic and interconnected, with a commitment to education and skilling, there can be very successful cross-pollination between research and development (R&D) and education/skilling processes.

The Regional Skills Forum model in Ireland has a role in mobilising systems which can support companies to meet emerging skills needs and tap into regional opportunities. Ireland offers a number of enterprise development and accelerator programmes – such as New Frontiers – which promote upskilling and reskilling and a strong focus on this in the region. Companies face a struggle for talent and investing in staff is seen as a way of retaining staff. On a daily basis the North West Regional Skills Forum interacts with companies to identify critical skills needs. There is a lot of information on training but it can lead to overload and confusion. A key part of the Regional Skills Forum’s role is to help companies navigate the range of supports and information: there is a range of subsidised supports but it can be hard to engage with all actors; there is a will and desire but there is a need for more resources to help companies navigate the landscape of training and development.

Success in the North West to date has been based on companies themselves having a commitment to workforce development. The role of the Councils, as stakeholders involved in creating the collaborative conditions in which good jobs are developed and sustained, is important. There is general recognition that a territorial approach to workforce development, underpinned by strong business, industry and education ecosystems, is essential – especially as the regional workforce expands. Derry City and Strabane District Council and Donegal County Council have worked closely together across the border on supporting job creation as well as wider regional growth. There is additional scope for a territorial approach to workforce development that takes into account the whole cross-border region, where workforce mobility is a fact of life—as it is in the North West.

There will be an ongoing requirement that the higher and further education sector responds to industry needs. This will help to release the value which already exists in the presence of a high level of skills, a high level of community spirit, and workforces who are willing to re-skill and try different things.

The question of what defines a good job can be subjective. Good jobs pay well, provide security of employment, and personal development and advancement opportunities. They also need to sustain families and communities. While a focus needs to continue on how large companies, including FDI companies, continue to evolve and sustain/create good jobs, it is important to also understand that in the North West there are communities which are not reached by these jobs. The role of the third sector and social enterprise sector in creating good sustainable jobs needs to be recognised and supported. For example, as a model of good practice, Creggan Enterprises in Derry supports 60 businesses on site, and has levered additional opportunities through existing enabling schemes. The role of the SME sector is also key, in particular, for women's entrepreneurship.

### 2.2.2 Obstacles that have been overcome

The third sector has had to overcome (and continues to face) negative and ill-informed perceptions of its potential as a vehicle for good sustainable job creation. There is sometimes a lack of strategic thinking within public policy environments about the agency of the third (community and voluntary) sector as an actual sector of the economy, and perceptions seem to be limited to a transactional understanding of the sector's role in helping to deliver services. The majority of jobs in certain areas, however, are actually in the third sector and, therefore, bodies which commission services from this sector are technically investors in a sector of the economy with a significant workforce.

As regards the overall good jobs agenda, there is still only access to low-paid work in deprived communities—this acts as a disincentive, in particular, to young people from these communities. The educational and social barriers created by complex deprivation mean that certain communities have more difficulty in accessing skills and employment pathways which lead to good sustainable jobs, and more work is needed on these pathways which specifically help young people from such communities to access good jobs. The role of the higher and further education sector in this is crucial, and the North West has had the additional disadvantage of under-investment in educational places at third level, combined with an absence of pathways to ensure that the University of Ulster in Magee, in particular, is accessible to those living in deprived communities.

During the Covid-19 pandemic additional challenges arose for lower-end small businesses, and many were wiped out by the economic crisis arising from the pandemic. However, in areas such as Creggan in Derry, where small businesses were supported within a social economy (third sector) holding structure, these businesses did not fold and have survived the pandemic. The role of area-based social enterprise support structures, in sustaining and protecting jobs through particularly challenging times, needs to be recognised.

Sensitivities relating to the Northern Ireland Protocol are high and some hold the view that these need to be overcome in order for the advantages of Brexit for Northern Ireland to be fully secured.

Practical approaches have been developed to address obstacles created by the border—such as the joint inward investment strategy and cross-border place-based promotional model developed and supported by Derry City & Strabane District Council and Donegal County Council. The Councils work closely together and provide an integrated cross-border talent solution platform for potential investors wishing to locate, expand or support business growth in the region. This is against a backdrop of poor road and rail infrastructure, which are also key components in the process of creating sustainable good jobs for the future.

Investment in good jobs in the Gaeltacht is part of the North West regional experience. The North West region includes a sizeable and industrialised Gaeltacht area—which includes a footprint of transnational companies. The ability of the lead development agency for the Gaeltacht, Údarás na Gaeltachta, to provide places of work has been key to this success: the ability to provide holistic, estate-based solutions for investors, which are aligned to the needs of the territory and communities, is an important aspect of how Údarás works. Good jobs require an availability of both workplaces and talent, as well as adequate infrastructure for connectivity. The provision of gteic (digital) hubs, which provide a social focus outside of the home for remote workers, has also been a crucial element of sustaining and supporting good jobs for people in Gaeltacht areas. These hubs were established prior to, and during, the Covid-19 pandemic and represent an important place-based support for good jobs. Údarás has also invested heavily in the development and growth of marine sustainability and innovation, renewable energy solutions including photovoltaics, while also ensuring that connectivity has been maintained. Historically, this has been

through investments in infrastructure including, for example, Údarás' support for Carrickfinn Airport in Donegal. Agencies with a remit to develop and support digital hubs can enhance this digital connectivity in the rest of the North West by working with other stakeholders.

### 2.2.3 What needs to change about current arrangements for creating jobs in the border region and who needs to be involved

#### Replacing competition with collaborative working on cross-border FDI approaches

Back-to-back<sup>2</sup> and competitive working in the main FDI and job creation agencies of both jurisdictions needs to be replaced with collaborative working for shared gains and benefits, particularly, in the marketing of cross-border functional areas as places for investment.

#### Broadband infrastructure

Broadband supply remains an issue in the wider border region despite Derry having some of the highest-speed broadband in the UK and Ireland (as a result of Project Kelvin which brings a connection to the transatlantic cable onshore at Derry). This broadband quality deficit needs to change if sustainable good jobs are to be created on an ongoing basis in the border region. Agencies such as Údarás have levered their own resources in the commissioning of resilient telecommunications infrastructure to their own estates. However, this is in the absence of any national policy or regulatory requirement on providers to ensure equity of access even when the instalment of infrastructure has been publicly-funded.

#### Sustaining communities within a holistic model of growth

We need to find new ways of sustaining and leveraging growth for communities in a peripheral part of Europe, ways which take into account the need for sustainability of place, of economy, of culture, of community, and of workforce. As people, and as governments, we need to reflect more holistically as to how we think we can maintain, support and develop our economic and social communities in a way that is sustainable for them and for wider economic cohesion. Spatial planning policy needs to take account of what rural economies need in order to become sustainable, and not focus purely on urbanisation sustainability agendas.

#### Changes in the future of work and sustaining/innovating regional industry

In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, there is likely to be a sustained diversification of work and, in particular, the location of work. Regional dispersal of the workforce has begun, and this changes certain assumptions which might have applied prior to the pandemic about the availability of skills in a particular geographical location. Banks are looking at what they are doing internally—exploring value-end possibilities for changing how they do business—and this business and employment is unlikely to remain confined to the large global geographical trading centres. The North West region needs to be aware of and ready to take advantage of this opportunity.

While the simple fact of remote working means that there are now more highly-paid remote workers choosing to locate to the North West region, the ecosystems still need to be in place for companies in the North West to optimise outcomes from an evolving change in the nature and globally-dispersed location of work, and for them to continue to grow good and sustainable jobs for a regional cross-border workforce. Companies based in the North West need to do more in marketing their capabilities in the global marketplace, and in potentially recruiting skills which would not have been based in the region before but can now be recruited through personnel either choosing to live in the region, or returning to the region from elsewhere.

The North West has strong capability in the areas of IT Security and FinTech. These need to be developed and marketed globally to ensure the North West can have an appropriate baseline of higher-end and senior positions rather than focusing only on lower-paid positions across the regional workforce. As an island economy we need to determine how to adapt to a wave of change coming as a result of changes in the future of work post-Covid-19, digitalisation and decarbonisation.

#### How we are educating young people for life and work

In terms of the education systems in both parts of the island, there are different challenges which need to be overcome. There is a perception that the Irish Leaving Certificate and points race illustrates a culture of preoccupation with progression to

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<sup>2</sup> Back-to-back working infers that organisations on both sides of the border are undertaking the same tasks without acknowledgement of each other's work, or co-operation.

degrees without providing sufficiently for other viable pathways to employability. In Northern Ireland, it is argued that the education system requires young people to narrow their subject choices too early, thereby restricting subsequent career choices. We need to ensure that we are both creative and specific about training pathways, in how they are designed and delivered, and in how they ensure symbiotic interaction between employers, educators and economic development agencies.

As an island economy, the following points need to be considered in relation to skills and education policies, which should underpin an all-island approach to the creation of good jobs (noting that it is not the public sector economic agencies who create jobs, but businesses and communities themselves; economic agencies create the conditions in which job creation is either easier or more difficult):

- How are we equipping people for work as school leavers?

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- Women form a high proportion of our overall self-employed population—we need more flexibility in how people are expected and enabled to work.

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- Immigrant and migrant communities often have a strong entrepreneurial spirit, but this is frequently overlooked.

These three factors—skilling our young people for employment and employability; flexibility of work which transcends gender barriers within the economy; and how immigrant and migrant communities are included in the concept of an all-island economy—are critical to our thinking about the future of work, and in the creation of good jobs. In order to tackle the deep structural changes which have taken place post-Brexit, we can choose to take the challenge on a shared basis and truly advance the integration of business across the island, or we can do it on a separate basis. Thus, there is a choice to either engage in deep collaborative working across the border to address these structural challenges or to engage in working co-operatively but without addressing these deeper issues.

## 2.2.4 How these jobs can be made sustainable

### **Shared Island, Shared Economy, Shared Workforce**

As regards a Shared Island approach to both good jobs and wider growth, we do not currently market the totality of the assets of the island. For the creation and sustainability of good jobs, we need to take a Shared Island approach to fostering growth, releasing the full potential of our economic assets, and furthering business integration across the island. This should be in the context of the EU single market, as well as interfacing with UK markets, both provided through cross-border working. Further support for territorial and sectoral clustering—including on a cross-border territorial basis—is required. In addition, fusion with the Atlantic Economic Corridor is particularly relevant for Derry and Donegal, which form the Northern end of the corridor, as well as having an intrinsic link to the Northern Ireland economy.

### **Releasing our full entrepreneurship potential through addressing barriers**

We need to ensure that the entrepreneurship landscape is democratised to facilitate those groups who experience additional barriers to financing, including women and people from minority ethnic backgrounds. The Awaken Hub<sup>3</sup> is an all-island peer-led SME support network for self-employed women which was formed during Covid-19 lockdown by a group of women based in the North West. Its purpose is to raise awareness of the need for gender-specific supports to women wishing to found or grow their own businesses. Awaken Hub's She-Generate programme is a small all-island programme which demonstrates a response to an identified gap in provision of supports for women, and takes an evidence-driven approach to the provision of supports and tackling structural inequalities. Women's needs were largely invisible in the national conversation on Covid-19, yet many women shouldered a great economic burden in the double/triple shift impact of: lockdown, remote working and childcare issues. In taking an island-based approach to good jobs we need to ensure that we know the location and nature of the gaps in the supports that are required. It is important to be aware of, and to note, the unintended consequences of what has happened to date.

<sup>3</sup> [AwakenHub](#)

### **A just transition for the workforce within more traditional industrial sectors**

The concept of sustainable and good jobs is also linked to a just transition and includes the need for interventions such as addressing the risks for older males in sectors such as traditional manufacturing. The Education and Training Boards (ETBs) in Ireland have implemented a nationwide 6-week digital skills programme aimed at supporting workers to make the transition to digital working. While there has been a focus on the high job creation potential of the FinTech, advanced manufacturing, and artificial intelligence (AI) sectors in the North West, the more traditional sectors should not be overlooked for their potential to adapt, and thus continue to provide employment opportunities. For example, how will the construction sector – a major traditional employer in the North West and border region in general – evolve to respond to the challenges and targets associated with decarbonisation and climate action?

### **Modelling economy and workforce integration and mobility on a territorial basis**

Business and industry employers are aware of, and keen to progress, an all-island approach to sustainable good job creation. However, obstacles in the public sector environment need to be addressed. In relation to the North West, the governance architecture of the North West Strategic Growth Partnership has the potential to inspire further innovative cross-border approaches to overcome policy obstacles. These are based on the assumption of a cross-border cohesive, functional economic area, with a single cross-border workforce. The current architecture and performance frameworks which public bodies must work within constrain the possibilities in a Shared Island context, and this is felt most acutely close to the border. It also constrains the potential of an overall island economy. Working within a cross-border functional economic area with an integrated workforce shows up the jurisdictional constraints placed on some agencies. Specifically, back-to-back policymaking and current performance frameworks for, and in, agencies such as the IDA and Invest Northern Ireland leads to competition rather than collaboration. These ways of working need to be replaced with approaches which value performance and delivery to a cross-border functional economic area and which would benefit the economies of both jurisdictions.

### **Infrastructure is needed to support the creation of sustainable good jobs**

Infrastructure also matters for sustainable good jobs. Poor infrastructure is an obstacle to good job creation, and the North West needs better road and rail access to the rest of the island, as well as an effective power supply. The repeatedly stated requirement for Donegal to have a 220kv power supply needs to be planned for, in respect of the overall impact of the growth in offshore renewables, and the potential to become a net producer of clean energy.

Overall, these kinds of structural obstacles to sustainable good job creation are constraints on the collective will of individuals within agencies to work together in ways that are not hindered by borders. Border regions are recognised by the European Union as laboratories for integration,<sup>4</sup> thus governments should promote the innovations that are possible in border regions for their potential benefit to the whole of the polity.

### **Structural approaches to enabling a Shared Island workforce**

For sustainable good jobs in a Shared Island context, the workforce must be mobile and enabled to take up opportunities across both jurisdictions. Taxation and social insurance issues still arise as obstacles to mobility and good jobs for frontier workers despite their special protections provided for under the 1998 Agreement. Sustainability of good jobs across the border region will be dependent on ensuring that frontier workers do not experience inequalities in taxation or social insurance. For instance, recent experiences relating to Covid-era tax relief and extended home-based working, plus inequities in the social protection entitlements of workers living in one jurisdiction and employed in the other, need more attention. Addressing these issues as they apply in both directions (workers living in NI/paying tax and social insurance in Ireland, and vice versa) will help overcome current obstacles to the mobility of workers across the border region.

Additional efforts should be made to ensure that employers in Northern Ireland and Ireland are both enabled to access a cross-border workforce. This has taxation and human resources policy implications. (A cross-referenced point applies here in that the issue arose in other focus group discussions about the fact that non-EU nationals in Ireland, and non-UK residents in Northern Ireland, may have permission to work within the jurisdiction where they have been given leave to remain but in many cases they cannot enter the other jurisdiction or legally work there).

### **Broadening opportunities and lifting all boats on the tide**

In the North West, as in the rest of the border region and Northern Ireland, additional attention should be given to the needs of those most distanced from the labour market and, in particular, to developing pathways to good jobs for young people from communities living with high levels of complex deprivation. There are still issues with young people, from both Catholic and

Protestant communities, living with high levels of deprivation and much lower rates of second level educational completion/attainment and progression to higher or further education. Structural action is required to address these inequalities. Young people need to feel incentivised to progress through education into employment. Self-employment for young people also needs to be seen as a viable form of employment and one which can bring opportunities. We need more employers in the border region to be supporting and participating in apprenticeship schemes. School leavers need support to enter an industry, therefore, we need to do more to support them to progress along accreditation pathways. There is also a need to support migrants into the cross-border workforce.

In addition, the needs of older adults should be addressed in relation to good jobs. For example, we need to pay attention to the fact that many people now have extended working lives. We also need to recognise that good jobs are jobs in which people feel physically and psychologically safe. In the context of Covid-19, public-facing work such as taxi driving and retail work, which has traditionally been taken up by an older work-force, placed older people in a more vulnerable position given the nature of the virus. We also need to do more in supporting people with complex needs, physical disabilities, and learning disabilities to access work with appropriate supports and adjustments, and enable them to access, and remain, in the workforce.

### **Embracing a culture of entrepreneurship at all ages and stages**

Entrepreneurship development and supports need to be improved across the island. Overall, entrepreneurship needs to be seen as a serious option for everyone, including young people. It was suggested that this needs to involve putting programmes together in which young people can see themselves reflected. Thus, we need to put more leaders, mentors and role models around young people as community support is a big factor in the sustainability of businesses. We need to think globally, and use networks locally. Putting supports in early is vital. In particular, we need to ensure that these supports are available and accessible for young people in STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts and mathematics) activities.

### **Recognising the Third Sector's role in social innovation and sustainable good jobs**

Good practice in the development of intermediate labour market models includes that developed by Creggan Enterprises. The Creggan model focuses not only on placements in the community and voluntary sector but also in other sectors, resulting in 60 to 70 per cent sustainability of jobs and pathways from the programme.

We need also to invest in digital social innovation hubs to stimulate start-ups, and to ensure that a knowledge economy is developed in a way which creates opportunities through providing social and community economic solutions. Examples of local companies which have created social innovation solutions through digitalised approaches are: Learning Pool (E-Learning) and Elemental Software (Digital Social Prescribing). These companies have created and sustained good jobs, and have a global reach. They also model excellence in indigenous technical entrepreneurship from the border region (both are companies founded and still based in Derry despite global expansion and intercontinental product footprints).

### **Political support for an all-island labour market**

Industry drives the sustainability of good jobs but the political institutions need to enable this, for example, by addressing the Northern Ireland student numbers cap. This is a policy issue impacting on the development of third level education capacity. Failure to address structural policy issues such as this means a continued 'brain drain' of students from Northern Ireland, mainly to other regions of the UK.

Public agencies need to stop competing with each other across the border when a shared territorial solution is what is required for the North West, the wider Border Region, and the overall competitiveness and innovation levels of both economies on the island. The North West Strategic Growth Partnership, and the partnerships within industry North and South, offer a solution for shared transboundary and cross-border approaches, offering solutions to policy makers and related public services programming.

Overall, sustainable and good jobs will require all relevant stakeholders taking ownership of the concept of an all-island labour market. An all-island labour market is in a crucial stage of evolution, and the question has been posed as to whether it is

<sup>4</sup> European Commission Brussels, 14.7.2021 COM(2021) 393 Final report from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, *EU Border Regions: Living labs of European integration*.

acceptable for any political party to refuse to co-operate under the terms of the 1998 Agreement, and support the necessary work through engaging with the North South Ministerial Council and related activities.

### **The North West as an effectively-governed collaborative laboratory region for all-island business and labour market integration**

Despite the barriers outlined, we already have a functioning example of an all-island labour market in the geographical North West of the island, as evidenced in the mindset of some companies and entrepreneurs providing investment and employment. Politicians on both sides of the border need to be encouraged to support this development. There may be merit in repeating the North South study on cross-border mobility which was carried out in 2000.

### **Shared ambition and planning for industrial transformation to underpin an all-island economy in the fourth industrial revolution**

A further question has arisen as to whether planning for an all-island labour market supporting sustainable, good jobs needs to go further. There may be merit in looking at a North South jointly-commissioned 'Culliton' style report<sup>5</sup> on industrial growth planning for the whole island. Such an exercise should address the emerging opportunities and challenges presented by the dramatic changes in the global economic environment which we are currently witnessing: digitalisation, decarbonisation, dispersed working, and climate-driven migration from the global south to the global north. An approach such as this could provide a route to ensuring that the necessary structural actions can be taken to underpin and optimise an all-island labour market to supporting an all-island economy. What made the Culliton report possible in Ireland in the early 1990s was the establishment of Social Partnership at national level, and the recognition of co-design between the social partners, industry and the state being the best way to achieve national growth and sustainability.

Any industrial planning process jointly undertaken by both Governments needs to be grounded in the equality agenda. This would help raise the ambitions of young people, women, migrants and refugees, and workers at all stages of life, as well as understanding the need for regional balance and equality of opportunity. A 'Culliton-style' exercise should take account of climate change, post-pandemic resilience and recovery, Brexit and business integration opportunities across the island, in an integrated way. It should simultaneously identify, recognise and support the collective effort required to generate the necessary action to deliver a sustainable all-island economy supporting good jobs. It also needs to be above sectarianism and to have the full involvement of industry, i.e. such exercises should not be held back by sectarian interests controlling state institutions.

### **The North West as a model/test region for an all-island industrial planning exercise**

Given that the North West region already has an intergovernmental collaborative vehicle specifically focused on growth and sustainability, in the form of the North West Strategic Growth Partnership, one option as a first step may be to pilot a 'mini-Culliton' exercise for the North West Region. This could provide important learning as a model for an overall island-wide approach. Undertaking an exercise at scale in the North West would take account of the fact that Derry has been historically cut off as one of the lead cities for the island, despite being its fourth largest urban area. This exercise could make possible an approach to industrial development, business growth, and entrepreneurship that is more commensurate with the scale of the North West region and its potential as a net contributor to the island economy.

As an island, we have more than two decades worth of cultural and intellectual capital for collaboration, which represents an asset for shared approaches to future economic wellbeing. The island will have to engineer its relationship with foreign direct investment (FDI) and effort needs to be made for this to happen in a co-ordinated way, as it is unlikely to happen organically. Further border proofing of existing employment terms and conditions, taxation and social insurance arrangements will be required to underpin equity of opportunity at regional level and for all workers, within an all-island labour market model.

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<sup>5</sup> The 'Culliton Report', is the 1992 report of the Industrial Policy Review Group, chaired by industrialist Jim Culliton which sought to address economic policy shortcomings in Ireland at the time and set out a blue print for future industrial policy.

## Chapter 3

# Green Transformation

## 3.1 Research Questions

Participants were asked to consider the following questions:

- How important is cross-border working in the area of green transformation?

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- What, from your experience, are the challenges of doing any kind of green transformation work on a cross-border basis?

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- What would make things easier?

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- Beyond the work you have done already on a cross-border basis in the area of Green Transformation, what else needs to happen to help deliver that?

## 3.2 Discussions

### 3.2.1 How important is cross-border working to green transformation

Energy management, water conservation and management, biodiversity protection and conservation cannot be done on a partitionist basis. We need to ensure a science-led approach drives our overall work and that we take into account the fact that climate breakdown does not recognise borders. We need to de-politicise effective action on climate away from the sensitivities associated with identity politics and national sovereignty issues. We need similar data sets in order to be able to plan, implement and measure shared action. We need to jointly address an ecocidal and unsustainable economic system and pursue a just transition in agriculture. We need to work together to address the overall vulnerability of the island to imported energy resources, and to look at how a just transition will work for all the people of the island when it comes to energy generation, production, ownership and distribution of the benefits of renewable energy.

Currently, our nature and farmland systems do not match up on a cross-border basis. Yet, we are a single biogeographic unit and we need to look at ecosystems on an all-island basis. We need to use the functionality of these systems for a regenerative and restorative approach. This requires a complete overhaul in how our systems work together across the border.

Cross-border working has been hugely important for the development of effective responses to catchment care, where water systems cross jurisdictional borders. The INTERREG programme has been particularly instrumental in supporting cross-border initiatives which enable shared approaches to be developed, tested and refined. There exists a body of knowledge amongst agencies in the environmental sphere in the border region as to how cross-border approaches can and should be taken.

The development, under the aegis North West Strategic Growth Partnership, of an overall green transformation policy statement for the region, and within that the development of a joint cross-border regional energy agency model, the North West Regional Energy Strategy, are good examples of what can be achieved when people work together. Cross-border working on these sectoral areas is essential as 24 per cent of the North West region's emissions come from domestic buildings, 26 per cent from commercial buildings, and the rest from transport. Taking an interjurisdictional approach to carbon emissions reduction will be necessary to make a meaningful impact on the targets set.

Institutional collaboration on spatial and environmental governance is not new to either Government. For example, the Loughs Agency represents an intergovernmental response, and recognition of the benefits of cross-border working for effective protection and conservation of shared and cross-border bodies of water and their river catchment systems. Through the establishment in 1952 of the Foyle and Carlingford Lights Commission, which is now the Loughs Agency, both Governments have a long history of collaborative environmental governance and delivery. A recent example of the benefits of this approach has been the Loughs Agency's co-ordination of cross-border interagency working on the response to, and learning from, the significant peat bog slippage and environmental damage which took place at the Meenbog Windfarm site in Donegal, and which impacted on the body of water within the Foyle catchment system (itself a cross-border system).

Equally, the International Centre for Local and Regional Development (ICLRD) was set up in recognition by the North South Ministerial Council of the need for cross-border spatial planning to inform the north south co-operation agenda, and the

importance of the role of local government in both delivering, and informing, cross-border and North South delivery. ICLRD has closely supported the development of the North West Strategic Growth Partnership structures and process, and is developing an issues paper which examines potential for the first cross-border transboundary spatial strategy on the island of Ireland, in the North West.

The collaborative framework, 'Spatial Strategies in Ireland and Northern Ireland', published by what are now the Northern Ireland Department for Infrastructure and the Irish Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, and updated in December 2020, was supported by ICLRD in its development. This collaborative framework provides further recognition by both governments on the island of the benefit of spatially-led and connected approaches to development and strategic planning. These approaches are particularly relevant to meeting the challenges of green transformation and digitalisation.

It has been recognised that there will be benefits in further cross-border work on rural development policy and planning, to complement existing work in environmental, marine and fisheries areas. There is also potential to consider the cross-border implications of both the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs' (NI) Green Growth Strategy, and the Irish National Climate Action Plan.

### 3.2.2 The challenges of doing green transformation work on a cross-border basis

The challenges of doing green transformation on a cross-border basis relate to data, resources, variations in regulatory classification of land use, and the experience of practitioners that there is a lack of understanding among funders as to the step-change that will be required to support an effective carbon transition.

There is an ongoing dissonance arising from misalignment of data sets and designations at the border, and as they interface across the border. Different data collection systems exist for environmental data and climate data on either side of the border. As well as non-cognate data capture design, there are also gaps in data and information. We also need to be aware of what data exists and how it can be shared rather than re-inventing the wheel. Open data needs to be part of this approach, as there is currently no central co-ordinating hub for the island that can collate, and create access to, all relevant data and climate research evidence on an open access basis. We still have a silo mentality. In order for us to be effective in reaching climate targets, we need to embed consideration of the cross-border dimensions of energy and spatial planning into the business of all organisations at all levels of public governance.

Rivers and species do not recognise borders, i.e. the environment does not stop at the border. Energy policy is very different on either side of the border. There is a lack of funding for integrated cross-border solutions, and a lack of stocktaking and baselining of the evidence that does exist, which makes planning and implementation more challenging.

There is a need to understand how we will get to net zero in our regions generally, and in the North West specifically. We need to understand green entrepreneurship better, and what opportunities it can bring both for solving climate problems and for new growth and sustainability. Obtaining funding is not the only challenge – often funding agencies do not understand the fundamentals of structural environmental transformation or what is involved on the ground. Being able to work in a way which is sectorally- and task- appropriate is essential for green transformation success, and funders need to appreciate this.

### 3.2.3 What will make cross-border working on green transformation easier

There is a need for common data baselines and metrics, education of politicians on green transformation, shared political declarations, and holding politicians to account. Both the Dáil and the Northern Ireland Assembly have declared climate and biodiversity emergencies, and this has been mirrored at local government level with declarations and motions across the island. This question is how do we follow this up with delivery and measurable impact?

Shared co-design of data collection, plus shared approaches to alignment and sharing of data (including sharing open data with the public) will make delivery easier. We need to ensure that there is good data, that gaps in data can be addressed together on a cross-border basis, and that data capture for the future is co-designed and takes account of the whole island.

The governance model of the North West Strategic Growth Partnership represents a model of best practice in collaborative governance that can support green transformation at a regional scale for a cross-border functional economic area.

There is significant untapped intellectual resources on either side of the border, which could be effectively mobilised through a cross-border approach to evidence, baselining and capacity building for climate action. A North South agency dealing specifically with data, baselining, and research is needed which would service the state, public, community and business sectors to act in concert with each other.

Funders, recognising the complexity, importance and desirability of cross-border approaches to green transition, should make doing the actual work in the border region easier, and more appropriately supported. Green transition is not simply an extension of normal business, but requires a whole systems change in how we work, and potentially dramatic actions to create impact—this needs to be understood across all agencies. A shared enterprise policy at an island level will make delivery of a green economic transformation easier.

### 3.2.4 Beyond what's already been done, what else needs to happen

#### **Co-ordinated approaches to spatial and environmental governance**

In practice, the PEACE PLUS programme needs to support strategic cross-border collaboration which addresses environmental and spatial governance issues, that are essential for the green transition, rather than merely funding multiple actions on the ground.

The Irish National Climate Action Plan and the Northern Ireland Green Growth Strategy need to be co-ordinated where they overlap at the border and in their implementation.

#### **Supporting green transformation for the island as a whole**

We need a centre of best practice for green transformation on the island of Ireland.

Funders need to be educated on what green transformation entails. Those who drive cross-border collaboration are very innovative, but the realities of implementation on a cross-border basis are not always reflected in the timescales demanded by funders.

#### **Traditional and social business model responses to green growth opportunity**

There is a need to support start-ups and social enterprise in the area of green transformation. The business models which are required by funders are often incompatible with the complexity of the objectives of environmentally-focused enterprises. We need to consider, and create, a role for social enterprise in relation to its potential contribution to green transformation. We need to fund responses that are tailored to meet the needs of specific places—for example, Inishowen in the North West which has a population of 40,000 people and 2,000 small-scale farmers.

#### **Farmers as a key stakeholder in green transformation**

There is a need to understand what the role is for farmers in helping to deliver a green transformation. Farmers respond to economic signals. CAP Reform will impact smaller farmers and enable more involvement in green transformation. For commercial farmers there is a need for education on, and enabling of best practice in, delivering emissions reduction and biodiversity conservation and protection.

#### **Other forms of cultivation and food production**

As regards forms of cultivation—particularly horticulture—that do not currently fit into the official agricultural policy model, there is a gap in supports. Yet, these are extremely important in the overall context of green transformation. People on the ground are often put off by the complexity of targets such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals, but people respond well to the opportunity to be involved in local projects where they feel ownership. The role of community gardens, and other types of horticulture projects, needs to be better understood for their contribution to sustainable food security. Thus, supports are required for local action.

The ChangeMakers project,<sup>6</sup> supported by Inishowen Development Partnership and involving Inishowen Community Gardens as well as community gardens elsewhere in Donegal, is a good example of the kind of activity that can be supported. There is

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<sup>6</sup> The ChangeMakers project, based in Donegal, aims to raise awareness, understanding and action for a fairer and more just world. The project connects with adults throughout County Donegal in a broad range of activities.

also the practice of farmers exploring alternative land use in conjunction with local food security projects. During the pandemic, food growers generally turned to seed banks on the island as imports were less available. This should prompt us to look at where seeds come from, how we can build resilience in seed stock, and empower communities through funding seed libraries, social farms and gardens. People run these initiatives because they are passionate about them, and they do it on limited resources with no continuity of funding. Furthermore, there is a danger that this volunteerism will burn out without appropriate supports being provided, for example, by governments acting to harness this as a resource for transformation.

### **Food Security**

Food security is a policy priority in the North West at local government level, and Derry City & Strabane District Council has participated in a food vulnerability study which was carried out by UCC. Meanwhile, Derry is now involved in a UK Sustainable Food Places network, including participation in an edible cities network summer school.

Brexit, and the Covid-19 pandemic, have highlighted the importance of food security, and also our dependency on supply chains for imported food. The Acorn Food Network<sup>7</sup> in Derry and Strabane has developed a project which links food security, nutritional education, health awareness, and skills for growing food. The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs in Northern Ireland has developed a food strategy which was out for consultation at the time of the focus group discussion. There is much more to be done on food security on a cross-border basis, with EU funding opportunities, but a lot of competition for cross-border resources. It will be vital to take a spatially-led forward planning approach to food security co-operation, and for funders to support a strategic approach to this. Having projects which are ready to implement, with adequate advance communication between funders and project leaders, will be essential for funds to achieve strategic development objectives.

### **Green energy, green enterprise**

Green energy production needs to be supported and understood as something which can be undertaken by whole communities, and not only confined to private sector operators. There are significant ambitions in places like Inishowen in relation to energy generation.

As regards green enterprise development supports, there are two main aspects to this: (i) companies innovating in a green entrepreneurial sense, and; (ii) companies taking measures to reduce their overall carbon footprint, but not necessarily diversifying from their existing product or service offering. Currently, there is a problem with the criteria applied by state agencies for enterprise funding, in that job creation, impact, and export potential are the main criteria which determine the allocation of supports to businesses. This needs to change. In relation to investment in a greener footprint, a very small percentage of businesses follow up on this. Some companies are investing in carbon neutrality ahead of the curve, but this may not be linked to expansion of job numbers or growing exports. It may, however, make them more competitive in the future as green and clean energy footprints become more influential for the buyer.

### **A change in business as usual for both businesses and state enterprise supports**

State enterprise support policy needs to evolve for Irish firms to be able to sustain jobs through a period of fundamental transformation in how businesses work. The nature of true sustainability needs to be more fully understood. In this context, the Rural Development Programme (RDP), which is part of the EU's Common Agricultural Policy, should play a role in helping rural businesses in the border region make the transition to green jobs. This might be an easier route for rural businesses as the RDP has different performance criteria which do not include a national jobs target. The INTERREG funds at European level have done much to support green entrepreneurship development, both by enabling practice and the sharing of expertise across borders and whole macro-regions of the EU.

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<sup>7</sup> The Acorn Food Network aims to create a more sustainable food system.

### **Backing green intentions and declarations with programming and resources**

Currently, there is a dissonance between the fact that we have a range of public declarations made by bodies at various levels of our governance structures which have declared a climate emergency, and yet, we are operating in a business as usual manner. Our policy making culture needs to change and Governments need to align significantly more resources to achieve green transformation. The science has been around for 50 years and yet we are still in a policy making culture which does not recognise the scale of the green transformation challenges. Public declarations, if they are to be seen as more than public relations exercises, need to be followed up with additional resources for the organisations charged with implementing green transformation, and this needs to include both programming and capital investments.

### **The need to effectively resource biodiversity within overall climate action resources**

Within the overall climate action funding envelope we need to ensure that biodiversity is sufficiently funded. Biodiversity, climate change and jobs all need to be considered as objectives to be validated and resourced. The All-Ireland Pollinator plan<sup>8</sup>—driven by Trinity College Dublin and the National Biodiversity Data Centre—was a relatively simple yet extremely effective and evidence-driven initiative which was carried out on an island-wide basis. The plan has clear practical tips for how people can play a part in creating a change in biodiversity to support pollinators. We need to see this kind of model replicated. There is a need to understand the role of sectoral peer-led actions and campaigns, within which a sector is empowered to lead on the change in a way that integrates evidence with effective action and results. For example, the Covid-19 pandemic is our version of a real emergency. The key will be to retain some of the good practice in how states and citizens have responded, and to act on the learning from the pandemic.

### **Joining up data across the border**

There is a need to ensure that national data sets are aligned across the border and that they can be aggregated on a cross-border basis. The science is already there, we just need to establish where we are in terms of baseline and future data requirements. Currently, the Census periods in Ireland and Northern Ireland do not align, and no move has been made to align these. However, it is still possible, with specialist approaches, to address incompatibilities in data and to provide an overview of what is happening. In this context, the International Centre for Local and Regional Development (ICLRD) and the All-Island Research Observatory (AIRO), based at Maynooth University, are hoping to secure funding to produce an updated Atlas of the Island of Ireland, which they originally jointly developed and published in 2014.<sup>9</sup> Understanding not only the data we are collecting, but how the data is analysed and interpreted, is fundamental to creating better data on a cross-border basis. Data officers need to be matched across jurisdictions, and supported to work more closely together. Ongoing challenges with the idea and delivery of open data also need to be addressed.

### **Effective spatial planning and communication of planning priorities**

In spatial planning, green transformation needs to be underpinned by a more concise and accessible model of territorial plans. Specifically, they need to be simplified, clear, and digestible, like the Scottish model of concise spatial plans. This is crucial because we have a multiplicity of micro-territorial plans across both jurisdictions on the island, each one of which can run to hundreds of pages. Therefore, communication of spatial planning policy is important so that all sectors can understand where they fit in to the territorial plans.

The role of demonstrator villages, as a planning and demonstration tool, should also be better understood. There is a fear of technology that needs to be addressed, through awareness raising about the possibility of green technology for sustainable living.

We are often slow to adopt evidence-based solutions, but a collective innovation approach is required to address green transformation. Relationships are personal, and on the island of Ireland we know how to network which is a significant asset in meeting this challenge. We need to support each other and ensure that meaningful employment and sustainable livelihoods are part of what we are working towards.

In this context, it would be beneficial if the climate crisis was talked about more at local level. However, it is not the only issue that occupies people's minds currently, so that there is a need for communications to help people to understand how the climate crisis is going to affect them and how they can get involved. Engagement of civil society is crucial.

### **Investing in green transition for rural/remote regions and not just the cities**

Rural infrastructure and transport solutions will be needed across the island to ensure that the impact of carbon tax does not create inequalities in areas where there is no alternative to the private car as a mode of essential transport. Governments need to take transport modal shift seriously and resource it. People need to be given a chance to prepare for the change.

The rhetoric of climate emergency and climate action is notably absent from some other crises such as the mica housing crisis facing thousands of households in Donegal.<sup>10</sup> There is a risk that a major opportunity could be missed in this instance, for building back with sustainable building technology and ensuring that this is provided for as part of the crisis response.

### **The leadership role of local government—being good ancestors**

The role of local authorities will be crucial in delivering a green transformation to its full potential. The extent to which local authorities have taken on board this agenda is unclear, but it needs to be at the top of the priorities for local authority leadership on an ongoing basis. Local authorities must provide leadership and be active in influencing people to move away from making poor environmental choices. Local authorities cannot be impartial and passive in influencing good environmental decisions. We all need to reflect on how we can be good ancestors for future generations. As an island, we are engaged with genealogy and perhaps, rather than casting ourselves back in time, we could mobilise this capacity to think beyond our own generation, and instead project it forward to connect with the needs of future generations.

### **Resource the grassroots or face failure in green transformation overall**

Overall, an all-island structural approach to green transformation is required to complement and enable sustainability of existing grassroots actions. Without multilevel governance and collaboration on climate change, the grassroots will burn out and we will lose a key means of achieving the transformation that is required. Local authorities – where they have not already been pro-active—need to be instructed to embed green transformation, promote positive livelihoods and sustainable jobs, and build environmentally positive decision making into all aspects of policies and services.

### **Give sectors the information and guidance they need to make the change**

Sectoral all-island plans for green transformation will be required, including for the economic development sector. These plans should set out common data relevant to that sector, and which can facilitate co-ordinated action. This should involve effective resourcing, and publication of sectoral baselines and plans for action in relation to green transformation.

<sup>8</sup> The All-Ireland Pollinator Plan is an island-wide attempt to reverse declines in pollinating insects.

<sup>9</sup> [The Atlas of the Island of Ireland | All-Island Research Observatory \(maynoothuniversity.ie\)](https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/research/all-island-research-observatory)

<sup>10</sup> Mica is a component of some building bricks and blocks. Mica attracts moisture from the air, so that over time mica breaks down the strength of the bricks and blocks causing them to crack and crumble.

# Chapter 4



## Poverty and Mental Health

## 4.1 Research Questions

Participants were asked to consider the following questions:

- What is the relationship of the border to poverty and mental health?

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- What do we need to understand better about poverty and mental health in border areas such as the North West? Who suffers the most?

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- What kind of solutions have worked well in tackling the root causes of poverty and mental health and in supporting people towards a better quality of life?

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- What needs to happen to make cross-border population-based solutions easier?

## 4.2 Discussions

### 4.2.1 Relationship of the border to poverty and mental health / What we need to understand about poverty and mental health in border areas such as the North West

The issues in the border region relating to both poverty and mental health are well-documented. In Derry City & Strabane District Council, for example, there are fewer than 70 jobs for every 100 people of working age. It is important that we understand the reasons which underlie poor mental health and poverty. A shortage of good jobs, poorly paid jobs, and differentials in wages between the North and South (such as a £3,000 difference in the median wage) need to be noted. Life costs are the same despite differentials in income. The £20 uplift in Universal Credit, introduced during the Covid-19 pandemic has been axed in Northern Ireland, and this has a disproportionate effect on the population as a whole, and a particular impact on women. There is a housing crisis which has real consequences for mental health and transgenerational trauma as a result of hardship. All of this has been exacerbated by the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. However, there is an absence of recent census data to fully understand these trends.

Transgenerational trauma – whether as a result of conflict, violence, social and economic hardship or combinations of these – needs to be understood in terms of its knock-on effects on mental health and the ability to participate economically. The evidence tells us that there can be biological transmission of trauma, and that fear and hypervigilance can be transmitted across generations. The evidence also tells us that the main way in which trauma is transmitted is through parental hypervigilance, which creates a problematic dynamic between poor mental health, positive attachment (including infant attachment), and substance misuse and addictions.

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are proven to be a determinant of lifelong health.<sup>11</sup> ACEs have an epigenetic impact and a biological impact. Two thirds of children in Northern Ireland have been living for more than three years in persistent poverty. Living in poverty creates key ACEs which have lifelong implications for mental and physical health. Exposure to the Troubles, in border populations and in Northern Ireland, is a live issue for the adult population especially, particularly given the current issues with legacy policy and remembering. The process of remembering is a real factor in how the process of healing will impact on people's mental and physical health. Many people are suffering debilitating mental health episodes in the context of remembering, and trying to make sense of the conflict's legacy.

The North West has some of the best schools in Northern Ireland, but the two-tier educational selection system means that many young people leave school early. At the other end of the spectrum a lot of young people leave the border region to go to University and do not come back.

<sup>11</sup> The original source for ACEs' evidence is a longitudinal study in California involving over 17,000 adults which was conducted by the Kaiser Permanente Foundation and the Center for Disease Control and Prevention. This study established a link between ACEs and leading causes of death in adults, see [About the CDC-Kaiser ACE Study | Violence Prevention | Injury Center | CDC](#)

Recent evidence relating to the prevalence of mental health problems among young people indicates that one in eight young people in Northern Ireland have experienced a significant mental health issue. This is 25 per cent higher than the rate for young people elsewhere in the UK.

The North West has a high prevalence of drug and alcohol related deaths. Northern Ireland's rates are three times higher than in better off countries, and are at their highest in history. This is an indicator of the legacy of conflict, and includes late presentations of alcohol related diseases. One underlying factor is alcohol advertising and the availability of cheap alcohol. There is also a legacy within the population of over-dependency on prescription and non-prescription drugs. With the exception of eating disorders and self harm (for which there is still insufficient funding in the North West), Northern Ireland has the highest rating for prevalence of every other mental health condition. Social violence (including domestic violence and gender-based violence) levels are high, with externalisation of behavioural disorders. This is also linked with high rates of child and physical punishment.<sup>12</sup>

Type 2 Diabetes has a 5 per cent prevalence in the West of Northern Ireland, and is strongly determined by genetics and inherited lifestyle patterns. The environment people live in influences their perception about how they see their ability to manage their condition. People impacted by transgenerational trauma may therefore not feel empowered to self-manage their diabetes. The border in the North West is irrelevant where epigenetics are concerned—there are strong epigenetic links across the entire population in the North West and it is frustrating to be delivering services on a major long-term condition in Altnagelvin Area Hospital in Derry without operational links across the border.

A Women's Consortium in Northern Ireland recently addressed Belfast City council about the cuts to Universal Credit (UC) and who will be impacted most. Some 84,000 children and 44,000 households in Northern Ireland will suffer as a result of the UC cut. Foyle constituency is the second most impacted area of Northern Ireland arising from the high number of UC claimants in the constituency. There is a false rhetoric from the UK Government about getting people back to work. There is a significant proportion of people living in poverty who are already in work, as well as people who are not able to work in the traditional sense. Work is, therefore, not the solution for over 60 per cent of Universal Credit claimants and the UK Government's policy of getting people off UC and back to work is mismatched with the evidence on the circumstances of the population of claimants. The welfare system is not providing solutions for the population who will be most adversely affected by the cut to Universal Credit. Households with children will experience the results of these cuts most acutely and this has significant societal implications. A pertinent question is why is this the case? Evidence based policy making, political will, and mobilisation of social capital are required.

Overall, the social and community sector is mopping up the damage done by poor policy making. Universal Credit is a failed policy which is failing every devolved region in the UK, and this disproportionately affects border areas like the North West because of high levels of complex deprivation, physical and mental health barriers to inclusion, and generational legacy issues. The question must be asked as to how much it is costing to mitigate the failure of poor policy making.

Food and fuel poverty are major obstacles to wellbeing and inclusion, and must also be considered in the context of how a green transformation can deliver a just transition in relation to these areas experiencing poverty in the border region and in the North West.

For migrant communities, mental health issues have an additional feature which may derive from experiences in their country of origin, particularly for conflict refugees. Social and cultural isolation, particularly for older migrants and specifically older men, impacts on mental health. Addiction issues are prevalent in some migrant communities, and are exacerbated by social isolation.

The impact of Brexit on the mental health of migrant workers in Northern Ireland has been significant. People experience a prevailing sense of insecurity, even if they have obtained the right to remain. They fear for their future prospects and their children's prospects. There is a sense that the Government can change its mind very quickly on such matters, and this sense of instability and insecurity will have a cumulative psychological effect within migrant communities.

The border has a direct impact on the wellbeing and opportunities of refugees and asylum seekers as well as non-EU migrant workers in the border region. Having leave to remain in Ireland does not mean you can enter the UK. For non-EU migrants,

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<sup>12</sup> Professor Siobhan O'Neill cited these figures. For further information see <https://www.profsiobhanoneill.com/>

refugees and asylum seekers based in Donegal, for whom consular services and asylum system interaction points are only available in Dublin, the border adds complexities to their experience in that they cannot legally enter Northern Ireland, yet public transport routes—by virtue of Donegal having a 100-mile border with Northern Ireland—have to go through Northern Ireland.

Nowhere do we see health inequalities and poverty interact more acutely than in the experience of the Traveller community on the island of Ireland. In Ireland, Traveller men have a life expectancy which is 15 years less than the average for non-Traveller men, with Traveller women's life expectancy being 10-12 years less than non-Traveller women. We need to reflect on the trauma experienced by minorities, and the cultural trauma ensuing from a hostile policy environment.

#### 4.2.2 What solutions have worked well in tackling the root causes of poverty and mental health

The NSPCC in Northern Ireland has conducted evidence-based evaluations of its services and has maintained a focus on early years and early intervention, perinatal parenting and psychological family supports, and promoting early attachment. This approach aligns with the evidence from the Kaiser Permanente ACEs study. There has been an emphasis in recent years on making Derry an 'Early Intervention City', promoting networks of support and best practice focusing on infant mental health, early years and family supports. Co-operation and Working Together (CAWT) has also delivered a successful EU INTERREG-funded ACEs programme across the border region.

CAWT has also delivered the Innovation Recovery Programme which is an EU INTERREG-funded project aimed at facilitating and supporting co-production and delivery of mental health recovery, supporting people to live well with mental health conditions and to become empowered as the expert in their own mental wellbeing. The recovery model is a well-established and evidence-based clinical best practice model, favoured by a number of leading clinicians across Ireland and the UK. The project has included an online recovery college which can be accessed by anyone with mental health or wellbeing support needs who is interested in supporting themselves. The online recovery college can also be accessed by those working to support people with mental health conditions either as carers, professionals or both. The model centres on an asset-centred, non-paternalistic approach to mental health promotion, and uses role modelling by people living with mental health conditions as a central feature of its approach. The overall model is trauma-informed and recovery-orientated, and the project has benefitted over 5,000 people in the border region through a collaborative effort involving mental health services North and South, and the voluntary and community sector.

The Healthy Living Centres in Northern Ireland empower citizens to optimise their mental and physical health, and to support people in managing specific conditions such as Type 2 Diabetes. This is a component of care that clinical specialists cannot deliver but which they welcome as available in certain areas for their patients. Self-empowerment in health is an essential component of healthy societies. The relationship between health and economic participation is well documented.

Social prescribing, as a mechanism which connects primary care to wider community support systems in a way which is organised around the specific needs of the individual, is important. Social prescribing has been integrated into primary care commissioning in Northern Ireland, and applies to both mental and physical health. It is also part of Irish national mental health policy.

Social prescribing is well regarded by clinicians and community stakeholders alike in the North West, particularly within Northern Ireland where social prescribing has become a commissioned health intervention delivered through the Healthy Living Centres, of which there are twenty-nine across Northern Ireland. The medical professions cannot solve health inequalities, but they do treat people living in poverty, and social prescribing and community health interventions and supports are an essential part of clinical support to patients. Derry has produced an international tech innovation success story in the development of Elemental Software, a digital social prescribing platform. This company supports good jobs, provides services across continents, and represents a social and digital innovation rooted in a response to local health inequalities.

There is now also an All-Island Social Prescribing working group. Social prescribing is a potentially powerful tool in supporting people to achieve better health outcomes than those they would otherwise have as a result of the structural conditions they are living in, particularly for those living in areas of complex deprivation like the North West and wider border region.

There is a strong network of voluntary and community organisations working on the ground in the North West to support people in navigating the particular challenges of poverty. This includes accessing supports for family wellbeing and mental health, as well as employability supports, which are delivered in a person-centred way. Foyle Women's Centre is one such example. However, many of these organisations are not provided with core multi-annual funding supports, and European funding has been relied on in the absence of exchequer funding. EU funding supports innovation with a view to the exchequer subsequently resourcing successful models of support. There is a need for a systematic approach to assess such successful interventions and mainstream them through strategic planning and multiannual funding.

The Northern Ireland Public Health Agency, and other commissioning bodies, have supported the development of integrated care systems involving enhancement of primary care and community health interventions including multidisciplinary clinical care systems. These integrated care systems focus on key long term conditions such as diabetes, cardiology, and also support the clinical and social needs of frail older people. For a model of integrated care to be fully effective there is a requirement for additional integrated planning across government departments on a health inequalities model of public health. The vehicle for this process to work at local level already exists in Northern Ireland in the form of the community planning governance arrangements, which are co-ordinated by local government. This is a vehicle through which a more structural approach can be taken to the planning and delivery of investments and services which address health inequalities and lead to better outcomes.

The Pobal Sláintecare Integration Fund, and the Healthy Ireland Fund, are examples of interventions which are in development in Ireland, and that will apply to the border counties as well as to the rest of the country. The Healthy Ireland Fund has been established as a response to the need to regularise health activity co-ordination in local communities. This intervention will run alongside a Healthy Communities Programme which will target nineteen disadvantaged areas across Ireland, on a cross-sectoral model led by the Irish Department of Health. The Healthy Ireland Fund will also see the appointment of health development officers in local authorities across the country. However, in public health policy terms, there is a risk that there will be too much focus on changing individuals' health behaviours rather than seeking to improve the social determinants of health. The social determinants of health affect the health outcomes of individuals living in areas of deprivation, such as parts of the North West and the border counties. A healthy communities model, driven on a health inequalities approach, may be more appropriate in such areas.

The border region has a range of examples of good integrated social, economic, civic and wellbeing supports for migrant communities and these interventions need to be supported. In addition to the various migrant support organisations located around the North West and the border region in general, specific good examples in Traveller support exist such as the Donegal Travellers Project which is based in Letterkenny.

### 4.2.3 What needs to happen to make cross-border population-based solutions to poverty and poor mental health easier

#### **Turn evidence-based pilots into business as usual and resource them within the mainstream**

Despite the fact that there are successful initiatives which respond to the needs of the cross-border population catchment—such as the CAWT Innovation Recovery project supported by EU funding—these have not made it into mainstream mental health policy. Health policy planning, in general, does not take account of the border. A shared mental health strategy for the border region may be a way of addressing this, which would allow both health systems to align the totality of resources in a way that mobilises assets towards agreed and shared goals. The North West Strategic Growth Partnership provides a space for potentially exploring such an approach on a smaller test scale while involving key relevant partners on the ground across the region and from both administrations.

#### **Post Covid-19 potential for cross-border shared health services**

Further exploration of the shared services agenda in the areas of health and mental health would be beneficial. In the wake of Covid-19, there may be a new appreciation amongst central health policy makers that an approach which takes border populations into account can lead to effective shared services through sharing of costs within a shared policy framework. Models already exist, such as the North West Cancer Centre and the cross-border percutaneous coronary intervention (PCI) service at Altnagelvin Hospital in Derry, so the concept is not new to either system.

### **Embed learning from the Covid-19 pandemic and resource local systems for wellbeing**

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the most successful and resilient responses were those developed between the community and voluntary sector and local government, and which worked from an asset-based, locally-connected model rooted in a community planning approach. This approach demonstrated the value of communities understanding what they could deliver, and being supported and resourced to do this—a health and social intervention model at its best. General public health planning, in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, now needs to take place on a shared basis and with shared policy priorities. It is possible to have the highest quality standards of healthcare delivery and embed these in an overall public health approach which addresses the social determinants of health. This should also involve cross-government mobilisation of non-health policy areas where supporting actions are needed, such as transport planning, labour market mechanisms, educational policy, and provision of community development infrastructure.

### **The need for a model of public health policy based on evidence of health inequalities**

Models of public health that address health inequalities, and the underlying social determinants of health, and which allow people to make decisions about their own lives, leading to a sense of self-empowerment are particularly needed in the North West, and in the border region as a whole. The underlying factors specific to the border and the conflict, relating to disadvantage and disempowerment have been well-rehearsed. People need to be empowered as agents in their own lives, to be respected, and to have the power to make decisions. Interventions such as the healthy living centres model, coupled with social prescribing, provide a social wrap-around support which is not fully valued yet. Interventions which do not put empowerment into people's own hands are setting people up to fail.

### **Poor and disconnected public infrastructure exacerbates poverty and poor mental health**

Places that are not logistically joined up—such as the North West and other border areas—place a burden of cost and responsibility on individuals and families. This can exacerbate poverty, as well as creating barriers to mental wellbeing.

Responding to poverty is not only a social policy issue but a concern which should be addressed across all areas of public policy. In the North West, for example, the cost of transport places a burden on individuals and families. There is a poor public transport infrastructure and service baseline, both in terms of the internal and external connectivity of the region. People often cannot use public transport to get to work because either services do not exist or the timetabling is not compatible with the normal working day. Single parents are more adversely affected as they are less likely to have access to a private car. Some 40 per cent of people in Derry have no access to a car or van for work purposes. Services which enable people to work need to receive greater investment, especially childcare and transport as two key enablers. People from rural areas in the border region cannot easily access adequate public transport in order to be able to attend healthcare appointments that take place outside of their local community setting.

Fuel poverty is an issue in the North West and needs to be considered in the context of an energy transition, and opportunities for new models of community wealth generation which can come with clean energy solutions.

### **Community and voluntary sector contribution**

There is a pattern of community and voluntary organisations picking up the slack in terms of work that should be properly resourced by public bodies. The voluntary and community sector does its best with the resources at its disposal, and fills the gaps left by public agencies, the churches and charitable organisations. Social isolation is an ongoing issue and Covid-19 demonstrated the importance of community and voluntary organisations in local communities. They helped to combat the risks to health and mental health which vulnerable people living in poverty experienced in lockdown, and during the Pandemic overall.

### **Mitigating the effects of Universal Credit cuts**

Poverty and poor mental health become exacerbated as people get older. There should be a cost-benefit analysis conducted on the value of deploying early intervention approaches which have a well-established international evidence base, and which tackle the complex and interrelated issues of poverty and mental health. This analysis should be used to inform more systematic and longer-term funding of key supports. Current UK Government policy, such as the cuts in Universal Credit, is creating knock-on effects which are having to be picked up by the community and voluntary sector. To address the structural inequalities in the border region, communities need to be more involved in decision making. In addition, there needs to be

greater recognition in public health promotion models of the need to address health inequalities for efforts to deliver effective and sustainable results.

### **Paying attention to rural disadvantage**

In addition to new investments, there needs to be greater promotion and awareness-raising on the availability of existing supports. There is a general lack of information within the population as regards benefits and entitlements. For example, there are rural schools in Northern Ireland which could be claiming additional funding, to offer programmes which respond to the social inequalities arising from rurality. A greater awareness of rural poverty and disadvantage—particularly for children and young people—is needed across whole sectors of policy making. Transport links are vital for children and young people’s access to extra-curricular activities, which are beneficial to their development. At present, rural children and young people in the border region experience poverty of opportunity, and systemic approaches need to recognise this. For example, the Northern Ireland education system takes little account of rural children’s need to participate in after school activities. School transport timetables can leave them unable to access social opportunities and skills which their urban counterparts avail of, when the simple timing of the child’s last bus home is a key factor.

### **Addressing health inequalities experienced by Travellers and other minority ethnic communities and groups**

As regards poverty and mental health issues for Travellers, the Donegal Travellers Project model has been successful over several decades in bringing forward grassroots solutions. The project has built capacity within the Traveller community for the development of culturally-appropriate responses to health inequalities, poverty, mental health, and a wide range of other issues experienced by Travellers.

Trauma-informed services, and empowerment supports, for ethnic minorities – as for Irish Travellers—must be available and tailored to the specific needs of particular groups. There needs to be greater investment in integrated support services for resettled refugee and migrant families. These need to include language development support, citizens’ advice, and general resettlement support services.

There is a specific need to address vaccine scepticism in communities where uptake is lowest. It has been cited that there has been less than a 50 per cent uptake in Northern Ireland of the Covid-19 vaccine by people from minority ethnic backgrounds. These are often the most socially disadvantaged areas. The question of why this is, and understanding the reasons, needs further examination.

### **Role of the Common Travel Area in tackling poverty and disadvantage**

The impact of how well the Common Travel Area (CTA) agreement is actually working for migrants, asylum seekers and refugees based in the North West, and the border region more broadly, needs to be assessed. Non-EU migrants with permanent residence in either Northern Ireland or Ireland cannot use the Common Travel Area mechanism. This is not only a social inequality issue but also has relevance in the context of an all-island workforce, and the mobility and availability of skills from migrant and refugee communities to support an all-island economy.

### **Supporting young people in alternatives to risk-taking**

Poverty and poor mental health, in an environment where there are few economic opportunities and little hope for young people, present a specific risk. Vulnerable young people are at risk of radicalisation by paramilitaries and becoming involved in criminal activity, as well as making poor health choices with long-term social and physical implications. The social determinants of these issues need to be understood and addressed, to prevent these risks being passed on to the next generation. For healthy neurological development, young people need to be able to engage in self-expression, but in environments with few positive opportunities or role models, young people can engage in unhealthy risk-taking. However, healthy alternatives to damaging risk-taking behaviours have proven to be positive for young people’s development. Creative activities, such as the arts and music, as well as sports and outdoor pursuits should be recognised for their benefits. Investing in young people by supporting the development of skills in areas where they can self-express, enhance their potential, and develop new skills, as well as learning how to manage and mitigate risk, can have considerable benefits. Consideration of border-wide programming of positive social interventions is also relevant for those involved in programme delivery to end paramilitarism.

### **Future of the community and voluntary sector in the Border Region—burnout and succession issues**

The community and voluntary sector in the border region has borne a particularly challenging burden over the last three decades, of providing a measure of social stability in a society on both sides of the border which was emerging from traumatic political conflict. The under-resourced voluntary and community sector has continued to deliver supports and interventions to a population with extremely high levels of need in terms of social deprivation, poverty, and mental health issues. The psychological impact on workers of continual piecemeal annualised funding, which leads to stress and anxiety about job security, is immense. Those who began working in the sector as the Good Friday/Belfast Peace Agreement was signed in 1998 will begin to reach retirement age in the next 10-15 years, as well as experiencing the impact of worker burnout. Thus, there is the question of succession planning for the sector. There is an emphatic need for structural policy planning for the sector in recognition of the social and economic value it provides for society, North and South. In particular, the system needs to move beyond being caught in a constant resourcing cycle based on the concept of ‘pilot’ initiatives. The issue of good jobs in the voluntary and community sector is a substantive one, which matters for social cohesion and stability in the border region, as well as its economic contribution.

### **Using PEACE PLUS as a springboard to adopt changes, and then resource them from the mainstream**

The overall design of the PEACE PLUS programme is well-researched and has significant potential to create a lasting impact on many of the issues outlined here. However, relying on European funded programmes is not a long-term solution. Consideration must be given to how the benefits of innovation, supported by EU funding, can be subsequently embedded into normal business on both sides of the border.

### **The importance of an overall all-of-Government drive to tackle the underlying social and economic determinants of health and social inequalities**

A model of public health for the border region, that recognises and addresses the social determinants of health and health inequalities, along with the provision of additional family income for families living in poverty, need to be considered. Specific provision for people with disabilities in the border region, who live with greater and more complex barriers to progressing out of poverty, also needs to be taken into account. The concept of a universal basic income does not work when the median income is extremely low, as it is in the border region, e.g. a single person’s social security payment in Northern Ireland is only 11 per cent of the median wage. In the absence of a universal approach to tackling poverty and income inadequacy, targeted approaches to income inequalities must be pursued as the best interventions.

## Chapter 5

# Mechanisms for Co-operation

## 5.1 Research Questions

Participants were asked to consider the following questions:

- What has been achieved through shared mechanisms for co-operation in your sector of expertise?

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- What challenges do you see emerging that require new thinking?

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- What are the limits of current mechanisms and enablers of co-operation?

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- What is needed to overcome these?

## 5.2 Discussions

### 5.2.1 What has been achieved through shared mechanisms for co-operation?

#### Joined up spatial planning

Under the collaborative arrangements of the North West Strategic Growth Partnership, and the joint working of Derry City and Strabane District Council and Donegal County Council, there has been a track record of exchange of information and knowledge in support of cross-border spatial planning. This has also been possible in the context of a north-south group of senior planners which has been organised by both parent government departments. Collaboration between planning officers has allowed for the activation of processes to complement formal statutory cross-border planning consultation arrangements. Communication takes place at an officer to officer level. As identified in *Ireland 2040*, planners in the North West are scoping out a potential strategic spatial framework and how this can support a joined-up approach to statutory metropolitan area planning.

The devolution from central to local government of planning competencies in Northern Ireland has created additional opportunities aligned with functional cross-border areas, i.e. this system now aligns with the Irish system where planning is a competency of local government. Environmental and spatial governance frameworks, and Directives at EU level, have enabled the development of formal structural arrangements for authorities on both sides of the border to work together. There are legislative requirements on planners on both sides of the border to take account of plans in adjoining areas, and doing this on a cross-border basis is the way that planning authorities in the border region can meet their legal obligations. Regular transboundary and cross-border liaison occurs in relation to specific planning applications, and with politicians and communities.

#### Business sector collaboration

In the North West, the Londonderry Chamber of Commerce has had a long-standing informal relationship with the Letterkenny Chamber of Commerce, and this has been formalised since 2020 with a Memorandum of Understanding. The Chambers continue to support business networking and bringing businesses together.

#### Collaboration between economic development actors in the North West

The collaborative governance adopted in the North West has allowed for more formalised structures for collaboration on key issues like Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), and has facilitated more focus on what else can be done together as a City region. Recognising the North West City Region as a mature concept has been essential for the effectiveness of joint trade missions, and for responding to the challenges and opportunities posed by Brexit.

Public private partnerships, such as that between Donegal County Council and Catalyst,<sup>13</sup> along with wider working across border local authorities (for Donegal this involves working with Fermanagh and Omagh District Council, as well as with Derry City and Strabane), have all been part of how joined-up working on the economy has progressed in the North West.

<sup>13</sup> Donegal County Council is collaborating with Catalyst, formerly known as the Northern Ireland Science Park, to develop a cross-border enterprise space in Letterkenny and Derry.

The Cross Border Local Enterprise Partnership—a network of SME support agencies in the wider border region—has played an under-acknowledged, but important, role in fostering the working relationships that are necessary for enterprise support to deliver on statutory targets and performance indicators. This partnership has been largely supported by EU funds but remains unrecognised as an element of the SME support infrastructure, which is essential to the success of domestic SMEs, and has never received a similar level of funding from either government.

Collaborative approaches to tourism, pre and post Covid-19, have taken place in the North West. Destination marketing work has been ongoing with Fáilte Ireland, Tourism Ireland, and Tourism Northern Ireland focusing on the North West, where the Wild Atlantic Way and the Causeway Coast routes meet. This promotion has seen the integration of the Walled City of Derry into the interface between the two nationally recognised trails.

Collaboration in culture and the arts has also been facilitated under the NWSGP arrangements. The North West is engaging in a collaborative approach to cultural programming across the region, including an audience development programme, which has created a better understanding of the nature of a cross-border audience for culture and the arts.

### **A connected North West approach to education, training, and research**

The North West Strategic Education Alliance was formally established in 2018 with a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) and has been funded on several actions by the Irish Higher Education Authority. The Alliance consists of Ulster University, Letterkenny Institute of Technology, North West Regional College and the Donegal Education and Training Board (ETB). This alliance provides a strategic counterpart to the work of the North West Councils in leading the development and growth of the North West City Region.

For collaboration in higher and further education it has been essential to have the backing of the leadership of the Councils and the NWSGP. The North West Strategic Education Alliance builds on a long tradition of connections between the institutions in the region but moves this collaboration into a different space in that it represents a sectorally-specific demonstration of the importance of both relationships and governance structures for collaboration. The North West Strategic Growth Partnership has been pivotal in providing the bedrock for key sectors such as higher and further education to build on.

The North West Strategic Education Alliance represents the development of a regional knowledge and technical transfer innovation ecology based on research-led teaching as a fundamental principle. Work that has been possible to date, and which will continue, relates to FinTech, MedTech, Advanced Manufacturing, Artificial Intelligence, and will include more recent developments aimed at growing innovation in the arts and cultural sector—ArtsTech. The presence of a graduate entry medical school at UU Magee, and the move by Ulster University to locate its entire school of health sciences at Derry, represents significant capacity to impact on the cross-border economy.

The North West Regional Development Fund, supported by both Governments, has been an important enabler of the range of collaborative activities that are taking place in the North West, particularly those involving the Councils and for which single-jurisdictional approaches were neither logical nor feasible. While the money has helped, the North West Strategic Growth Partnership very importantly provides the additional structure and governance for the necessary relationships that are required to make the work successful. The qualitative value of relationships, and investing in the process of collaborative working, should not be overlooked and needs to be valued as a feature of the North West model. This is essential for the longer term development of the regional economy.

### **Collaboration in health and social care—CAWT**

Co-operation and Working Together (CAWT) is the cross-border partnership of the health services in Ireland/Northern Ireland and has its headquarters in Derry. CAWT has been involved in health and social care co-operation in the border region as a whole for more than two decades. The work of CAWT has gained recognition and many awards, and initiatives have been delivered on a cross-border basis across programmes of care in both jurisdictions. EU funding has been a crucial factor for delivery, and the level of co-operation could not have been achieved without the assistance of EU funds. CAWT has developed strong relationships with the voluntary and community sector in the border region as a delivery partner. In addition, the multiplier effect of the EU funding managed by CAWT has been positive for SMEs, and the economy of the border region, through procurement and contracting.

All of CAWT’s work has been informed by data on health inequalities in the border region. For example, it is known that 20 per cent of health is determined by health services, 30 per cent by lifestyle factors and 40 per cent by the wider (social, economic, environmental) determinants of health.

#### Historical intergovernmental collaboration—the Loughs Agency

The Loughs Agency is the modern day form taken by the intergovernmental body which was established by both Governments in 1952 as the Foyle and Carlingford Lights Commission. As such, it is one of the oldest examples in Europe of an interjurisdictional vehicle for shared environmental governance and protection. It was confirmed as one of the official North South institutions following the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. The Loughs Agency has successfully delivered a range of statutory functions relating to environmental management and protection and provides an effective template for the conservation and protection of the Foyle and Carlingford lough systems. The Loughs Agency is enabled by unique legislation within the statutes of both Ireland and the UK, which allow the agency to prosecute for environmental infringements and crimes by domicile. It has strong relationships with the Councils and a range of other agencies whose work or remit impacts on the ecosystems, water systems, or biodiversity and habitats/species within Lough Foyle, Carlingford Lough, and their connected inland river systems. The Loughs Agency’s structure and remit provides a useful template for the emerging challenges associated with managing climate change risks and protecting shared environmental assets on a cross-border basis. As such, it is a mechanism which will be central to how both Governments agree to deliver a green transformation by working together.

The Loughs Agency houses a unique combination of enforcement functions (its fisheries officers are warranted officers), scientific monitoring and research functions, and environmental conservation and public engagement functions. Its international relationships include transatlantic research-based partnerships with University College Davis and Dalhousie University; domestic relationships with Glasgow University, Queen’s University of Belfast, University College Cork, and NUI Galway; as well as with key institutions such as the Marine Institute (Ireland), Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) (Northern Ireland), and the North-South Implementation Bodies dealing with environment and agri-food issues (Waterways Ireland and Food Safety Ireland). The Loughs Agency has recently installed the largest fish counter in Europe, north and west of the island of Ireland, through its recent INTERREG-funded project Sea Monitor. It is seeking to ensure that this infrastructure can be made available for public benefit, in the ongoing monitoring of species, marine migration and other indicators, which will be important for understanding the impacts of climate change and global warming on native Atlantic species.

#### Building cohesion through a Shared Island approach to community finance

Community Finance Ireland (CFI) is an integrated North-South social financing organisation which has been working across the island formally since 2000. It has provided social financing to the value of more than €60m to hundreds of organisations on the island. It has achieved high impact at grassroots level and has facilitated significant benefits across the areas of community infrastructure, sports, rural community amenities, wellbeing, and childcare initiatives. CFI offers not only financing but also a capacity building approach. Thus, it is an organisation that can provide capacity building on a range of social cohesion and community support issues across the island, contributing to a resilient third sector as a crucial cornerstone of the social and economic fabric of our shared island. CFI has a footprint across the border region, in Northern Ireland and in Donegal/West Connacht, which can provide opportunities for collaboration in the geographical North West of the island.

## 5.2.2 Challenges, new thinking required and possible solutions

### Impact of Brexit

Brexit has brought a significant challenge to the strategic and structured supports for cross-border collaboration which need to be built into the normal business of both Governments on the island of Ireland. The benefits of the EU emphasis on ERDF monies addressing the ongoing legal and administrative challenges of borders are significant in their potential to create resilience to the aftershock of Brexit for the whole island. There is also the potential to design creative solutions to deal with the repercussions of Brexit for the island economy as a whole.

Brexit has also had detrimental effects on the wellbeing of migrants and ethnic minorities living within the Common Travel Area (CTA). Stronger Together Northern Ireland<sup>14</sup> has undertaken some work with the Department of Foreign Affairs and the

<sup>14</sup> Stronger Together Northern Ireland is a consortium of groups and individuals who share information and opportunities to support and develop minority ethnic communities.

Department of the Taoiseach in helping the Irish Government to understand how Brexit and the CTA issues have impacted on people from minority ethnic backgrounds.

### **Improving data to understand the experience of business**

At the time of reporting, there is limited data which is relevant for businesses on a cross-border basis. The Chambers of Commerce in the North West are now looking at this, in conjunction with Letterkenny Institute of Technology and Ulster University, and are exploring a project which will deploy research students in collating data and working on cross-border clustering. This project will collate data relevant to businesses operating in this part of the border region, and will enable the Chambers to use the data to support advocacy for change in relation to how business supports are organised in the cross-border area. The project will focus initially on the FinTech sector but will also provide more generic learning for the wider business sector. It is important to understand how conditions are experienced by businesses on the ground, and a more structured approach is required to underpin the progress which has been possible due to the presence of specific personalities and working relationships. Good working relationships and relationships of trust, together with more formal governance for a structured approach, is the ultimate combination for success.

### **Marketing the whole region as a FDI location**

FDI agencies need to understand that there is a cross-border workforce available in the region and the assets of the region need to be marketed in an integrated way. Structure and relationships are both crucial elements of this.

### **Value of a connected cross-border region for innovation and growth**

For statutory agencies dealing with the North West region in relation to enterprise support, Brexit placed the benefits and values of a pre-existing interconnected regional approach in the North West into sharp relief. The North West model was vital for agencies on either side of the border who needed to address issues of standards, supply chains, workforce visas, etc. Companies from the North West collaborate and compete internationally for the island of Ireland in the presentation of joint offerings. More of this is needed. Cross-border innovation systems benefit both economies. The value of a cross-border approach for SME development—in terms of entrepreneurship development, cluster development, and driving innovation—is well recognised in key agencies.

### **Moving beyond dependency on EU Funding**

In terms of regional performance at EU level, the European Commission in the 8<sup>th</sup> cohesion report (2022)<sup>15</sup> downgraded the Northern and Western region of Ireland to the status of a lagging region, in which Galway's performance as an economic centre compensates for gaps in other parts of the region. The Atlantic Economic Corridor is a developing concept within the Northern and Western region, that is now officially in transition and not sufficiently competitive to be left without targeted interventions. The factors underlying the status of the Northern and Western region as a lagging region in transition are more acutely felt in border areas, and in Donegal, in particular.

The importance of moving from experimental actions to embedded change and innovation, following investment of EU funds across a whole range of cross-border sectors, is vital.

### **Mechanisms and co-operation for the totality of relationships on a Shared Island**

In terms of activating co-operation mechanisms and governance for cross-border co-operation, and in mobilising the totality of relationships needed in order to develop shared approaches, the North West region—with the most concentrated population mass in the border region—has demonstrated and achieved gains through this approach since the signing of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. The region holds further potential for the wider economy of the island. Other parts of the border region have not experienced the same level of structural and relationship work as the North West. However, there remain significant structural obstacles to sustainability and growth in the North West. The North West has been a success story because of the underlying connection in its economic geography, which was disrupted but not completely severed by the border. Brexit has had a more recent and serious impact on the contexts in which north south co-operation have been framed since the 1980s, including legal contexts, such as: the Anglo-Irish Agreement, EU Membership of both the UK and Ireland, and the 1998 Good

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<sup>15</sup> *Cohesion in Europe towards 2050: 8th Cohesion Report*, accessed at [https://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/en/information/publications/communications/2022/cohesion-in-europe-towards-2050-8th-cohesion-report](https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/information/publications/communications/2022/cohesion-in-europe-towards-2050-8th-cohesion-report).

Friday Agreement. This represents a fundamental change, and the North West region is at the edge of a rapidly changing UK. Nevertheless, there is still a commitment to ensuring that the progress made in recent decades is not lost.

With Northern Ireland remaining in the single market, the island needs to adapt to the concept that it has a border around it, and that the North West region can provide an exemplar of how to deal with this. Having focused on structural issues when there was time and space, and put in place an enabling framework for cross-border collaboration, the North West now has something to contribute to the rest of the island, not only in terms of economic potential but as a development and demonstration ground for new best practices in resource planning and public administration where administrative systems meet on a interjurisdictional land border.

There will be the question of how the North West, and the wider border region, are positioned in terms of changes to Irish corporation tax rate. How the North West connects to Dublin, infrastructurally (transport, freight, and energy) and digitally, will be important for the economy of the whole island. The North West is serving an all-island labour market, and there is an element of re-imagining the North West as a major component in an island economy which includes an interface with the UK. In the case of the North West this has been interpreted as an opportunity for growth, and for releasing the region's potential as a net contributor to both national economies.

Brexit has created shifting and divergent dynamics in the UK and in Ireland relating to concepts of citizenship, identity and mobility. These issues have relevance for Ireland's economy as a whole. The North West, through the City Deal for Derry and Strabane, has levered devolved resources of over £200 million from the UK Treasury and Northern Ireland Executive. This investment is to be specifically targeted on the economic growth and performance of Derry as the second city of Northern Ireland and its wider area including Strabane district. The question of what this means for the economy on the island as a whole needs to be explored. The North West is the only part of the island that currently has a joined-up structure to oversee the dispersal and management of a combined public investment envelope.

Data is one of the keys to unlocking solutions to an all-island economy and labour market. The North West region should be considered as a pilot region for a regional data dashboard which can support measurement of the appropriate indicators to ensure sustainable growth of the Irish economy. A shared island requires a joined-up economic, social, and civic infrastructure, especially in a digital era.

The European Commission, in July 2021, issued a formal communication to the Parliament, the Council, and the Committee of the Regions on the role of border regions in Europe as laboratories for integration and cohesion, which can contribute to the cohesion of cross-border territories. The North West Strategic Growth Partnership now represents a model of best practice in cross-border territorial co-operation on an EU external land border.

The European Union has been the source of support for much of the capacity-building and knowledge know-how which has been developed through cross-border co-operation across the border region and on a north-south basis. What is now required is strategic leadership to embed such approaches into national systems. This is in the interests of an effectively functioning shared island with an integrated economy, workforce, and social sector capable of benefitting people in all parts of the island and, in particular, those parts of the island disadvantaged by the border and the conflict.

Such an approach translates into broadening the mandates of specialist cross-border agencies to enable collaboration of national systems, rather than simply to manage European funds. It also translates into mandating and enabling single jurisdiction agencies to work with peers and stakeholders, along and across the border, where this is relevant to their catchment, to achieve optimal outcomes. The North West Strategic Growth Partnership arrangements provide a prototype for this kind of working by virtue of the cross-government mandated participation of departments North and South, and by implication their arm's length bodies/agencies. Performance systems, and agency-specific mandates, need to be adjusted to reflect the new possibilities inherent in more strategic cross-border sectoral and territorial co-operation. While there is significant capacity and activity on the ground, often at frontline officer level across a range of agencies working in the border region, the full impact and recognition of the value of this way of working needs to be reflected in the nature of decision making and policy formation at a higher level within both public administrative systems on the island of Ireland.

This approach will be particularly significant as the island responds to the challenges of climate action, and the development of international standards and compliance with these actions, such as carbon accounting. This approach will also yield benefits by supporting business, the public sector, and the third sector to function and thrive in the context of digitalisation, green transformation, and a just transition for all of the people of the island.

# Publications

Council Reports					
No.	Title	Year	No.	Title	Year
1	Report on the Economy in 1973 and the Prospects for 1974	1974	14.	Population Projects 1971-86: The Implications for Social Planning—Dwelling Needs	1976
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3	The Economy in 1974 and Outlook for 1975	1974	16.	Some Aspects of Finance for Owner-Occupied Housing	1976
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6	Comments on the OECD Report on Manpower Policy in Ireland	1975	19.	Rural Areas: Social Planning Problems	1976
7.	Jobs and Living Standards: Projects and Implications	1975	20.	The Future of Public Expenditure	1976
8.	An Approach to Social Policy	1975	21.	Report on Public Expenditure	1976
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29	Some Major Issues in Health Policy	1977	44	Comments on Development: Full Employment	1978
30	Personal Incomes by County in 1973	1977	45	Urbanisation and Regional Development in Ireland	1979
31	The Potential for Growth in Irish Tax Revenues	1977	46	Irish Forestry Policy	1979
32	The Work of the NESC 1974 - 1976	1977	47	Alternative Strategies for Family Support Income	1980
33	Comments on Economic and Social Development; 1976 - 1980	1977	48	Transport Policy	1980
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