

# REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

## RECOGNISING FUNCTIONAL TERRITORIES

ISSUES PAPER

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An Roinn Gnóthaí Eachtracha agus Trádála  
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## SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION

Over many decades, local and regional development has been dominated by economic prosperity. However, in recent years, this dominance has been tempered by concerns for tackling poverty, inequality and citizen rights, and with an expanding, more inclusive, growth agenda that complements – ought not to compete with – economic prosperity by better understanding the means for achieving well-being (Pike, *et al.*, 2017: 49). In re-conceptualising regional development, contemporary policy makers and politicians need to consider well-being in terms of social, cultural, political and environmental conditions of places, alongside prevailing economic conditions. These attributes put an emphasis on context-dependency, which highlights the importance of the endogenous conditions of place that build-up a locality or region.

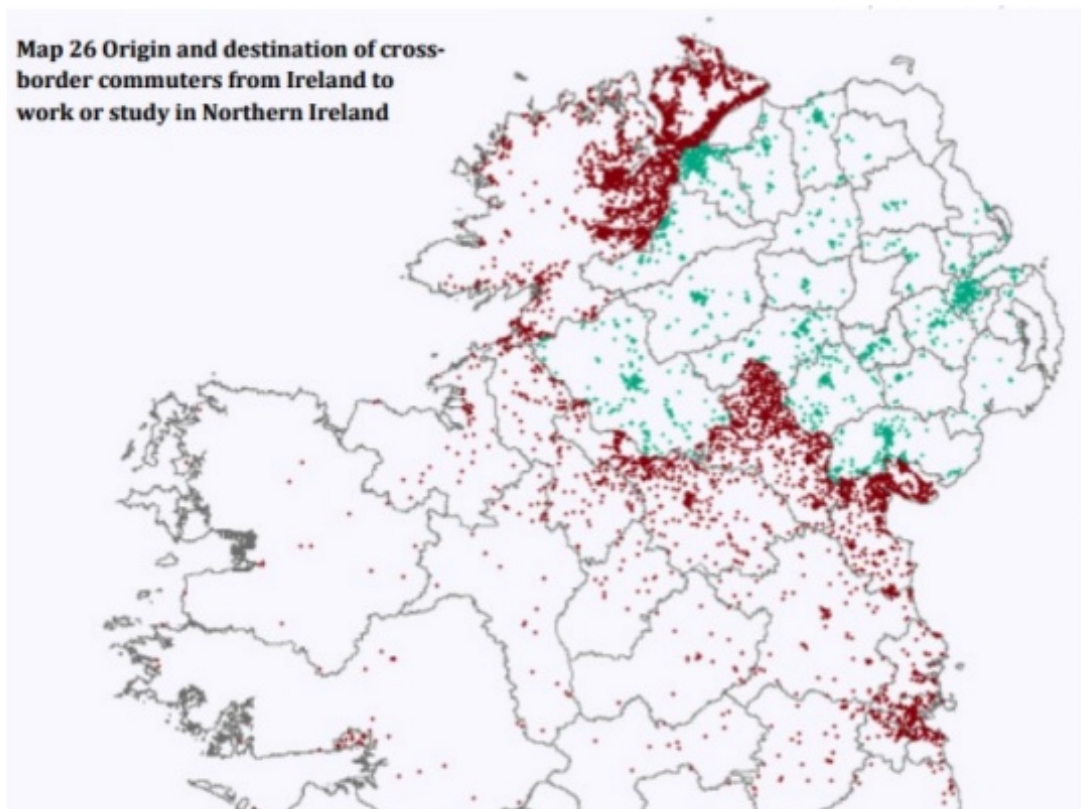
That said, managing development can be problematic, particularly as spatial dynamics often transcend administrative boundaries. This creates challenges for policy makers and service providers in terms of financing the public sector, and the jurisdictional disconnect between origin and destination. For example, a growing number of people commute to work each day from across Northern Ireland to Belfast, and throughout Ireland to Dublin, impacting on physical (transport) infrastructure, schools and indeed social and health services of the ‘host’ urban area. Furthermore, there are substantial cross-border commuting patterns occurring between Ireland and Northern Ireland (see Figure 1). Infrastructure and service issues are magnified in border areas, which have tended to suffer from ‘back-to-back’ approaches to decision-making, including spatial planning practices. Previous research notes that “Traditional perceptions of social and economic relations across space therefore can – and does – lead to inefficient planning and a duplication of services, particularly on an inter-county and cross-border basis” (Walsh *et al.*, 2016: 2). In response to this, considering such spaces as ‘functional territories’, or ‘functional geographies’ address governance fragmentation and can help:

1. To promote economic development, strengthening vertical and horizontal linkages in the regional economy and developing critical mass;
2. To achieve efficiencies and synergies in the provision of public services, promoting a ‘shared services agenda’;
3. To mitigate environmental impacts and promote socially and spatially just outcomes; and
4. To achieve a better understanding of functional relationships, working across and beyond administrative boundaries, supporting evidence-informed planning and policy-making (Walsh, *et al.*, 2016: 3).

A variety of governance models and mechanisms have emerged that enable government – local and central – in different jurisdictions that are otherwise bound within geographical administrative and operational constraints to work collaboratively in support of functional territories to the betterment of society and the economy in those places. However, on the island of Ireland there is much uncertainty about the future of such arrangements post-Brexit, and the potential consequences, particularly for settlements along the Irish border which have community, employment and service provision inter-dependencies.

Therefore, this working paper explores the context for inter-jurisdictional spatial planning on the island of Ireland through the lens of the ‘functional territories’ concept, and seeks to identify potential issues that may emerge following the UK’s departure from the European Union in March 2019. This will lead to a further investigation (Phase 2, *Position Paper*) and analysis of responses to these issues, and perhaps opportunities, informed by relevant stakeholders and further critical reflection.

**Figure 1: Cross-border Commuting Patterns**



(Source: Gleeson, 2017).

## SECTION 2: REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT ON THE ISLAND OF IRELAND

### History of regional development on the island of Ireland and contemporary policy and practice in both jurisdictions

Securing regional development has been a focus of government policy in Ireland and Northern Ireland for many decades, with an emphasis on balancing development across both jurisdictions to counter-balance dominant urban centres. This found initial spatial expression in both the *Regional Development Strategy* (RDS) for Northern Ireland (DRDNI, 2001) and Ireland's *National Spatial Strategy* (NSS) (DoELG, 2002) both of which utilised the language of balanced regional development, a concept that was applied across the European territory (EC, 1999). Both the RDS and NSS promoted a functional territories approach in creating concepts of 'corridors', 'gateways' and 'hubs' (Walsh, 2009).

In Ireland, government recognised the link between spatial planning (including land use allocations) and public expenditure through the National Development Plan (NDP). This ultimately led to alignment between the two documents as found in the regional policy framework of NDP 2007-2013, which sought to organise spatial development that enables Ireland to be internationally competitive, socially cohesive and environmentally sustainable. The approach was ultimately stymied as a consequence of the global financial crisis of 2008 and associated impact on public expenditure (DoHPLG, 2018). However, the instruments for achieving this are worth noting, particularly with respect to evolution of the contemporary national planning framework *Project Ireland 2040*. Previous policy (DoECLG, 2002) focused on gateways (national scale urban centres with associated regions); hubs (located strategically on transport corridors between gateways); and county and other towns (with important regional and local roles). This though was negatively impacted by a "perception of 'winners' and 'losers' that undermined the objectives that the NSS was seeking to achieve" (DoHPLG, 2018: 16).

Going forward, the language has changed in relation to the new national planning approach, with balanced regional development replaced by an emphasis on managing more balanced growth between the three regions in Ireland (see *Regional Assemblies* below). Half of future growth is to be concentrated in five cities and the other half accommodated in Ireland's large and smaller towns, villages and rural areas. This is, perhaps, a recognition that balanced regional development is elusive:

*From an inclusive perspective, balanced growth on the island of Ireland sounds great. But in reality, it is quite delusional. Envisaging Cork as a counterbalance to Dublin from a planning perspective is as illogical as thinking Killarney could be a counter balance to Cork City. Regional disparities exist due to the uneven impact of regional development and they will persist because the underlying economic competencies are different from location to location (Crowley, 2018).*

Policy relating to regional development in Northern Ireland is contained in *Building a Better Future: Regional Development Strategy 2035* (DRDNI, 2010). This emphasises balanced sub-regional growth based on key settlements, a reflection of the Northern Ireland Programme for Government, the most recent iteration of which is in hiatus because of the collapse of the NI Assembly. Belfast is considered to

be the regional economic driver, and Derry/Londonderry the principal city of the North West with a hinterland into Donegal towards Letterkenny. The Main Hubs are dispersed across the region, reflecting the established settlement hierarchy that was first expressed in public policy in 1975. Several Main Hubs are located close to the border and have a functional territory that extends into Ireland, including Strabane (Donegal), Enniskillen (Cavan/Sligo), Armagh (Monaghan) and Newry (Louth).

National spatial planning on the island of Ireland has evolved significantly over the past twenty years. Cooperation is now firmly embedded between central government North and South. This is evidenced by the inclusion of cross-border networks to Belfast and Derry/Londonderry in *Project Ireland 2040*, and reference in RDS 2035 to the wider North West that incorporates the Derry City and Strabane District Council and Donegal County Council areas. Indeed, the latter continues to evolve with the prospect for a cross-border city-region plan, *North West City Region*, designed to underpin economic growth, improve infrastructure connections between County Donegal and Derry City and Strabane, as a counterbalance to geographical peripherality. Such initiatives are politically enabled through the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement, which promotes greater collaboration between Ireland and Northern Ireland. This follows the European model of cooperation across borders which has attempted to remove “economic and infrastructural obstacles and imbalances in border and cross-border regions to promote a more balanced and competitive social and economic environment” (InterTradeIreland, 2006).

### **Regional and Sub-Regional Governance**

Following the implementation of local government reform in Northern Ireland (1<sup>st</sup> April 2015), a process of decentralisation, land use planning is the responsibility of local authorities. This now reflects the operational context in Ireland. Area plans<sup>1</sup> designed and monitored at a local level are central to the management of development in both jurisdictions. With the inclusion of local service delivery, this enables a bottom-up – rather than top-down – approach to spatial planning policy and strategy. Indeed, good governance necessitates decentralisation through subsidiarity. Reflecting on the trans-frontier context of the Irish border region, there is no doubt that cooperation is enhanced with the existence of similar competencies and decision-making processes (Creamer *et al*, 2010). In the context of spatial planning this allows for strategic coordination of policies and projects at the appropriate level. This has become the dominant paradigm in border areas throughout Europe, arising from political and financial commitments to addressing issues of peripherality, social and economic division, and better place-based decision making for enhancing well-being.

Trans-frontier cooperation and coordination can be challenging with regard to policy alignment, political agreement and common budget commitments. This is mirrored at the *intra*-jurisdictional spatial scale, with local authority planners in Northern Ireland encouraged to be cognisant of development dynamics that exist in neighbouring council areas as well as their own (McCandless, 2016). In Ireland, collaboration between local authorities is enabled by three Regional Assemblies, tasked with sourcing European funding for Regional Programmes, promoting coordinated public services, monitoring proposals which may impact on their areas, and advising public bodies of the regional implications of their policies and plans (DoHPLG, 2018). Undoubtedly, cooperation within and between the two

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<sup>1</sup> In Northern Ireland this term is used to refer to the local development plan (LDP); in Ireland this references the country development plan.



jurisdictions on the island of Ireland has become much more fluid and dynamic over the past ten years, underpinned by relationships established through border networks of local authorities North and South.

As noted above, cooperation is dependent on political enabling, which can take considerable time to mature. A variety of governance instruments are currently available on a cross-border basis at the local and regional spatial scales, such as European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC), a full legal personality designed to “facilitate and promote territorial cooperation in view of strengthening the economic and social cohesion of the European Union” (ECR, 2018). Other, non-statutory, vehicles also exist, such as a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) an example of which is the Strategic Alliance between Newry and Mourne District Council and the Louth Local Authorities. This MOU envisaged co-operation that “...may involve working up and delivering joint projects and funding applications, exploring opportunities for the co-ordination and sharing of services” (Newry and Mourne District Council & Louth Local Authorities, 2011).

In addition to specific instruments at the local level, a joint cross-jurisdictional framework for cooperation<sup>2</sup> exists between the two central government departments in Ireland and Northern Ireland responsible for strategic spatial planning. Agreed in June 2013, opportunities for engagement and cooperation are identified at two working levels: 1) between the Northern Ireland Executive and the Irish Government; and 2) amongst local authorities in both jurisdictions. Whilst drawing from good practice examples internationally, the Framework sits outside of formal European instruments. At the same time, achieving the Framework’s ambitions around enhancing competitiveness, creating competitive places, environmental quality, and spatial analysis are linked – directly and indirectly – to European Union funding and networks.

Therefore, the post-Brexit adaptability of policy and operational strategy linked to cross-border cooperation – both statutory and non-statutory – will be fundamental to achieving sustainable development goals. This is of particular interest in sectoral delivery of public sector services and infrastructure linked to cross-border mobility, including for example, roads; energy; health; and higher education. Each of these areas of public intervention and action are of course set within specific areas of government policy objectives, budgets and stakeholder engagement. At the same time, as outlined above, these can also be considered as the outworking of strategic spatial planning. Consequently, high quality trans-boundary governance – including collaboration and cooperation – is essential to manage and facilitate development in these functional geographies. This is further explored in Section 3, leading to the identification of potential issues and challenges post-Brexit.

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<sup>2</sup> *Framework for Co-operation: Spatial Strategies of Northern Ireland & the Republic of Ireland*. Available at: <http://www.housing.gov.ie/sites/default/files/migratedfiles/en/Publications/DevelopmentandHousing/Planning/FileDownload%2C33970%2Cen.pdf>

### SECTION 3: FUNCTIONAL TERRITORIES AND GEOGRAPHIES IN A POST-BREXIT LANDSCAPE

As noted above, contemporary governance, whether at a local, regional or national level, is complex. The territorial unit for governing places and managing spatial change contains multiplicity - and is continually being shaped by both endogenous and exogenous forces. Across the global North, decentralisation has increasingly become a growing trend that has given birth to new spatial concepts, for example, 'new regionalism' (Pike, *et al.*, 2017), 'functional economic areas' (Jones, 2016) and 'city-regions' (Coombes, 2014) that try to map to more functional geo-spatial interactions across a range of socio-economic measures. Because of this, decentralisation has unfolded at different rates and spatial scales across the island of Ireland.

Internal governance within one jurisdiction can be challenging in its own right, as there tends to be a "lack of geographical alignment and coordination between functional policy areas and institutions across local authorities" (Pike, *et al.*, 2016: 16), but can be even more complex when trying to untangle the dynamics across jurisdictions. In a pre-Brexit<sup>3</sup> era, with decades of EU membership – and not diminishing the substantial efforts in establishing collaborative governance architecture across the British Isles since the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement – the institutions and cross-border organisations in Ireland and Northern Ireland have painstakingly tried to untangle the complexity to make services and places on either side of the Irish border more 'workable' and to mutually enhance social, economic and environmental well-being. This has created a range of functional spaces and cooperative instruments, some of which as noted above, that try to address such 'messy' geographies. However, the implications of Brexit on these activities confront politicians, policy-makers, spatial planners and many others with apprehension and ambiguity. The challenges and consequences of Brexit, particularly along the Irish border, require immense thought, careful consideration and great creativity to not disrupt the delicate balance that currently exists across the island of Ireland, in what is its most peaceful period in modern history.

Perhaps new spatial concepts and a growing return to 'the local' offer conceptual scaffolds for (re)designing policy instruments that can respond to Brexit. These concepts and their operationalisation, particularly for those emerging in cross-border contexts, e.g. the North West City Region, on the island of Ireland, face challenges from Brexit. While the UK's decision to exit the European Union is a democratic and political desire, the outworking of this exit places Northern Ireland in a precarious social, economic and political set of circumstances. Many arguments have emerged to explain the referendum result. In Great Britain, chiefly England, the Brexit result perhaps indicates a rejection of the tenets of modern liberal democracy (Lambert, 2016). For Goodhart (2017), the outcome represents a powerful societal value divergence occurring in western democracies, emerging after decades of social, educational and political change. He argues that the western citizenry now sees the world from an 'Anywhere' and 'Somewhere' perspective. Goodhart suggests 'Anywherers' tend to have a global outlook, be socially liberal, highly educated and increasingly mobile, elevating individualism before what is understood as traditional community. Therefore, they are less place-bound. Whereas, for 'Somewherers', Goodhart contends they are more likely to be parochial, socially conservative and

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<sup>3</sup> Brexit relates to the decision by the UK to leave the EU following the June 2016 referendum.

ascribe to a stronger sense of national identity. As a result, they tend to be rooted to a particular (local) geography – and, thus, more place-bound. While this fresh classification may not neatly translate to other social contexts, such as Northern Ireland and Ireland, it does offer insights into the evolving relationship between people and place. Those places where people feel forgotten and abandoned, often neglected in policy interventions or have not benefited from investment, are a reminder to politicians, policy-makers and spatial planners that social challenges and spatial injustices remain prevalent outside core urban centres in western countries. On the island of Ireland, the (mainly) rural areas along the Irish border, now, and in a post-Brexit landscape, require consideration on how to promote social, economic and environmental well-being. In particular, careful consideration needs to be given to the cross-border instruments that will offer productive spaces for maintaining socio-spatial collaboration and coordinating co-designed interventions.

### **Context and Concepts**

As noted above, the territorial outworking of regional policy emphasises the crucial role of governance structures and spatial planning practices for negotiating, directing and delivering desired outcomes that are place-based and address local people's needs. Much of the debate on regional policy has been influenced by European Union (EU) operations for coordinating sectoral programmes that address spatial disparities and work towards building territorial cohesion. While territorial cohesion has been present from the beginning of the project of European integration (Faludi, 2009), it was the Lisbon Treaty (2007) which placed greater emphasis on access to services and 'functional geographies' that would complement economic and social cohesion (European Commission, 2016; Nosek, 2017). In doing so, this elevation of territoriality in policy-making has drawn greater attention on 'spatial context and distribution' (Faludi and Peyrony, 2011) and 'place-based' approaches (Nosek, 2017) for nurturing a more just distribution of opportunities in places, across different spatial scales and across different member state territories. In effect, policies for enhancing social, economic and environmental well-being need to be better considered and coordinated at, and below, sub-regional spatial scales.

It is against this backdrop that the notion of 'functional territories' has gained momentum. In many regards, the idea of 'functionality' is an extension of *cohesion* and *joined-up thinking*, which tries to ensure different sectoral policies across different scalar levels form a coherent whole (Faludi and Peyrony, 2011). As such, functional territories may reflect the formal administrative structures of a nation, such as, the administrative tiers that a state use to govern their territory. However, globalisation has accelerated the interconnectivity between people and places, amongst markets and across nations. The slow 'international convergence' (Spence, 2011) that has been occurring over recent decades calls for a fresh, more nuanced, understanding for how people relate to, engage in, and understand, place and geography in a post-industrial, post-modern and post-political world. Arguably, localities and their interaction, which form the basis of 'functional geographies', have become important territories for: (1) coordinating spatial collaboration that achieves economic prosperity, (2) building more appropriate place-based resilience, and (3) better addressing spatial inequalities. Such territories, in this understanding, may be beyond the traditional confines of land-based administrative and juridical significance. In a more globalised world, 'functional geographies', that reflect social, economic and environmental linkages and relationships, has made "space and place more rather than less important" (Barca, *et al.*, 2012: 136). While the expression 'territories' is commonly applied to functional spaces, it is contested and can conjure up many connotations. Perhaps, like many authors use, 'geographies'

better reflects the complex social, economic and environmental relational nature of geographies. Therefore, geographies, or spatial frontiers, straddling jurisdictional borders present both opportunities and challenges for joint working that debates the significance of space and directs the management of places. Of growing concern is the need to consider the rationales and instruments for facilitating mutually beneficial spatial collaboration across intra-jurisdictional scales.

### **Rationales and Application**

The rationales for promoting the concept of 'functional geographies' may differ among stakeholders, across various spatial scales and between countries. While planners and policy makers have traditionally practised within clearly bounded national, regional and local geographies (Heley, 2013; Walsh, 2014), the spatial turn in contemporary planning has strengthened the strategic management role of spatial planning. Strategic planning can be considered the maturation of land use planning that seeks to better coordinate territorial management of land and development (Rafferty and Lloyd, 2014). Occurring alongside this has been the evolution of spatial planning, which while contested, is generally understood to go beyond merely managing land use changes to embrace sectoral and integrative planning, and promote connectivity across geographies (Rafferty and Lloyd, 2014). Arguably, the co-evolution of these concepts and practices can be considered the provenance of functional geographies, for appreciating and managing complex socio-economic and spatial relations.

The rationales for adopting functional territories, or better still, functional geographies approaches, such as those noted above (on page 2, by Walsh, *et al.*, 2016) will contain *vertical* and *horizontal* dimensions. Vertically, in the sense that rationales may emerge from different administrative scales, i.e. micro, meso and macro, chiefly within a nation state. Consideration is required on the administrative structures and communication channels that operate, vertically between governance tiers, to appreciate the functionality of places and services through micro, meso and macro operations. Horizontally, in the sense that rationales can relate to establishing functionality across sectoral policy operations to combat fragmentation and institutional insularity. Central to this dimension is collaborative working that spans professional and sectoral boundaries to co-design innovative policy solutions. In a cross-jurisdictional, cross-border context, a *lateral* dimension becomes significant. While vertical and horizontal components, which help frame functional geographies operations, can be challenging within a state's administrative governance model, the lateral extension to cross-jurisdictional design and application can present additional complexity. It may require additional political and macro-level commitment to initiate and sustain momentum. Geo-political, socio-spatial and cross-border departmental relationships may be conditional factors influencing policy-makers' and spatial planners' abilities to formulate functional geographies, operate within such models, particularly for those that are necessary in a cross-border context.

The application of functional geographies requires consideration of, and distinction between, *territorial* and *relational* spaces. Arguably, territorial spaces can be considered political geographies, which relate to notions of a 'nation' or the internal institutional mechanisms of managing a country's land territory. Whereas, arguably, relational spaces reflect the more complex relations and interconnects associated with relationships that stretch across different geographies (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2009: 169, cited in Allmendinger, *et al.*, 2015). This distinction is subtle, yet significant. While not ignoring the stronghold of territorial thinking in framing contemporary politics and policy making, the shift towards

relational spaces as a way of considering functionality offer more accurate reflections of socio-spatial relations and patterns. For example, previous work by OCED (2002: 3) captured the essence of relational spaces in how they articulated functional geographies:

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

While labour market is one relational aspect framing functional geographies, it is not the only sectoral consideration. Another emerging cross-border relational sector is health, particularly in the EU context, which has been occurring across the island of Ireland in recent years, too. Latest research demonstrates the opportunities and challenges of cross-border collaboration for improving the health outcomes for those living in border regions, although its feasibility is context-dependent (Glinos and Baeten, 2015). For such joint ventures to be successful, the cross-border collaboration should respond to local need, align partner interests, nurture institutional-thickness and apply innovation to go beyond the priorities, rules and incentives of domestic health systems (Glinos and Baeten, 2015).

These sectoral considerations illustrate the high frequency of both economic and social interactions across relational spaces that constitute functional geographies, which can occur both within and across administrative boundaries. Like territory, functional geographies are conceptualised and operationalised as socially constructed models, spaces and practices (Schejtman and Berdegué, 2003, cited in Berdegué, *et al.*, 2015). Thus, the concept of 'functional geographies' can be a useful framework, or construct, to make sense of the complex set of evolving relationships between rural areas, urban centres and the global economy. Earlier ICLRD research also argued that the "increasing connections and interactions between places, regardless of official borders, means that the traditional way of seeing cities and towns need to be augmented by a network approach, which assesses the functionality of individual urban centres" (Gleeson, *et al.*, 2010).

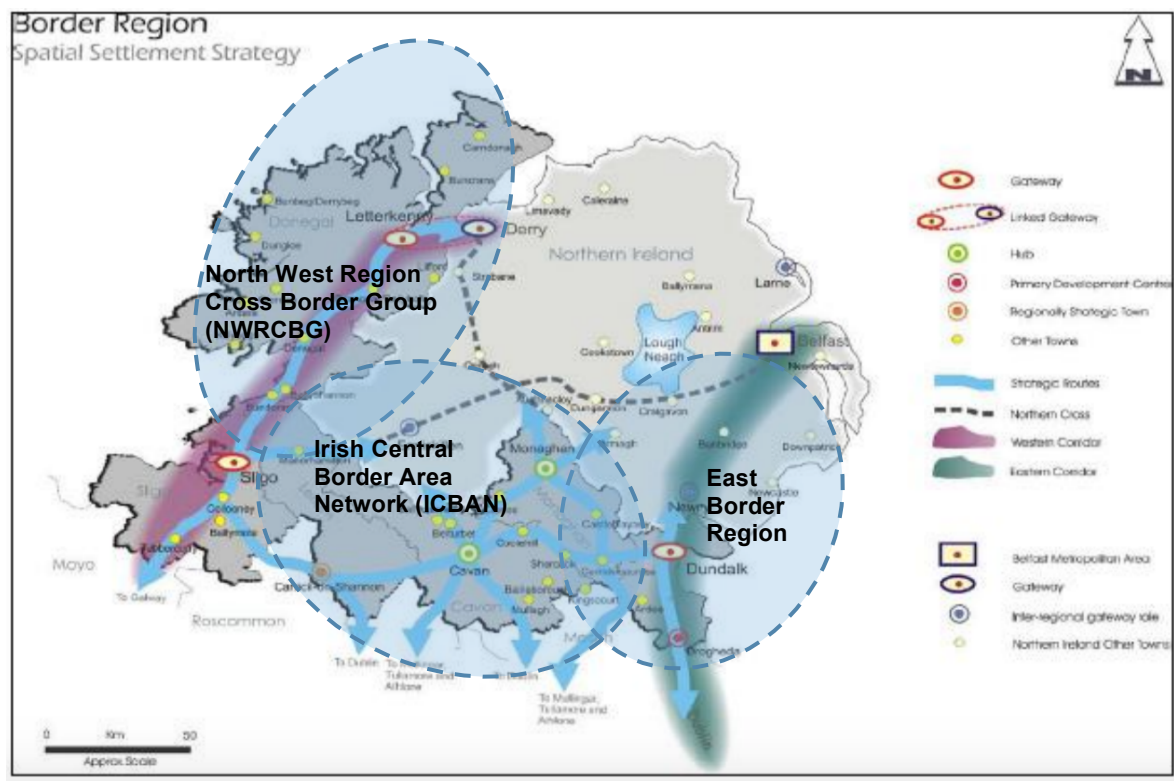
Across the 'global North', decentralisation has been a growing trend that has given birth to 'new regionalism'. The role of traditional institutions can be challenged by such geo-spatial reordering. However, this should not always be the case. Institutions remain important for negotiating dialogue and formulating policy. However, as Amin and Thrift (1994) have previously argued, promoting economic activity and achieving its embeddedness across regions requires the presence of 'institutional thickness'. This relates to the "trust-based networks of interacting organizations that shape collective endeavour in cities and regions that 'hold down the global'" economic forces (Amin and Thrift, 1994: 10, cited in Pike, *et al.*, 2017: 48). Extending this to the notion of functional geographies, and considering the governance instruments for shaping collective actions, it could be argued that functional geographies require adequate 'thicknesses' between institutions, and those operating across jurisdictions in a cross-border context.

Recent reforms in each jurisdiction across the island of Ireland has strengthened the leadership role of local government, which can play an important role for nurturing micro level cross-border collaboration. In Northern Ireland, significant place-shaping and service coordination functions were either transferred

(e.g. spatial planning) from central government or introduced through new legislative powers (e.g. community planning). In Ireland, governance reorganisation brought with it new local administrative structures for greater efficiency and effectiveness in local and community development programming, for augmenting the delivery of public services, and for enhancing enterprise support and economic growth (e.g. LCDCs and LECs, alongside SPCs). These transformations offer significant structural alignment opportunities for governance on a cross-border basis. In particular, with local authorities on either side of the border having similar powers and responsibilities, and convergence along governance structures, this provides a unique set of circumstances that can enable stronger collaboration and nurture necessary cross institutional ‘thickness’. Similar governance and policy instruments offer opportunities to take a comprehensive perspective, beyond purely administrative boundaries, to align policy, structures and joint working practices in what can be considered interdependent ‘functional geographies’.

In recent years, emerging evidence confirms how local authorities across the Irish border have been fostering joint working (Creamer and Driscoll, 2013), supported chiefly through collective cross-border networks (Figure 2), such as East Border Region Ltd. (EBR), Irish Central Border Area Network (ICBAN) and the North West Region Cross Border Group (NWRCBG). These networks offer opportunities for local governments to consider bi-lateral cooperation, for example, to deliver shared services. Furthermore, these cross-border networks provide supportive collaborative arenas to consider relational links that operate across multiple administrative boundaries.

**Figure 2: Cross-border Networks**



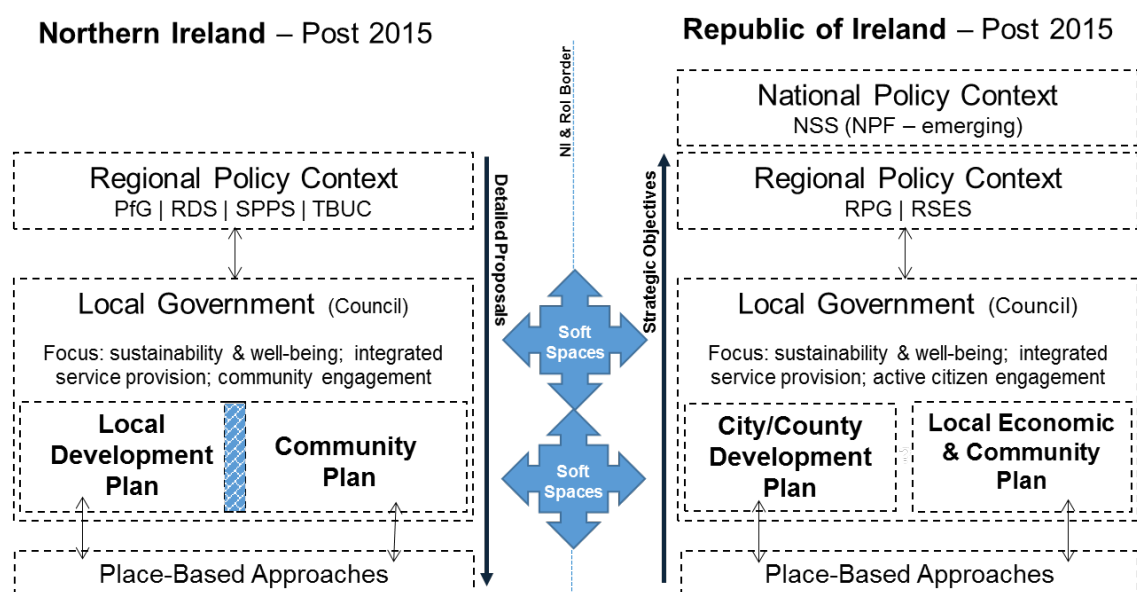
(Source: adapted from The Border Regional Authority, 2010).

In addition, these networks can be considered expressions of ‘soft spaces’ in which to negotiate and co-produce initiatives that are the foundation for nurturing successful ‘functional geographies’ that reflect place-based responses. Creamer and Driscoll (2013: 16) note that these cross-border networks demonstrate some essential components of what constitutes fundamental geographies:

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

Both jurisdictions on the island of Ireland have increasingly exhibited degrees of structural and policy convergence over many decades. Partly, this can be explained by Northern Ireland (UK) and Ireland both being EU member states. However, the East-West and North-South strands of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement have nurtured unprecedented positive relationships that has led to significant alignment occurring across the island. The convergence around governance structures is illustrated in Figure 3, which demonstrates similar regional and sub-regional alignment. In both jurisdictions, local government is tasked with considering better ways of coordinating services (through ‘community planning’ in Northern Ireland and ‘local economic and community planning’ in Ireland) and managing spatial change (through ‘spatial planning’ at local council levels in both jurisdictions).

**Figure 3: Governance Convergence across the Island of Ireland**



(Source: Rafferty, 2017).

Both local governance systems encourage policy and planning practitioners to consider 'place-based' approaches for enhancing social, economic and environmental well-being. These administrative systems use formal 'hard spaces' that are statutorily expressed in legislation. These are necessary for underpinning such administrative duties, but arguably, they establish a rigidity that presents a structural barrier for considering relational spaces, or socio-spatial relations, that create functional geographies, perhaps beyond traditional administrative boundaries.

With the maturation of spatial and strategic planning occurring across most European countries, there appears to be a growing appreciation of planning across 'fuzzy boundaries' (Walsh, *et al.*, 2016). Experimentation of spatial planning not only across European member states, but also within countries, across devolved nations, illustrates different ways for addressing the 'edges' of administrative boundaries. In effect, this reflects the complex, interrelated cross-boundary (and cross-border) relationships that form functional geographies. Many authors describe these types of activities as operating within 'soft spaces' (Walsh, *et al.*, 2016; Walsh, 2015; Allmendinger, *et al.*, 2015), which can occur outside or parallel to existing, more formal 'hard' bureaucratic spaces and procedures. Such 'soft spaces' offer potential in moving beyond the rigidities of existing administrative boundaries, working with 'fuzzy boundaries', and governing functional geographies.



## **SECTION 4: CONCLUSIONS AND EMERGING ISSUES**

The vulnerability associated with Brexit demands considerable thought and creativity in continuing to build on the legacy of social, economic and infrastructure integration and policy convergence that has emerged over recent decades, particularly to avoid any slow unravelling of the current architecture and operations associated with spatial collaboration across the island of Ireland.

Finding new ways of working in a post-Brexit era demands reflection on what has worked to date, in relation to cross-border collaboration, and what new, or reconceptualised, practices are necessary to control the vulnerabilities that Brexit could have on cross-border collaboration in the future.

The following presents conclusions drawn from existing practice to date and represent emerging issues that need to be carefully considered in relation to the Irish border in a post-Brexit era.

### **Scalar consideration for functional geographies**

At the core of functional geographies operating in cross-border areas is socio-spatial cohesion that combines the jurisdictional regulatory land use planning system and beyond-state strategic spatial planning thinking. To nurture functional geographies across the Irish border, consideration is required across various scales, at national, (sub-)regional, and local. The endogenous assets, which form the notion of local distinctiveness, are important for trying to better appreciate and work with the complex relationship between people and place.

### **Governing functional geographies**

Trying to construct governance models that understand and carefully manage linkages and flows between people, services and places is important for interconnected functional geographies. Key spatial dimensions for governing functional geographies are: (1) appreciating the 'core'/'centre' of these geographies; (2) the place-based dynamics operating in and forming such relational and functional space, and; (3) the 'fuzzy' catchment boundaries that frame such geographies. There is also a need to consider exogenous factors, which Pike, *et al.* (2017: 48) include as any "restructuring of international divisions of labour, national political economics and macro-economic shifts." Translating such factors to functional geographies along the Irish border, particularly in a post-Brexit era, demands a shift from 'competition' versus 'collaboration' thinking, towards a more 'coopetition' approach, which merges both collaboration and competition at the same time.

### **Lateral spatial collaboration**

Learning suggests that working with and in 'fuzzy boundaries' relating to mutual thematic policy areas, such as infrastructure, health and higher education, requires lateral collaboration across borders that respond to local need, align partner interests, nurture institutional-thickness and apply innovation. Therefore, greater emphasis ought to be placed on nurturing the value and building the resilience of 'soft spaces' for facilitating cross-border discussions, supporting collaboration, formulating joint initiatives and co-designing mutually beneficial delivery vehicles. 'Soft spaces' can potentially offer more

constructive arenas for bringing together various stakeholders to negotiate, conceive and manage co-designed solutions for place-based functional geographies. Arguably, such constructs could provide arenas to discuss spatial/service relationships and functional geographies that respond to the interdependent nature of cross-border cities, towns and rural areas along the Irish border, particularly in a post-Brexit context.

Each of these emerging issues focuses on ‘*how*’ collaboration can manage vulnerabilities that may occur post-Brexit, whilst also building on the substantial positive cross-border collaboration achieved to-date. With increasing convergence around policy and infrastructure projects – such as strategic spatial planning policy, transport and health – it is essential that the notion of functional geographies is given further consideration. This will be explored in a following *Position Paper* (Phase 2) which will include analysis of feedback from stakeholder interviews.

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