Identifying Pathways to Developing an Effective Regional Development Strategy on the island of Ireland

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Front cover image: Peace Bridge, County Derry

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Executive summary

The dichotomy of the economic and social trajectories between the two jurisdictions on the island of Ireland – Northern Ireland and Ireland – since partition in 1921 has been characterised by two distinct periods: the first 50 years were marked by a much stronger and more affluent North as a constituent part of the UK and an underdeveloped and relatively less economically developed independent South, reflecting the strong industrial base in Northern Ireland as the only part of the island of Ireland to have experienced the first wave of the industrial revolution of the 19th century.

However, the second 50 years of partition have seen a marked decline in the economic position of the North and a belated period of modernisation of the economy of the South combined with the entry of both to the European Economic Community in 1973. The period between 1969 and 1998 of violence and political unrest, known as the Troubles, in the North deterred inward investment and accelerated the decline of its traditional manufacturing base, requiring the region to be subsidised by the UK exchequer and a dramatic expansion in the size of its public sector in relation to its economy.

The South, on the other hand, experienced a belated period of economic modernisation from the 1960s onwards that was punctuated by periods of deep economic difficulties, occurring in the 1980s and again in the early 2010s. The period of rapid and unprecedented economic growth experienced in the South between 1993 and 2007, colloquially known as the "Celtic Tiger" transformed the economy and raised living standards for its population significantly, allowing it to surpass the North and indeed that of the UK as a whole at the turn of the 21st century.

This report examines cross-border initiatives in place concerning energy, economic development and infrastructure provision with a focus on the latter of the three. The discussion also seeks to discern the types of measures and enabling agencies required to foster greater connectivity between the two constituent parts of the island of Ireland with an understanding of the political issues and potential difficulties that may arise from such measures. The report also notes the existing Framework for Co-operation (2013) designed to facilitate cooperation between the spatial strategies of both jurisdictions and its limited impact to date.

An extensive review of pertinent literature in relation to the topic of regional development, cross-border initiatives and the role of transportation infrastructure in facilitating regional connectivity and economic growth is explored in this report. This was augmented by primary research involving a series of in-depth consultations with nine key stakeholders who work in the area of regional development and infrastructure provision.

The report concludes by acknowledging the realities of the difficulties in a post-Brexit environment of fostering cross-border institutions concerning facilitating and enhancing regional connectivity within the island of Ireland as a whole. There is also an emphasis on creating the necessary conditions, given the political issues that persist in Northern Ireland, to foster greater cooperation and coordination between various agencies responsible for infrastructure planning and economic development. The critical importance of creating sustainable poles of growth in key urban centres on the island to strengthen the economic position of the different regions is clearly identified.

The report also recommends a series of bottom-up measures for various disparate groups and statutory agencies operating on a regional basis, particularly in regions with poor connectivity such as in the North-West of the island, to combine their pool of expertise and work together in concert to maximise the economic development potential of their regions with greater horizontal linkages. The role of experts in the fields of regional planning, infrastructure and business in terms of their potential input into collaborative and coherent regional policy will be a critical aspect in relation to the potential establishment of an oversight body to administer the funding, provision and operation of cross-border regional policy initiatives.

Introduction

1. Introduction

The last nine years, beginning with the referendum vote in the UK to leave the EU, have been ones of political and (to a lesser degree) economic turmoil. This has affected British-Irish relations as well as the politics of Northern Ireland in particular, where a majority voted to remain in the EU. This has produced debates about whether Northern Ireland should remain within the EU Single Market and where border checks should happen, and has resulted in a renewed discussion on the Irish border and constitutional arrangements for the North. This is the political context for the research programme currently underway at the School of Law and Government at Dublin City University and the Ulster University Economic Policy Centre which considers at least three separate but inter-related economic questions:

1) How would FDI decisions change in a new island economy?
2) What potential exists for tourism development in a new island?
3) How might the economic geography of the island look in a united Ireland?

This report is concerned with the third of those questions. Whilst two separate jurisdictions exist on the island of Ireland, Dublin's position as the 'primate city' within the southern jurisdiction but also on the island of Ireland, 'supereminent, not merely in size, but in national influence' (Jefferson, 1939) is beyond dispute. This report explores the range of spatial planning, industrial, enterprise and infrastructure policies, measures and governance structures that would be necessary to deliver stronger regional economic development outside of Dublin. It compares the existing government strategies in those policy areas, North and South, identifying where they overlap or differ in breadth and scale of ambition, and assesses the current extent of cross-border cooperation in those areas.

Underlining how the two jurisdictions on the island have not always thought or worked jointly about regional development, the most recent study of the issue of a dominant city focused solely on the South. It found that Ireland's second city, Cork, contains a mere 18% of the population of Dublin (Barrett, 2018). This is significantly below an international mean urban primacy of 31.3%, measured across 131 countries between 2000-2014 (Ioannau & Wojcik, 2021).

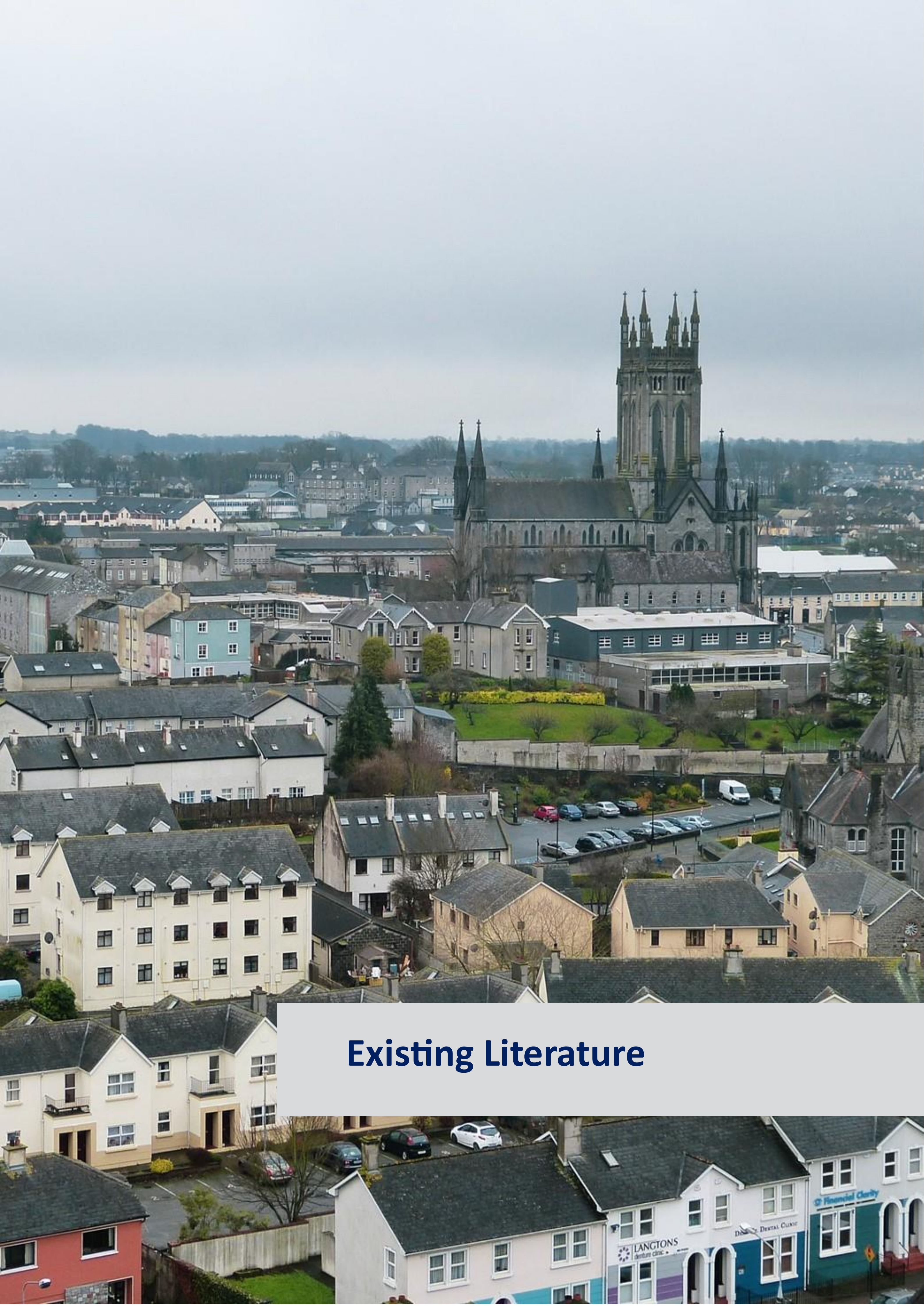
On the same metric, as shown in the table below, the island of Ireland's second city, Belfast, lags significantly behind Dublin (23% of its population). However, Belfast remains critical to the economic geography, even if this reality marks a reversal of the situation that pertained at the turn of the 20th century. Then, Belfast was larger in population and size than Dublin, reflecting its position at that time as the pre-eminent industrial centre on the island of Ireland. However, a prolonged decline of the traditional manufacturing sector in Northern Ireland, the impact of the Troubles between 1969 and 1998 on the city, and the limitations placed since the 1960s on its physical expansion (via the Matthew Stopline) have all played contributory roles in limiting the development of Belfast during much of the 20th century. Outside of Belfast's particular problems, the description of 'deconcentrated and decentralised' development of an urban hierarchy since the 1960s could be applied to the island as a whole, resulting in a limited ability to absorb much of the pace of economic development in Dublin (McCafferty, 2019).

Table 1: Population in cities on the island of Ireland

City name	Population size	Proportion of Dublin's population
Dublin	1,263,219	
Belfast	293,298	23.2%
Cork	222,536	17.6%
Limerick	102.287	8.1%
Galway	85,910	6.8%
Derry	85,217	6.7%
Craigavon	72,301	5.7%
Waterford	60,079	4.8%

Source: RoI Census (2022); NI Census (2021)
Note: NI cities population at Settlement 2015 geography from NISRA; RoI cities denote 'city and suburbs' for Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Galway and Waterford.

Despite these trends and the challenges posed across two jurisdictions, this report begins from a premise that a wider cast of sub-regional cities, North and South, will be required in order to develop capacity outside of the Dublin region, if any successful attempt is to be made to rectify a problem as complex as that as regional imbalance on the island of Ireland. In addition to a review of existing policy initiatives, the report makes a qualitative contribution to the existing literature by bringing to bear the expertise of public servants, local government officials and senior executives from state agencies, campaign organisations, NGOs and the private sector, towards crafting a set of recommendations for the kind of policy-making processes needed in the area of cross-border regional policy initiatives to achieve a more balanced regional development paradigm on the island of Ireland.



Existing Literature

2. Existing literature

Between the 1950s and 1970s, Ireland's spatial planning record has been described as 'largely reactive and opportunistic in nature rather than strategically or ideologically driven' (MacFeely, 2016). The Buchanan Report (1969) marked the first attempt at a regional development strategy to counteract the primacy of Dublin. It proposed a series of eight designated "growth poles" including the cities of Cork, Limerick and Galway that would be targeted for expanded industrial development to reduce the regional disparities in economic development between Dublin and the remainder of the country (Breathnach, 2019). The rejection of the Buchanan Report by the policymakers of the time signalled an unwillingness in political circles to properly address the regional question and resulted in a continued dispersal strategy of industry that would prove itself to be unsustainable by the 1980s.

In contrast, a 'social partnership' approach and EU models were integral to Irish spatial planning during the latter part of its 'Celtic Tiger' era (c.1995-2007), which prioritised transport infrastructure development such as inter-urban motorways/rails, airport and port capacity (Roche, 2007; Daly, 2016). At least one impact of that pace and scale of development was described as the 'serious social and environmental problems' of reduced walkability and increased greenhouse gas emissions (Rau & Vega, 2012).

Both state agencies and independent organisations in Ireland have grappled with devising the appropriate policy responses to the impact of climate change, albeit a critique of some of them was that they 'have not meaningfully advocated community development models for wind energy' (Walsh, 2018). Importantly, however, both 2017 and 2018 surveys of Irish citizens (Bertsch, Hyland & Mahony, 2017; Hyland & Bertsch, 2018) found that people were positively disposed towards renewable generation technologies such as wind farms, although continued resistance from local communities to the construction of local energy infrastructure remains a key challenge of policy development in that area (Bell et. al., 2005). There appears to be clear potential in this area given that scholars have claimed that 'Ireland could theoretically supply all of its energy needs nineteen times over from wind power' (González, Daly & Gleeson, 2016).

Eoin O'Leary has written of the imperative to 'operationalise the concept of the urban hierarchy', and criticised the weak Irish record in identifying city regions, towns and rural locations as drivers of competitiveness, in which he contends that Sligo, Letterkenny and Waterford, the targets of previous Irish spatial planning strategies, had been included 'for political reasons' he contends 'none of those realistically would ever make the cut as second-tier cities' (O'Leary, 2018). From a different, geographer's, perspective comes a similar conclusion (McCafferty, 2019). Concurrent to Ireland's rapid economic growth during the 1990s was a widening inequality between rich and poor and a failure to identify housing as a key issue in wider economic development planning (Memery, 2001); a problem compounded by an inefficient planning system (ESRI, 1999). Perhaps the most obvious legacy of the Great Recession of 2007/8 has been a lack of provision of affordable housing and a continued net outward migration in many areas outside of the Dublin region (Williams & Hughes, 2019; Williams & Nedović-Budić, 2023).

Spatial planning in Northern Ireland was badly hampered by the period of the Troubles (1969-1998) during which violence and political unrest retarded the economy of the region, accelerated the decline of traditional linen and shipbuilding industries and saw the abrupt cessation of its nascent and ambitious motorway construction programme. In addition, the curtailment of the outward expansion of Belfast and the designation of a series of towns in the extended hinterland of the city including Lisburn, Bangor, Antrim and the planned new city of Craigavon to absorb Belfast's urban population overspill created a pattern of urban development in the North in marked contrast to that of the South. The controversial designation of Coleraine in the early 1960s as the location of the new University of Ulster campus by the Stormont government as opposed to the second-largest city of Derry was criticised as an example at the time of a highly sectarian approach to regional development, favouring the economically stronger 'East of the River Bann' region which contained a strong Protestant majority (O'Brien, 1999).

Undoing the structural segregation of that society, such as in work, schooling and housing which had contributed to the conflict and indeed had worsened during that period, was envisaged by some as part of a package of conflict transformation measures to flow from the Good Friday Agreement (Knox, 2010). Northern Ireland has double the rural population of the UK average and thus has 'one of the densest road networks in Europe'. Fundamentally altering the way people travel, work and live, the Covid-19 pandemic was considered 'a once in a lifetime opportunity for Northern Ireland to reset investment decisions in maintaining the transport network and providing accessible affordable public transport' (Lydon et. al., 2021). In the case of the EU, transport networks of roads, railways, airports and ports have been considered as means of achieving territorial cohesion, reducing economic disparities and promoting economic development and convergence (Crescenzi & Rodríguez-Pose, 2012; Lukosevicius, 2020).

Data & methods

3. Data and methods

As has been alluded to in the introduction, this report, and the wider research project, concern the island of Ireland as a single geographical entity. Consequently, the two jurisdictions the island contains have been referred to by their formal or legal names in the first instance – Ireland and Northern Ireland. At times throughout, those jurisdictions will interchangeably be referred to as 'North' for Northern Ireland or 'South' for Ireland whenever it is appropriate to do so. Given the sensitivities associated with language on matters pertaining to the border and national identity and so forth, the use of North-South should not be taken as reflecting or endorsing any political outlook. Rather, it is consistent with the neutral and agreed nomenclature of the Good Friday Agreement and, moreover, it avoids clunky or otherwise repetitive references to formal language in this report whenever the context should be clear to the reader.

A 'limited but evolving' literature concerning the island of Ireland, North and South, has found Ireland's citizens being, on average, considerably better off based on metrics such as GDP per capita and household disposable income than their counterparts in the North (McGuinnes & Bergin, 2020). This dichotomy marks a reversal of the situation pertinent at Ireland's entry to the European Union in 1973, when GDP per capita in Northern Ireland significantly exceeded that of the South although it remained lower than the UK average (Fitzgerald & Morgenroth, 2019).

Another key difference between the economic landscape of Ireland North and South is the abnormally high reliance on public sector and state agency employment in Northern Ireland, accounting for approximately 27 per cent of all employment compared to 15 per cent of the share of employment in the South (NISRA, 2024; CSO, 2024). This dichotomy can be explained by the rapid expansion of public sector employment in the North during the period of the Troubles in order to address growing unemployment resulting from the decline of its traditional manufacturing base and the lack of significant inward foreign direct investment during the prolonged conflict. Additionally, the "Celtic Tiger" era of rapid employment growth in the South during the 1993 to 2007 period which saw dramatic levels of inward investment in the IT, financial services and pharmaceuticals sectors and a consequent erosion in the share of employment accounted for by the public sector (Fitzgerald & Morgenroth, 2019).

The same scholars have elsewhere presented numerous comparators between Northern Ireland and Ireland. Metrics included those of living standards such as household disposable income in 2021 (€4,266 or 20% greater in the South) (CSO, 2022; NISRA, 2022) measures of opportunity such as education enrolment ages in 2018 - Northern Ireland is lower than Ireland in every age group from ages 3 to 64 and particularly in relation to third-level attainment, and measures of well-being such as voter turnout in 2014 (11.6% higher in the south) (Bergin & McGuinness, 2021). Other scholars have found similar disparities in living standards between North and South across most if not all available metrics including life expectancy, such as those pertaining to the year 2016 (Fitzgerald & Morgenroth, 2019; Bergin & McGuinness, 2021).

Embedded within some of the existing comparative economic studies of Ireland, north and south, are some methodological issues which, if unacknowledged, may obscure direct or even fair comparisons being achieved. First, there is the matter of the full range of economic policy levers not having been devolved to the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive, with some of those retained by the United Kingdom government at Westminster coupled with the direct financial transfers made to Northern Ireland since the 1960s by the UK government in order to subsidise the shortfall between tax revenue in the North and public spending (Birnie & Brownlow, 2017).

Second, there are theoretical debates which speculate on the economic cost of a border on the island of Ireland being in place for over a century. Impossible to quantify perhaps, but if the best-case scenario is that political borders need not influence the level or the structure of economic activity, the lived reality is that 'they usually do' (Ó Grada & Walsh, 2006). Third, are variously the economic impacts of the Troubles on Northern Ireland (Birnie & Hitchens, 1999), the ongoing impact of Brexit on the two Irish economies (Doyle, 2021), and cross-border collaboration on many aspects of daily life and activity (Butler, 2019). Fourth, is that separate statistical agencies collect data pertaining to North and South respectively, and those may not always be collected and presented in a manner easily comparable.

Fundamentally, an obvious but unavoidable issue rests on the existence of two separate jurisdictions sharing the same small island which necessitates precise and consistent geographical definition towards making such comparisons. If geographical extent, uneven demographic and economic development or differing available policy levers complicate

North/South comparisons in their simplest form, this research project will, on occasion, utilise the Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics (NUTS) classification of regions. Those had been applicable to both parts of Ireland for the 'development and harmonisation of European regional statistics' when both the UK and Ireland were partners within the European Union (European Commission, 2023). Fortunately, since leaving the EI the UK's Office for National Statistics' replacement 'international territorial levels (ILT) 'have been established as a mirror to the previous Eurostat NUTS system used by the UK' (Office for National Statistics, 2021). Thus, what the EU considers a NUTS 2 level geography, or 'basic regions for the application of regional policies', of which there are three in the South, remain directly comparable to Northern Ireland's statistical designation as an ILT 2 region. Thus, while the direct North/South comparison will be useful to make in many instances, at times it is better to consider Northern Ireland as a region within the island of Ireland equivalent to and comparable with any of the other three statistical [NUTS 2] regions in the South.

Map 1: Island of Ireland NUTS 2/ILT 2 regions. Source: EMRA Regional Spatial and Economy Strategy

The following statistics, for illustrative purposes only at this juncture, demonstrate the viability of using the NUTS 2 and ILT 2 classifications, when applicable, to regional analyses concerning the island of Ireland. More revealing perhaps is to consider Northern Ireland's demography (2021) alongside the most recently available for the NUTS 2 regions of Ireland (2022).

Table 2:

Region	Population (2021/2022)	Population Density (2022)	Motorway length (2020)
Northern Ireland	1,903,100	135.1 persons per km²	115km
Northern & Western	884,580	35.6 persons per km²	135km
Eastern & Midland	2,467,483	173.4 persons per km²	491km
Southern	1,654,261	56.6 persons per km²	369km

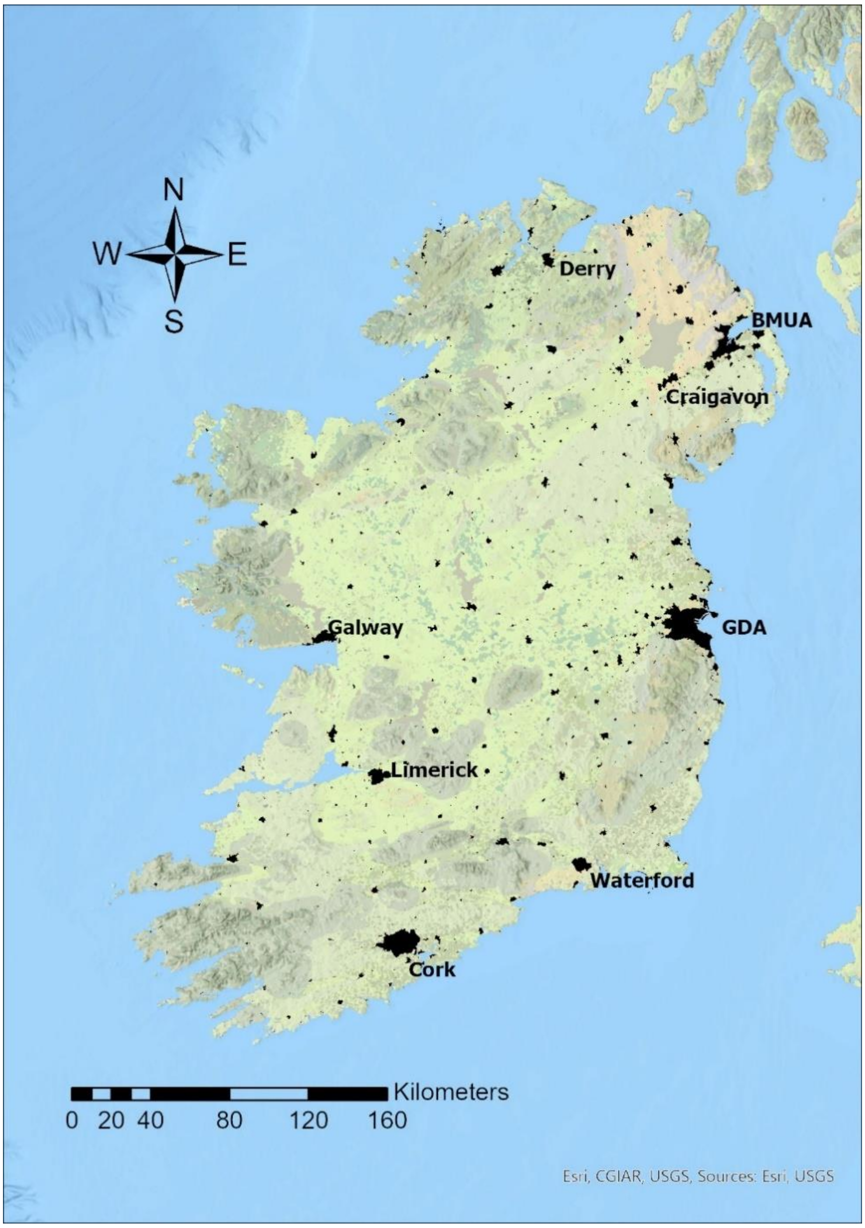
Source: CSO (2022); NISRA (2021); Dept. Infrastructure NI.

In a further refinement of the proposed viability of sub-regional analyses concerning the island of Ireland, it is perhaps worth noting the demographic trends in relation to the island's two largest urban centres, taken as the Greater Dublin Area (GDA)[1] and the Belfast Metropolitan Urban Area (BMUA)[2] and larger areas than the urban settlements covered in Table 1 (on p. 8). The GDA contained a population of 2.08 million in 2022, representing a 40.4% share of the population of the South. The GDA grew by 36% on the 2002 census figure, strongly exceeding the 31.4% increase in Ireland's total population during that time. The BMUA has a population of 704,400 in 2021, which represents a 33.4% share of the total population of Northern Ireland, smaller than the GDA dominance. Utilising the most recent figures, the BMUA contains a population 33.8% the size of that of the GDA, suggesting that an all-island view offers a better fit for international averages of urban primacy.

[1] The GDA is defined as including the area encompassing the Dublin and Mid-East Regions, respectively, comprising the counties of Dublin, Kildare, Meath and Wicklow (EMRA. 2010),

[2] The BMUA includes the Carrickfergus, Greenisland, Newtownabbey, Holywood, Bangor, Carryduff, Castlereagh and Lisburn Urban Areas (McEldowney et al, 2005).

The geographic spread of the largest urban settlements on the island of Ireland is mapped below. It highlights the importance of the Dublin/Belfast Corridor which was identified by several scholars working in the arena of regional geography and urban economics in the 1990s.



Map 2: Island of Ireland, urban settlements.

Source: CSO; OSNI; Census of Northern Ireland (2021) Census of Ireland (2022).

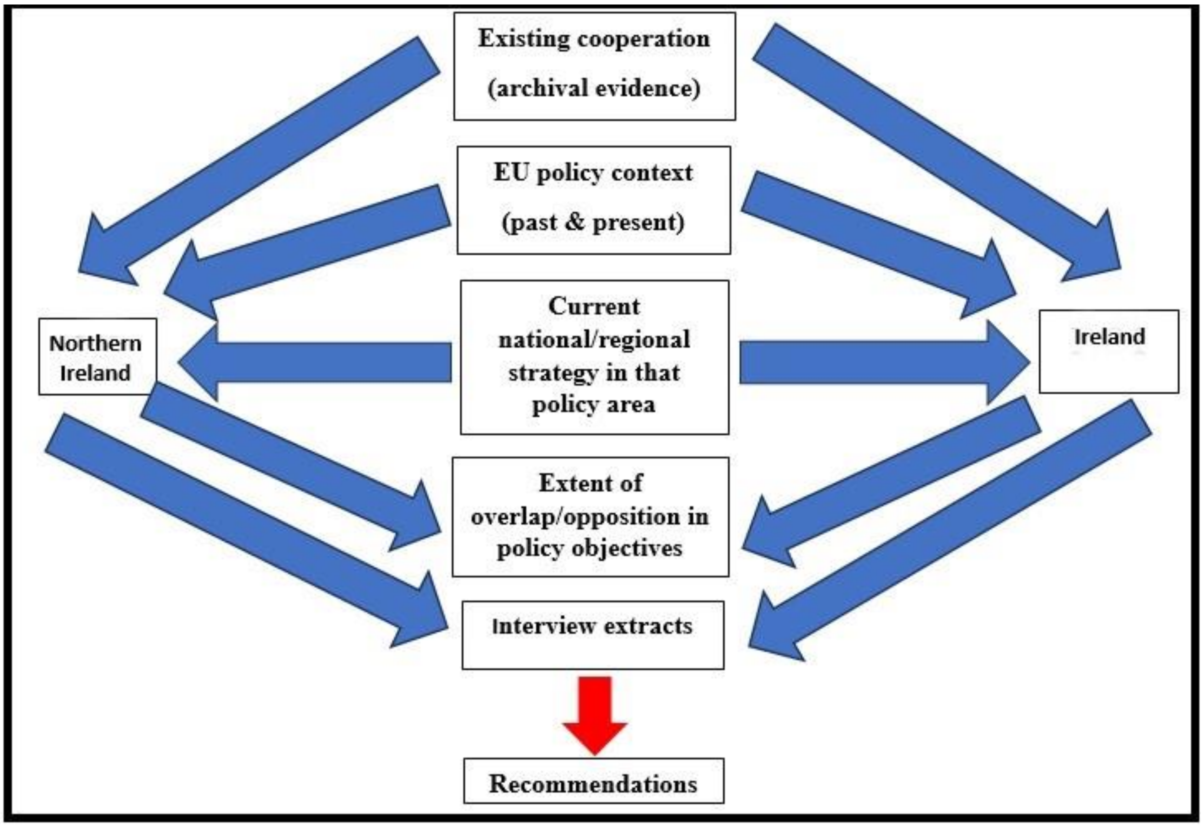
The existence of economic corridors, anchored by strong poles of growth in the form of large cities, had been identified as far back as the early 1960s in respect of the US Megalopolis/NE corridor connecting Boston to Washington D.C. and anchored by New York. In global terms, key economic corridors also exist between the cities of Tokyo and Osaka in Japan, Shanghai and Beijing in China, Brussels-Antwerp in Belgium and Copenhagen in Denmark and Malmo in Sweden. These corridors are characterised by enhanced connectivity between the poles on each end of the corridor with direct benefits accruing to settlements and regions located along the corridor (Bezpalov et al., 2022).

The recognition of an economic corridor linking Dublin and Belfast was facilitated by the positive political developments at the time including the 1998 Good Friday Agreement and a desire by the chambers of commerce of Dublin and Belfast to work more closely together in using the corridor as a means to promote their cities for inward investment. The publication of the report *The Dublin-Belfast Economic Corridor: Current Profile, Potential for Recovery & Opportunities for Co-operation* in 2021 marked a significant step forward in recognising the importance of this corridor and its potential to serve the island both North and South with enhanced growth prospects (Blair et al., 2021).

Containing a population in excess of 2.5 million, the Dublin-Belfast economic corridor is the strongest region of economic activity on the island of Ireland and connects its two largest cities. The settlements located along the corridor, namely Swords, Balbriggan, Drogheda, Dundalk, Newry, Banbridge and Lisburn have all been beneficiaries in respect of their local economies. The need for stronger and more meaningful cooperation between various agencies and local authorities across the border has been identified in the report as critical in advancing its potential for further development (Blair et al., 2021).

Currently, Dublin and Belfast are linked by good road connectivity, although not a continuous motorway standard as the dualled sections of the A1 in the North between Newry and Sprucefield, dating from the 1970s and 1980s, are below par in terms of safety and capacity. The rail line between the two cities carries regular Enterprise train services but only a small section of this line is currently electrified. These are two prominent examples where connectivity between Dublin and Belfast needs to be improved in order to maximise the economic potential of the corridor. It is also more likely, given the stronger economic position of Dublin and its region, that Belfast and the towns along the corridor in the North will benefit disproportionately from greater co-operation and connectivity.

This report will discuss three specific key areas within the broader economic development strategies as they currently exist on the island of Ireland. Those specific areas are spatial planning, transport infrastructure and energy infrastructure and they are chosen due to the historical and indeed contemporary importance of each in the development of Irish regional policy that has, to date, spawned a body of literature that has critically assessed those policy developments. In turn, the current policy landscape on the island of Ireland is outlined for each area in keeping with the available source material in the structure outlined below, following which a number of substantive recommendations on policy competences and formulative processes that we might hope to see in the future are presented in the conclusion to this report.



Source: Authors' diagram

The authors have conducted a series of nine semi-structured interviews to inform the analysis. The contributions of interview participants are anonymised. Each contribution cited as having been made by an interviewee is denoted by a code in the discussion that follows, and those codes are listed in Annex 1 alongside a non-identifying broad descriptor such as the level at which the individual has engaged in the formulation of regional policy on the island of Ireland or the sector of the economy the individual's firm operates in the nationality of that firm. Such expertise has occasionally been cited as having been absent from Irish regional policy of the past that proved ineffective (MacFeely, 2016; O'Leary, 2018). As a result, the qualitative aspect of the methodology employed in this report represents a significant contribution to the existing, and largely quantitative, regional policy literature and current debates on such issues concerning the island of Ireland.

Discussion

4. Discussion

Spatial planning

The potential of cross-border spatial planning initiatives in Ireland appeared, in theory, enhanced by the spirit of cooperation contained within the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. Furthermore, that the British and Irish co-guarantors of that settlement were partners within an EU that had been shaping trends in strategic spatial planning since the early 1990s in the form of the European Spatial Planning Development Perspective (ESDP, 1999), appeared equally promising. One might consider its model of strategic spatial planning that encouraged the interdependence of actions and positive attitudes towards mutual collaboration between sectors (Faludi, 2002) as a good fit for the interdependent strands of the Good Friday Agreement. The aforementioned Dublin-Belfast economic corridor and its promotion is a good example in this regard.

However, political disagreements regarding the role of new all-island institutions, those that almost scuppered the Good Friday Agreement during the final hours of intense negotiations (Mitchell, 1999), and upon which 'Nationalists seek to strengthen cooperation and Unionists caution against any increase in the number and functionality of cross-border bodies' (Blair, Adair et al, 2007), have undoubtedly been a barrier to cross-border cooperation on spatial planning on the island of Ireland. Indeed, the work of the institutions that were set up under the 1998 Agreement, such as the Loughs Agency, has been described as 'perfunctory', 'ill-equipped', lacking transparency and 'mostly choreographed' (Ansong, Heather & McElduff, 2022).

Archival records held at the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI) can serve to place the desired co-operation agreed in 1998 into both a contemporaneous and broader historical context. Records of European Economic Community (EEC) Cross-Border studies conducted in the 1970s, reveal some areas of cooperation that existed even in the context of the Troubles at that time, including in Agriculture, Tourism, Electricity, Transport and Health and Social Services (EEC cross-border studies, 19 December 1974).

The EU's INTERREG programme underpinned initiatives that existed in 1998 prior to the 1998 Agreement's implementation bodies becoming operational, such as a North/South working group overseeing the application to an Urban Development Programme as well as a rural childcare project funded by the Department of Agriculture in the North and the Department of Enterprise and Employment in the South (Cross-border economic co-operation, 1998).

We also learn from correspondence between British government officials in the Anglo-Irish Secretariat in 1998 that, alongside the agreed joint implementation bodies in the 1998 Agreement, a number of policy areas were among those prioritised by the Government of Ireland for 'enhanced co-operation through existing structures'; these included Agriculture, Transport and Health (Policing, Planning and Constitutional Unit, 1998).

Development plans aimed at increasing economic competitiveness and improving the delivery of essential public services were devised by governments in both parts of Ireland in the first decade of the twenty-first century. In the South, a National Spatial Strategy (NSS) for Ireland covered the period 2002-2020 which was the belated successor to the abortive 1969 Buchanan strategy. Among its acknowledgements was, interestingly, that the GDA 'will remain pivotal to the overall economic well-being of Ireland' …. [However] … 'Ireland also needs to build up other places and areas to be similarly strong on a national and international scale — generating benefits closer to where people live' (NSS, 2002).

> since establishment what the [regional] assemblies have done is married the spatial planning function with the structural fund function and started giving much more relevance to the structural funds in how they can be the conduit to deliver on spatial policy. I would argue that they have been [effective] and probably somewhat to the surprise of some of the central structures and I think the evidence of that now is the increasing functions being allocated to the regions around energy targets for the local authorities, marine planning places are also being looked at – [INT1]

In Northern Ireland, the Regional Development Strategy (RDS) published in 2012, included a spatial framework that was stated to accord with wider EU policy and it encouraged the 'clustering of places, includes policies to reflect local needs and emphasises the importance of understanding the function of urban and rural settlements' (RDS, 2012). Its effectiveness thus far is not universally agreed, however:

> Limited I suppose … we don't look to the RDS to define our local economic development activity. It's a material concern in the planning context of the council but I can't say it's something we dust down and consult every week. Everything we do is local, by definition, we exist at the street level. Sometimes we have arguments about what EV charging point is going to go on what layby. So for economic development programmes that we run, the funding

> initiatives that we have, the grants for business, the trade stuff that we do, it's all within our boundaries and it all looks inward – [INT2]

The Framework for Co-operation: Spatial Strategies of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland (2013) developed between the Department for Rural Development (Belfast) and the Department of Environment, Community and Local Government (Dublin) is a "bilateral spatial planning framework for joint working across the two jurisdictions" (Peel & Lloyd 2015) and its development reflected efforts across the European Union (EU) to secure transnational regional planning and to avoid the downsides of parallel spatial planning processes. The joint statement advocates "co-operation" and explicitly references the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) and the EU Territorial Agenda and aims to develop a shared understanding of the issues, opportunities and challenges that are frequently shared by both jurisdictions and "thereby to assist economic recovery through improved spatial planning and more effective prioritisation of investment and development" (DRD&DEHLG, 2013: 5). While it might be considered a casualty of Brexit, the Framework for Co-operation remains a live if underutilised instrument. For example, the national development plan Ireland 2040 specifically references the Framework for Co-operation (2018: 108). In addition, the Framework proposed that regular reports on spatial planning work streams were to be prepared for the British Irish Council meetings, and while the Forward Work Plan agreed by the Council in February 2021 included consideration of "best practice in National/Regional Planning Frameworks" these were not discussed at the Guernsey Summit in July 2022 or the symposium hosted by the Welsh Government in September 2023. However, the Framework for Co-operation retains some currency and spatial planners continue to use it as a mechanism to continue discussion between both jurisdictions.

Transport infrastructure

Given the Brexit developments of recent years, the trajectory of EU policy trends in relation to transport infrastructure is one of many that, whilst *directly* relevant to the entire island of Ireland prior to the end of 2020, now only apply to the South. The EU has been considered a key example in which investment in transport infrastructure was envisaged 'as a means to bring about territorial cohesion, reduce economic disparities, and promote economic development'. That investment amounted to over 28% of the European Regional

Development Fund (ERDF) and Cohesion Fund totals in the 2007-13 programming period, suggesting transport infrastructure has been 'one of the key – if not the key – mechanisms in order to achieve economic development and convergence' (Crescenzi & Rodríguez-Pose, 2012).

Since Brexit, Northern Ireland is no longer in receipt of EU structural funds such as the ERDF. In 2012, a Regional Transportation Strategy (RTS) for the North stated that 'whilst the United Kingdom as a whole does not compare favourably with other European Union countries, Northern Ireland, as a region, compares even less favourably'. In addition, it conceded that owing to the North being 'much less urbanised than many other European regions' … low population densities existing beyond the BMUA 'limit the efficiency of conventional public transport operations' (RTS, 2002).

The funding of transport infrastructure investment under the RTS between 2002-2015 amounted to, in 2005 prices, £1.78b on road networks, £450m on bus services, £78m on walking and cycling routes, and a mere £6m on the rail network (Sub-regional transport plan, 2015). By comparison, under the direction of Ireland's National Development Plan (NDP) 2007-2013, a total of almost €9.5b was spent on capital investment in roads and a further €3.7b in public transport (Review of NDP, 2015).

Whilst the lack of investment in Northern Ireland's rail infrastructure was notable, a Regional Strategic Transport Network (RSTN) Plan published in 2015 did at least 'consider strategic inter-urban and cross-border transportation links and the roles of gateway cities and towns' such as Derry, envisaged as a regional city and transport hub for the north-west of the island of Ireland (RSTN, 2015). Subsequently, an All-Island Strategic Rail Review was announced by the Minister for Infrastructure in the North and the Minister for Transport in the South in 2021 and it engaged both jurisdictions' stated intention to reach net-zero carbon emissions by 2050. The report of the review noted how the rail network was viewed as a key agent in supporting balanced regional development, supporting an ageing population, enabling housing development and mitigating congestion in cities such as Dublin. During the public consultation process, it is notable that the greatest number of responses emerged from both a North-West region that is not connected to the current rail network, and also from the capital city. The review recommended both a new railway between Derry and Letterkenny, the two largest and cross-border urban areas in the northwest that are currently poorly served by transport infrastructure, as well as recommending 'a cross-Dublin solution' to the congested existing network between Connolly and Hueston stations (All-Island Strategic Rail Review, 2023).

Whilst the strategic rail review recommended a solution to the lack of rail transport between the major cross-border urban areas *within* the north-west, it is possible that such an intra-regional proposal did not solve a wider inter-regional issue that is that region's lack of connectivity to major centres throughout the island:

> Our proximity to Dublin is a disadvantage and that disadvantage could be narrowed by motorway. If you think about Dublin to Waterford, Cork, Limerick, Galway, for all you're talking approximately two hours … to Letterkenny if you know the road it's three, three and a half hours but given the quality of the road it will typically take an investor four plus hours if they are making the drive by themselves – [INT6]

Despite being the only realistic funder of the project, the government's Programme for Government 2025 does not feature any commensurable actions based on the review. In its Project Ireland 2040 strategy, the Government of Ireland has linked transport infrastructure investments to the broader national policy objective of a low-carbon economy. Specifically, the aims include 'an environmentally sustainable public transport system… [manifest in] … a decisive shift away from polluting and carbon-intensive propulsion systems'. One of the funding streams for initiatives such as the Metro Link in Dublin and an overhaul of current bus transport in Ireland's cities, and underlining the linkage with environmental aims, is a €500m Climate Action Fund to leverage funding from both the public and private sectors 'with a strong focus on interventions in the transport sector' (Project Ireland 2040).

Such lofty ambitions can, and perhaps must, rectify a status quo which was assessed by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which reported that 'the Irish transport system fosters growing car use and emissions by design, and is thus unfit to enable the country to meet its greenhouse gas reduction goals while improving well-being (0ECD, 2022).

It may be true that the good faith strategic aims, such as in Project Ireland 2040, whereby transport infrastructure in the abstract is considered a key agent to promoting balanced economic growth, are redundant unless that transport infrastructure development addresses existing imbalances or deficits in that area:

> I think the infrastructure deficit that is there in certain parts of the country will always pose a threat to the economic development … the rural Ireland piece, in terms of what's traditionally seen as economic development, can be focused… in that space with all the technology changes we probably need to change the way we think about that anyway as to how people work, where they work and what they're delivering. There isn't a simple answer to that there needs to be a lot of talk and examination – [INT1]

For some, the economic necessity of linking transport infrastructure in the Dublin region to urban centres such as Galway, Sligo or Letterkenny would not only address infrastructure deficits felt there but also serve to ease congestion in the GDA:

> I think infrastructure is the big challenge. We should have a high-speed rail from Cork to Dublin or to the west. Having the infrastructure there for people to travel into the west and south of Ireland is important. I know they have Shannon and Cork airports but flights aren't as regular as at Dublin airport. If you are going to have to fly into Dublin then how do you get more infrastructure to bring people to other parts of Ireland in a much more efficient way – [INT4]

North of the border, the Department for Infrastructure's draft strategic investment plan, was published for consultation in January 2022 and considers the development of a long-term strategy dating until 2050. It too envisages upgraded and expanded public transport networks as a mechanism for 'responding to the climate emergency'. Specific measures intended as part of upgrading Northern Ireland's transport infrastructure include 'the mass electrification of transport systems' and, to reflect the necessity of 40% of the vehicle fleet being electric by 2035 for current emissions targets to remain on track, 'this will require significant investment across urban and rural areas in rapid charging stations, electricity generation, storage, distribution and battery recycling' (Infrastructure 2050).

The Infrastructure 2050 strategy identified Northern Ireland's public transport provider, Translink, as an example of how the public sector could set a positive example towards meeting emissions targets. Translink's own strategy to achieving a 'cleaner greener transformation in public transport' recognised that 'transport has a huge role to play in the economy reaching Net Zero'. Envisaged milestones include a 50% reduction in carbon emissions by 2030, for all buses, trains and buildings to be Net Zero by 2040, and to be 'climate positive' by 2050 (Climate Positive, 2021). Undoubtedly, the transition to Net Zero will be the future priority for all businesses, not just the previous biggest contributors to emissions such as transport providers:

> The world is changing. Quite soon for businesses your carbon balance sheet will be just as important as your financial balance sheet so decarbonising what we do is a problem but we [business community] are really good solution finders – [INT3]

If the Department of Infrastructure and Translink have spelt out their commitments as to how transport infrastructure should be developed and in pursuit of which broader policy goals, it is possible that the geographical planning context of such investments can assist in alleviating global sub-regional trends that also appear ingrained within the North:

> There is an issue. It's actually not even a Northern Ireland issue, it's a global issue, which is investment and a lot of the benefits of investment tend to cluster around bigger urban centres … it's very easy to parochialize these things into saying its Northern Ireland issue, or that Belfast is getting everything and Derry not or Enniskillen not. I think it is the role of government at one level to try and level things up. If you think about some of the levers … connectivity and all its forms, you can level up the playing field … I think in a Northern Ireland context that should be easier because the distances involved are not as big, it's not a very big place basically... It's not a mystery, it's pretty obvious what needs to be done, it just needs to happen – [INT5]

In an interesting development in early 2024, the Irish government announced an €800m funding package towards infrastructure projects in Northern Ireland, including €600m towards the upgrading of the A5 road which forms a key corridor connecting Derry to Dublin in the west of Northern Ireland and €50m towards the cost of the proposed redevelopment of Casement Park in west Belfast (Belfast City Council, 20 February 2024). The recent opening of a £340m integrated public transport hub in Belfast, known as Grand Central Station, is a very positive development in respect of strengthened bus and rail connectivity between Belfast and Dublin with an hourly rail service operational since late 2024. The launch of these initiatives, despite the lack of a governance framework, indicates the need to support such projects by creating a broader structure through bodies like the DBEC and involving stakeholders at the local authority and policy levels.

Energy infrastructure

In a similar manner to how transport infrastructure policy in both jurisdictions on the island of Ireland is presently framed, the EU policy context in relation to energy infrastructure is similarly integrated and contained within that bloc's long-term strategies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and towards meeting its broader sustainable development goals. The European Commission's vision is aimed towards a climate-neutral EU by 2050 (European Commission, 2018). Sitting within that strategic vision is the European Green Deal, in which interim objectives include a 55% reduction in net greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 compared to 1990, and to plant three billion trees across the EU by 2030.

Beneath the EU policy context level, underlining the fact that the UK is no longer a partner of Ireland's in that policy arena, the latest Memorandum of Understanding reached between the UK and Irish governments in 2023, with regards to the present consideration, agreed 'to promote the development of electricity interconnection between the Participants', with areas of co-operation including:

a. Offshore renewable energy
b. Electricity interconnection
c. Maritime spatial planning
d. Onshore renewables(UK-Ireland Memorandum of Understanding, 2023).

As per the Renewable Data Reports 2024, 40% of the all-island electric system comes from renewable sources (40.1% in Ireland, and 39.5% in Northern Ireland). The case for upgrading or revolutionising energy infrastructure appears not only to be the climate change emergency, pressing as that is, but also the limitations of existing infrastructure in serving the energy needs of some of the more productive regions currently across the island of Ireland:

> some of our infrastructure is almost at capacity, the likes of power for example … We have to sort out power, I don't know what the power situation is in Northern Ireland but it's pretty bleak around Dublin so that has to be sorted out – [INT9]

The Government of Ireland's strategy for reaching its long-term environmental goals emerged from an energy white paper published in 2015. Contained within were a number of strategic objectives relevant to the themes considered in this report, all of which can be said to form part of that broader strategy.

> Infrastructure will be required to support the energy transition across the transport, heat and electricity sectors … Energy infrastructure comprises linear facilities – such as gas pipelines, electricity interconnectors and roads – as well as point infrastructure, including power stations, electricity switching stations, ports and oil and gas terminals. Enhanced energy infrastructure, including some communications infrastructure, will be essential for economic development, regional development, and the cost efficient and secure provision of energy and other services that citizens need and value (The White Paper, 2015).

The Department for the Economy in Northern Ireland published an energy strategy in late 2021. The interim objective on its 'path to net zero' included 25% energy efficiency savings from buildings and industry by 2030, to meet 70% of electricity consumption from renewable sources by 2030, and to double the size of the low carbon and renewable energy economy by 2030 (The path to net zero energy, 2021). A revised Climate Change (Northern Ireland) Act 2022 increased this to 80%. Wind energy constitutes the largest source of renewable energy in Northern Ireland, and although the Energy Strategy Action Plan 2022 included a plan to "develop an action plan to deliver 1GW of offshore wind from 2030", little action seems to have been taken on this front, even by 2024 (Energy Strategy Action Plan 2024). The development of offshore wind potential could be crucial to achieving these targets by 2030 (Johnston et al, 2025).

It is perhaps in the realm of energy regulation that the two jurisdictions of the island have cooperated most effectively since the 1998 Agreement. Indeed, archival records indicate that under the EU funding umbrella and prior to the North/South bodies of the 1998 Agreement becoming operational, at least two areas of cooperation on energy infrastructure existed in August 1998. They were a North/South interconnector aimed at ensuring the security of supply to the gas industries on both sides of the border, and an energy scheme designed to promote energy-efficient and renewable energy projects (Cross-border economic co-operation, 1998).

> Business will always look at the cost of doing business where they go. Whether that's the cost of your energy supply… We have some stuff to do on energy – [INT3]

The Integrated Single Electricity Market (SEM) is an all-Ireland wholesale electricity market that became operational in November 2007. It has been jointly regulated by the Utility Regulator in the North and the Commission for Regulating Utilities in the South. It has two main components:

> 1. Energy – The SEM is made up of an all-island wholesale pool market known as the spot market which is centralised and also obligatory. Electricity is traded by generators and suppliers via this market.
>
> Generators bid into this market pool for each half-hour of the following day and based on these costs the SEM will determine an SMP (System Marginal Price) for each half-hour trading. The efficient generators are run to meet the demand whilst those who are more expensive are deemed "out of merit" and are not run or paid SMP, thus leading to lower costs for customers.

All generators who contribute to demand are paid SMP. Suppliers can also sell electricity directly to the consumer and can purchase electricity from this pool at this SMP.

This model in which the significant generators and suppliers are obliged to participate is mandatory and which differs from most other European markets allowing greater transparency in market outcomes and pricing.

These market rules and the resulting transparency ensure that both jurisdictions on the island of Ireland reap the benefit of efficient generation and downward pressure on consumer pricing and in addition, ensure security of supply along with environmental benefits.

2. Capacity - The SEM Committee also sets a Capacity Payment for generators operating in the SEM, which if they are available, goes towards their fixed costs. In addition, suppliers also pay towards these payments and any other system charges. This payment only partially covers the fixed costs due to its calculation method which is based on the relatively low fixed costs of a peaking plant. The resulting savings are as a rule passed to consumers (Utility Regulator NI)

Crucially, it is an area of North/South cooperation that survived the Brexit upheaval, Article 9 of the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland, part of the UK-EU Withdrawal Agreement, states:

> The provisions of [European] Union law governing wholesale electricity markets listed in Annex 4 to this Protocol shall apply, under the conditions set out in that Annex, to and in the United Kingdom in respect of Northern Ireland (Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland, 2019).

Political controversy regarding the Protocol of recent years notwithstanding, the UK and EU 'established new structured expert groups to allow detailed UK-EU discussion of new rules applied under the Protocol across the full range of issues' and listed the SEM as one of those issues (The Windsor Framework, 2023).

The perceived share of responsibility for the current level of carbon emissions will vary between different sectors of economic activity. Thus, in the view of an official working in the financial services sector of the economy, so too the extent of transformation now required and also the future energy requirement will vary accordingly. For instance

> In financial services perspective energy costs aren't things that are brought up most of the time as issues, they're not heavy users like the manufacturing facilities or data centres. We have targets as an organisation as part of the government strategies to decarbonize, to help support our clients do climate impact assessments and put in climate plans. But I must say in the financial services team we are struggling with that because they're already doing it or the impact is not the same scale as that from data centres or in manufacturing. So energy is not something that comes up too often.

Striking the right balance determining the share of the weight required to be carried in addressing environmental concerns and reaching associated emissions targets, forms in part what has become known as the 'just transition' (Newell & Mulvaney, 2013; Healy & Barry, 2017). This must be a feature of future regional policy in areas affected by the scale of change required to meet net zero and other targets:

> More recently the Just Transition Fund which is a new fund aimed at climate change and the impact on local economies particularly in the midlands ... So I suppose the evidence will be in the delivery – [INT1]

The requirement to upgrade existing or develop further energy infrastructure was also noted as a factor in sustaining economic development, or at least in sustaining some of the competitiveness foundations in Ireland's attractiveness as a destination for Foreign Direct Investment:

> I think the increase in costs in general, electricity, gas, cost of living in general is increasing constantly and that will threaten the piece of being a more low-cost market or the original proposition – [INT4]

Economic development planning

At present, the European policy context with respect to economic development planning appears to reveal battle scars from events of recent years, including the COVID-19 pandemic (2020-21), the impacts of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in early 2022 and the tariffs policies of the second Trump presidency (2025 onwards). There is a greater, unsurprising, emphasis on economic *security* strategies, such as supply chain resilience and energy security, rather than any new ambitious development plans.

The latest European macroeconomic forecast (May 2025) points to the belief that growth will continue to be moderate with increased downside risks due to uncertainty arising from talk of tariffs. The Commission, like other forecasters, project that Ireland will see continued economic growth, but very open to risks from increased protectionism (European Commission, 2025). The most recent economic forecast by Ulster University's Economic Policy Centre (January 2025) suggested that the Northern Ireland economy would see very moderate growth over the next two years, although unemployment would remain close to its current record low of just over 2% (UUEPC, 2025).

The most comprehensive long-term Government of Ireland economic strategy, in which a National Planning Framework (NPF) and National Development Plan 2021-2030 were its parts, appears to have recognised where previous national or regional development strategies pertaining to both parts of the island had been limited in their ambition. Importantly, it also signalled an intent or desire for more far-reaching cross-border cooperation on matters of mutual economic interest than many that have gone before it. The NPF included a significant and detailed chapter [eight] on 'working with our neighbours' on a list of 'national policy objectives' that included spatial planning, economic development, transport connectivity and energy infrastructure (Project Ireland 2040). Whilst a positive step, it is possible that the Project Ireland vision and the NPF will do little more than to obscure a perception held by some of a disconnect between central and regional governance in Ireland:

> To be fair the NPF and Project Ireland 2040 was delivered and that was a sea change in terms of how our spatial planning was managed so from an Ireland Inc. perspective that was a very strong plus. I think there has been support for the regions from the centre but I think I would qualify the success piece with a strong belief that central government is too linearly focused, isn't well co-ordinated, doesn't work cross-disciplinary very well, and has a very different focus to what would be seen as the regional focus – [INT1]

If Project Ireland 2040 reflects the ambitions of a government in a strong fiscal position, it also underlines the scope for comprehensive and ambitious objectives that stable institutions of government allow for. By contrast, the devolved government in the North has functioned intermittently (seven years out of twelve) between the publishing of one economic strategy in 2012 and what were called Ministers' visions in 2024. The island economy and cross-border economic development cooperation have continued during these years but often in a begrudging or politicised fashion. This might best be seen in the 2024 publication of an agreement between the DUP and the British government where the latter recognised 'the political concept of the "all-island economy" as being of concern to Unionists in Northern Ireland and committed to 'a full and complete repeal of all statutory duties relating to the all-island economy' (Safeguarding the Union, 2024).

The Department for the Economy's May 2021 strategy for Northern Ireland – 10X: A decade of innovation – can be seen as a holding document. More important to the present consideration of this report, it is noteworthy that there was little mention of potential cross-border cooperation, nor of any regional focus beyond, seemingly, Belfast 'emerging as a key regional hub delivering innovative financial services' (A 10x economy, 2021). The initial 10x strategy has been criticised as being produced 'without any real involvement with local government' although the same interviewee acknowledged an updated place-based approach [Place 10x] included specific sub-regional targets representing 'a step forward and a policy admission that there is a sub-regional or regional imbalance' – [INT2]

This would be further added to with the 'economic vision' articulated by the Minister for the Economy, Conor Murphy, in February 2024. Creating greater regional balance was to be one of four goals, alongside a greater number of good jobs, improved productivity and decarbonisation of the North's economy. By the end of 2024 a *Sub-Regional Economic Plan* was launched with commitments to establish Local Economic Partnerships at Council level, funding of £45 million over three years for these and fresh resourcing and targets for Invest Northenr Ireland's regional office network (Department for Economy, 2024). The greater unevenness of economic growth in recent decades, the scale of the North's regional inequalities and their persistence over many years makes the realisation of greater economic balance across various places in Northenn Ireland a daunting challenge (Magennis et al, 2025).

Perhaps one contribution to achieving this is by accelerated and better-spread levels of foreign direct investment (FDI). One part of the 10x strategy referred to 'FDI implications (opportunities & challenges) of our new trading arrangements, including the potential attractiveness of GB & EU dual market access to investors …[which]… will inform a new international investment proposition for Northern Ireland' (Trade and Investment, 2021). In a way, interviewees identified Brexit opportunities and challenges as the very basis of Northern Ireland's new value proposition or unique selling point (USP):

> we've never had a proposition that we could take to the world that other territories couldn't claim that they also have … this is a competitive marketplace. We needed something that would be different and despite the traumas of Brexit Northern Ireland has ended up with a unique proposition that nowhere else in the world has. Whilst we were members of the EU as part of the UK we had access to the UK and EU market, the UK has exited the EU market whereas we still access for goods. Every other part of the UK would give their right arm for the status that we have – [INT3]

> This has the potential to be the game changer of game changers and I'm not prone to hyperbole or exaggeration. You have a situation that has landed in our lap here which is this often-used phrase "the best of both worlds", this unique position in terms of dual market access to our two biggest markets. But it's not just that because then the EU is the gateway to the rest of the world so I would argue that the opportunity here is global so whichever way you look at it we now have a competitive advantage that most geographies would pull your arm off for – [INT5]

After both joining the EEC in 1973, a joint UK-Ireland bid for a European grant towards the cost of cross-border project studies in 1974 listed the following proposed projects:

1. Re-opening of the Ballinamore and Ballyconnell Canal.
2. Re-constitution of Carlingford Lough Harbour.
3. Industrial training cross border at places like Londonderry, Enniskillen and Newry.
4. Cereal silos possibly at Londonderry and or Warrenpoint to benefit the hinterland on either side of the border near these two ports.
5. Evaluation of mineral deposits…where it is possible that the total Irish deposits may merit going into production.
6. Atomic power station but not before the 1980s. The introduction of such a project would only make sense on an All-Ireland basis.
7. Road improvements including a motorway link between Newry and Dundalk.

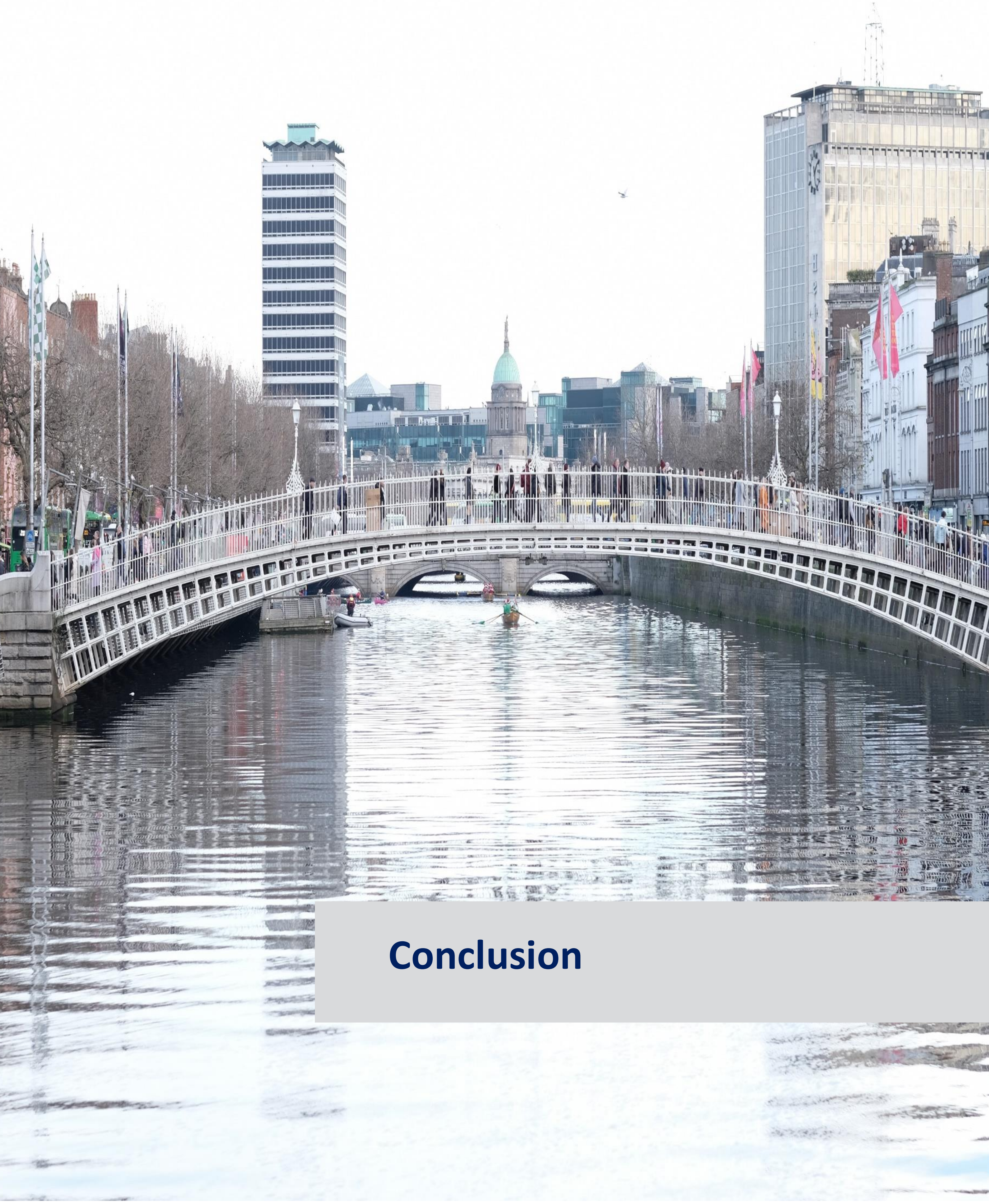
Interestingly, from the available archival evidence, it would appear that diverging political and economic emphases in relation to Northern Ireland also existed between the British and Irish governments from at least as early as 1974:

> The UK line has been that such cross-border studies should be restricted to specific, concrete topics, whereas the South's has been to widen their scope into what would, in effect, be area, even regional, planning exercises disregarding the political frontier (EEC cross-border studies, 19 December 1974).

An historical faultline that is perhaps undermining effective economic development planning in Northern Ireland relates to the existence of oppositional or mutually incompatible constitutional preferences, those that were legitimised, rightfully, in the opening to the Good Friday Agreement. As with every other facet of life, society and politics in the North, that juxtaposition is an impediment to effective economic strategy in which all stakeholders are pulling in the same direction. Fundamentally, the issue centres on the preference of Unionists wishing to maintain and deepen east-west economic integration with Great Britain experiencing friction with the economic preference of Nationalists seeking to build or extend upon a pragmatic range of North/South economic links on the island of Ireland. A previous economic strategy developed by the Northern Ireland Department of Economic Development in 1999 (Strategy 2010, 1999) ignored such matters, or at least chose not to address the existence of such friction directly. In not doing so, scholars have cited this as an example of 'failing to give leadership on a defining problem whose resolution will be a key determinant of the future success of the Northern Ireland economy' (Bradley & Hamilton, 1999).

Indeed, it is arguably the full utilisation of those North/South and East/West axes that must be at the core of Northern Ireland's strategies to address chronic or historical poor performance in the areas of productivity and innovation:

> We're on the doorstep of Europe, even Northern Ireland, we benefit from that island economy and the link with the EU. Certainly, anytime I got through a door with anyone from the States, they were very keen on that wider European market …
>
> From a Northern Ireland point of view … we could work a lot more with the southern entities to package the island as a whole. My experience is, we've a lot to offer on the island from a workforce point of view, good skills but you need to get out, you need to have people at the front end who can sell, who can really package it and who are not put off. It can't be a civil service type of push, it needs someone who has the personal experience who can spot the opportunities – [INT7]



Conclusion

5. Conclusions

That the island of Ireland is now home to over seven million inhabitants for the first time since 1841, albeit the accuracy of that census' total of over eight million people is disputed (Moroney, 2015), brings into focus the necessity of an effective, balanced and evolving regional policy. Academic studies have identified a 'first surge' (c.1961-85) and a 'second surge' beginning around 1995 of population growth in the South. Punctuating those surges was a period of economic recession and an uptick in emigration and, significantly, EU population growth of 5% since 1995 was only one-eighth of that which occurred in Ireland in that time (Fahey, 2022). This trajectory suggests that the management of demographic trends, insofar as that is possible, is inseparable from wider economic growth/stagnation in which regional policy can be an accelerant or inhibitor depending on the effectiveness of those policies. Whilst the North's population has not grown quite so sharply as that in the South over recent decades, longer-term demographic factors such as its ageing population (McCrory et al, 2011) will undoubtedly also be a factor in the formulating of any future all-island regional policy (Engineers Ireland & Irish Academy of Engineering, 2017).

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, scholars advanced a possible new vision for Northern Ireland, in order to address structural problems such as deprivation, inequality and other barriers to economic development such as an over-reliance on the public sector. They remarked that, inevitably, the hard-won peace of 1998 had been negotiated at the 'top table', but that reconciliation has to happen on the ground (Gaffikin et. al., 2001). Given the poor overall performance in the area of reconciliation since the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, we might consider such a suggestion to be that a bottom-up approach which could provide political cover to successive generations of politicians in the North who, for many, have consistently avoided making difficult decisions. It is not a significant stretch to suggest the same has been true regarding regional and economic policy given the similarly poor track record in those areas also since 1998.

This report has outlined the policy landscape in relation to the latest developments, trends and stated objectives concerning four key layers of regional policy as it exists on the island of Ireland. As discussed, it appears that in relation to two of those policy areas— spatial planning and economic development planning—political differences within Northern Ireland over the constitutional question, have been a barrier to effective cross-border cooperation on such matters since the Good Friday Agreement of 1998. It recognised the legitimacy of those incompatible constitutional preferences as a necessary step to end the violence of the preceding decades, to provide a tentative basis for power-sharing devolved government in Northern Ireland, and to establish a mechanism for constitutional change in future on the basis of consent rather than by force.

The consequence of such ambiguity, arguably, has prevented sincere engagement with and blunted the effectiveness of many of the North/South institutions established by the Good Friday Agreement. That is by no means the only reason for ineffective cross-border cooperation on the island of Ireland, and scholars have recently advanced several other barriers or impediments albeit specific to certain sectors that have been the focus of this report. For example, a study of the pharmaceutical sector across the island found that 'institutional and spatial proximities' were also required, in addition to geographical and cognitive proximity, 'to support meaningful cross-border economic cooperation'. Thus, we might also wish to see harmony in both formal structures (laws and regulations) as well as improved relations between agents at the micro-level in the regional policy of the future (Van Egeraat & Curran, 2021).

In the area of healthcare cross-border collaboration, at least one academic study to date has utilised interviews with relevant experienced stakeholders similar to that undertaken in the production of this report. Notably, it contended that academic, clinical and economic institutions could provide 'political cover' if that was required, to mitigate the myriad political sensitives to cross-border cooperation in healthcare that have also featured prominently in this report's analysis of regional policy. Both a consultant and commissioner of services from opposite sides of the border stated the need for realistic policy ambitions, noting that as a small island with a small population, it was unaffordable to expect specialist care to be available everywhere (Heenan, 2021). Some of those same suggestions, if appropriated and modified to reflect developments within the regional policy space, could form part of the basis for improved regional policy on the island of Ireland, and we will return to some recommendations at the end of this report.

Before that, the example of Tanzania may seem far-flung and removed from the Irish context although it can serve as a useful example of successful regional policy in a fractious political entity. That nation's mainland, Tanganyika, gained independence from Britain in 1961 followed by its outlying Zanzibar islands which gained their independence from Britain in late 1963. In early 1964 Tanganyika and Zanzibar each surrendered their sovereignties to a supra-national entity which came to be officially known as the United Republic of Tanzania (Mwakikagile, 2014). Beginning in 1969, Tanzanian government initiatives aimed to reduce the primacy of its metropolis – Dar es Salaam – by allocating investment funds to nine other 'growth poles'[cities] in order to stimulate industrial and urban development. Over the next decade Dar es Salaam shared manufacturing job growth with five of those cities although, beyond countries using 'methods widely considered repugnant', it is difficult to find examples of comprehensive efforts to redirect regional development to reduce urban primacy' (Sawers, 1989). Standing not only in contrast to scholarly consensus developing in the 1990s which posits the idea of the "third world metropolis" (Krugman & Livas Elizondo, 1996), the ambition of and relative success of the regional policy developed by a Tanzanian state in its infancy suggests that the island of Ireland, albeit at present containing a mature democracy in the South and unstable devolved administration in the north, should be able to identify credible sub-regional 'growth poles' of its own as part of any wider strategy aimed at absorbing some or much of the economic heat currently centring on Dublin.

Given the political sensitivities surrounding the extent and, for some, a perceived ulterior motive behind North/South cooperation on the island of Ireland, it is worth again noting the example of the island's Single Electricity Market as arguably the best existing layer of cross-border cooperation in any aspect of regional policy considered in this report. Since its establishment in 2007, it has withstood not only the northern half of its administration and regulation being in suspension for two lengthy periods (2017-20 & 2022-4), but it has emerged from the Brexit difficulties to a place where its continuance position has been protected in international agreements struck by the UK and EU (in 2019 & 2023).

In the area of transport infrastructure, there is, at present, an element of overlap in the current strategies produced by governments, North and South. Such linkages, if not in the scale or direction of specific policy objectives, are at the very least aligned in each being linked closely to a wider climate policy agenda that does not, and indeed cannot, be constrained by regional, national or supranational borders. Nonetheless, if we cast back to the era of a 1995 report by the European Conference of Ministers for Transport (ECMT), it concluded that new infrastructure projects were, due to an increasing awareness of environmental impacts, having to contend with 'increasingly severe spatial constraints with every day that passes and face increasingly virulent local opposition', and that whilst investment in road infrastructure was greater than that in rail infrastructure over the preceding decade, investment in combined transport facilities had risen sharply. (ECMT, 1995). Overcoming the challenges of 'not in my backyard'(NIMBY) resistance to development is far from unique to Ireland (Block, 2023) but poses universal challenges to spatial planning, transport and energy infrastructure development and economic development planning more widely. The planned upgrade to the A5 corridor in countries Tyrone and Derry serves as a good case in point: despite initial planning commencing in 2007 for the project with the commitment of a financial contribution from the Irish exchequer, this urgently needed scheme has been on hold for many years as a result of repeated local objections at the planning stage.

Prior to the end of 2020, the EU had regulated the movement of goods and services across the Irish land border whilst the Common Travel Area (CTA) Treaty signed by the UK and Ireland prior to the European project, regulated the movement of British and Irish citizens across that land border (Morchid & O'Mahony, 2019). Despite the challenge to improved British-Irish relations posed by Brexit, the two governments reaffirmed existing cooperative commitments in relation to their Common Travel Area (CTA) in 2019, indicating that models of hybrid regulations are possible if the political will exists. On a politically divided island with uneven rates of regional economic development, we might wish for the regional policy of the future to similarly reflect:

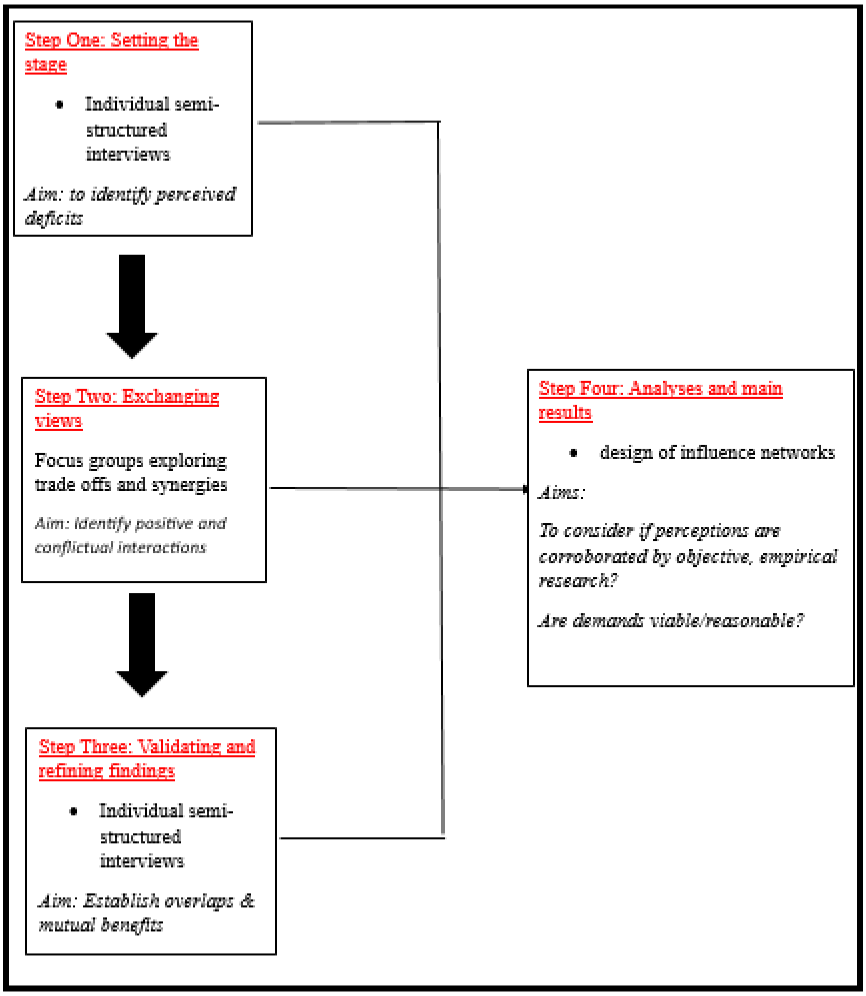
> the many social and economic connections … and … the reciprocal enjoyment of certain rights and entitlements to public services by British and Irish citizens when in each other's state (Memorandum of Understanding, 2019).

As the analysis of existing cooperation in the pharmaceutical industry and healthcare systems above alluded to, hybrid models, if possible, may provide one layer of the political cover necessary to advance ambitious levels of cross-border cooperation on regional or indeed any other area of policy. Industry and regional-specific knowledge and experience are undoubtedly important stakeholders to consider in any policy processes we might want to see moving forward. The input of local-level stakeholders will undoubtedly address existing deficits and imbalances, although such engagement must be fused or framed in the context of what many would perceive as the economic imperative of the bigger picture – that the motivations behind or benefits accruing from ambitious regional policy cannot be localised or even regionalised. If urban, regional or provincial growth poles are to be identified, the addressing of current infrastructure deficits for example, is critical to enabling the positive effects of economic spillover that transcend political or cultural frontiers (Acs, Audretsch & Lehmann, 2013).

Many of the planning challenges identified in this report have been more difficult to overcome due to a single governance framework to coordinate the benefits of island-wide regional planning on economic and environmental issues. This type of governance would bring clear added value. It would allow joint decisions of mutual benefit to the two jurisdictions to be made. Just as crucially once a political decision is made it would allow a coordinated approach to implementation. In a 'new Ireland' of whatever constitutional form such decisions would be made and implemented collectively and there would be clear added value. Given the current differing levels of economic development in North and South, the initial benefits of such a joined-up approach would be seen most strongly in Northern Ireland, but the whole island would benefit. However, at present, it has proven to be politically difficult to advance even individual projects such as the A5 road, or an electricity interconnector. A bottom-up approach, around specific issues / sub-regions, as outlined in this report may be a good place to start. It may help build consensus around the need and the specific requirements for implementation. In the long run, it might also build support for the wider framework of governance which is needed.

Recommendations

i. Encourage bottom/ground-up consultations in the policy-making process for the region(s) where infrastructure deficits currently exist. The involvement of local and regional government bodies, the third sector and civic or community organisations in such a process provides political cover if or when that is required in selling the benefits of cross-border cooperation on regional policy. Such a process depends on, according to the experience gleaned from the Neighbourhood Woods project across Europe, the precise participatory mechanisms chosen and the communication between facilitators and policymakers during that process (Janse & Konijnendijk, 2007). One such process that served in exploring ecosystem service networks in the French Alps used the following Influence Network Framework (INF):



Source: Crouzat et al, 2016.

ii. Moreover, grassroots consultation as suggested above should include a role for experts from the specific sector(s) in question within any cross-border policy formulation as one potential safeguard or guardrail against parochialism of the past on both sides of the border. Whilst the value of expertise has been derided by politicians during the UK's recent Brexit episode, interestingly it is politicians who subsequently over-relied upon expertise, arguably as political cover, during that country's COVID-19 response (Cairney & Wellstead, 2021). Thus, important considerations should be the very question as to whether the problem can be addressed with expert knowledge, whether there is any risk of policymakers using expert knowledge strategically to advance a political agenda, and perhaps the key issue being the certification of expert knowledge and establishing an agreed baseline of facts (Baek, 2022). The Japanese use of expert stakeholders, however, suggests that experts are strongly supportive of strategies which prioritise a greater engagement of citizens and increased networking across organisations in policy formulative processes (Ghinoj & Omori, 2023).

iii. The creation of an oversight body to administer the funding, construction and operation of future cross-border regional policy initiatives should lend credibility to and formalise such enterprise. Similar to that which regulates the Single Electricity Market, a North-South regional policy administration or secretariat should be jointly staffed by officials from North and South with an external balancing role delegated to the UK government and EU officials.

iv. Greater connectivity between Dublin and Belfast, recognising the critical role of the economic corridor that exists between the two cities will need to be achieved by enhanced cross-border co-operation between the various agencies involved in funding and delivering key transport projects. In particular, the replacement of the deficient section of the A1 route between Newry and Sprucefield by a new offline motorway in order to improve capacity and safety must be a priority objective as is a full electrification of the Dublin-Belfast rail line in order to provide high speed and frequent rail connections. The current isolated position of the northwest of the island, whereby Derry city and Donegal are poorly served by transport infrastructure which has negatively impacted their economic potential, also needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

v. The lack of impact of the *Framework for Cooperation* (2013) despite its continued and ongoing existence highlights the challenges posed by developing effective island-wide regional development strategies. It is recommended that the Framework should be renewed and effectively resourced in light of the development of the *Ireland 2040* plan, the new Programme for Government in Northern Ireland and the ongoing climate emergency.

vi. The continued dependence of Northern Ireland on direct financial transfers from the UK exchequer,[3] underscores the need for the North to receive direct subvention from Westminster in order to maintain an adequate level of public services and infrastructure provision. These financial transfers have been in place since the late 1960s prior to the

[3] The basis for calculation the subvention and its relevance for a future new Ireland has been contested and is the focus of a forthcoming paper from this project.

outbreak of the Troubles and have significantly grown since that time, a reverse of the situation in the 1930s when Northern Ireland was a net contributor to the UK treasury. In particular, political developments can alter the receipt of additional funding as exemplified in September 2024, when there was a decision (reversed later) to withhold the City Growth Deal allocations beyond those for the Belfast city region and Derry and Strabane. The precarious nature of these funding streams underscores the pressing need for the N

vii. The North to develop a stronger economic base, reduce its dependence on the public sector and foster a strong entrepreneurial culture in order to lessen its annual budgetary shortfall on reliance on direct transfers from London. The role of the Dublin-Belfast economic corridor in fostering economic growth in Belfast and the North in general will be critical in this regard as will be an increased level of educational attainment and specialised skills. The potential for the Irish government to make further funding commitments to enhance infrastructure and other services such as education resources in Northern Ireland should also be explored.

viii. The recent election of the Labour government in the UK following 15 years of Conservative power indicated that the new Starmer-led administration in London is willing to re-engage with Brussels and this has led to a recent EU/UK 'reset' on agri-food and fishing among other areas. This is a very positive development, but it will take time before the implications for the current post-Brexit arrangements in place to protect Northern Ireland from a hard border with the rest of the island become clearer.

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Annex 1

List of interviewees

Code	Descriptor	Jurisdiction
INT1	Retired public servant	South
INT2	Local government official	North
INT3	Senior executive campaign organisation	North
INT4	Former decision-maker tech multinational (United States)	South
INT5	Private sector executive	North
INT6	State agency official	South
INT7	Retired state agency official	North
INT8	State agency official	South
INT9	Local government official	South