**NICVA Position Paper on Brexit**

**July 2017**

1. **Background on NICVA and the NI Voluntary and Community Sector**

NICVA (the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action) is the umbrella body for the voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland (NI), which includes over 6,000 organisations employing over 44,000 people in a wide range of activities and services ranging from meeting front-line health and social care needs, to transport services, arts and sports activities, and protection, promotion and enjoyment of our environment. NICVA provides over 1,000 members with information, advice, training and support services, and representation of the sector as a whole.

1. **Our position on Brexit and how we formulated this response**

In view of the far reaching social, economic, and environmental implications of ending our 45-year membership of the European Union, NICVA has been engaging with its members and the wider voluntary and community sector since before the UK referendum on exiting the EU in order to understand the potential implications which this decision could have for the sector and for the society it serves.

This response is based upon this sustained engagement which has included a series of events with academics, elected representatives and governmental officials; two surveys of NICVA members; and roundtable discussions between sector representatives and the ‘Brexit lead’ officials in the Department of Justice, The Executive Office, DAERA, and the Department of Education.

From the outset of our engagement with the sector it was clear that the prospect of Brexit raised a very broad range of concerns and in a pre-referendum survey, 80% indicated they supported remaining in the EU. In view of these concerns and as a leading civil society organisation, NICVA took a broad view on the Brexit question and actively supported the remain position and campaign.

1. **Key issues and areas of concern raised by the sector**

The voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector in Northern Ireland has a number of concerns relating to the potential impact of Brexit.

There is also genuine concern in the VCSE sector in NI that NI will not be given a high priority in the UK government’s Brexit negotiations – 83% of NICVA members who responded to our post-referendum ‘Brexit Viewfinder’ survey expressing specific concern about this. Additionally, 83% stated they believed that political disagreements within the Executive would weaken Northern Ireland’s position in Brexit Negotiations.

NICVA has identified five key issues we would like to see these prioritised in future negotiating objectives:

**Protecting peace and stability in NI**

Direct support from the EU, not least through successive PEACE programmes, has played a vital role in developing peace and stability in NI.

The all-island legal framework that shared EU membership provides on the island of Ireland is also incredibly important to protecting continued peace and stability in NI.

The retention of this framework is essential to avoiding the necessity for a physical and economic border. The reestablishment of a ‘hard’ customs, trade and immigration border on the island of Ireland requiring visible enforcement along its length, poses a direct threat to the progress made in recent decades.

NICVA believes a Brexit deal must avoid this at all costs.

**Protecting the NI Economy and Economic Well-being**

Brexit could severely threaten the economic well-being of people in Northern Ireland through the loss or reduction of Northern Ireland’s access to its most important export markets in the EU (60% of NI exports) and specifically the Republic of Ireland (34% of NI exports); the loss of EU agricultural subsidies (c.£325 million/yr); and the loss of EU Structural Funds support (c.£175 million/yr) for peace-building, cross-community and border co-operation, rural development, infrastructure projects and European Social Fund for supported employment; supporting specific needs not targeted by domestic government funding programmes.

Sectors that are vitally important in NI, such as agri-food, which accounts for over a third of NI exports, are less important for the UK economy as a whole. This raises serious concerns that future post-Brexit UK trade deals will not favour the specific circumstances of NI, and could undermine our key sectors, through for example favouring the import of non-EU agri-food products produced without the application of EU standards.

A Brexit deal which does not recognise these unique circumstances, will place major economic pressures on Northern Ireland’s already overstretched public budgets and undermine our economy for which free all-island trade and movement of workers is so vital.

**Protecting our social and economic rights**

Many voluntary and community organisations working to tackle inequalities and discrimination in our society fear that Brexit could result in the loss of protections currently provided by EU legislation, such as the 2000 EU directive on equal treatment in employment and occupation which bans disability discrimination in employment. It is vital that the UK’s withdrawal from the EU does not result in an erosion of these rights. The sector is also very concerned about the risks to such rights inherent in the enacting of Great Repeal/EU Withdrawal Bill and subsequent amendments to UK legislation.

**Protecting our health**

Brexit could also threaten vital EU co-operation in medical research by charities and the future of all-island/cross-border health delivery and investment, as well as the major contribution of EU nationals in service delivery.

We urge those negotiating the terms of Brexit to secure a deal that retains our access to EU funding for medical and other research, as is the case in other non-EU countries like Norway, and does not undermine efforts to meet already major challenges in providing health services in Northern Ireland and across the island of Ireland

In recent years cross-border collaboration on a range of health issues has begun on the island of Ireland; for example in cardiac paediatric health and through the establishment of a cancer centre in the North West. This is a further reason why it is essential to retain the ability to move effortlessly and access healthcare across the island of Ireland, achieving vital economies of scale at a time when health budgets are so under pressure.

**Protecting our environment**

It is well known that much of the legislation that protects our environment, including our air quality, levels of pollution, disposal of waste, and the protection of our unique and precious natural environment comes from EU legislation. Indeed in NI it has been the threat of infraction fines from the EU that has, in some cases, ensured we act towards our environmental obligations, for example recent action to halt and seek to reverse long-standing damage to Strangford Lough; the UK’s first and largest UK marine nature reserve and internationally important marine conservation area.

For the sake of this and future generations, as well protecting assets vital for our growing tourism industry, the UK’s withdrawal from the EU must ensure that this protection is not lost.

1. **Key priorities for Brexit negotiations**

In view of the above concerns, NICVA is calling on those negotiating the terms of any Brexit deal to:

1. Ensure continued **peace and stability** by avoiding a hard border and any undermining of the terms of and rights afforded under the **Good Friday Agreement**
2. Preserve the rights afforded under the **Common Travel Area** between the UK and Ireland
3. Ensure continued **free trade and movement of goods and people on the island of Ireland** to avoid the economic damage and threat to stability which any hardening of the border beyond current arrangements border would inevitably bring
4. **Protect the rights and social and environmental protections** currently afforded under EU legislation and ensure full scrutiny by NI government of the transposition into NI law of EU legislation under the Great Repeal/EU Withdrawal Bill and of any subsequent proposed changes, as well as ensuring adequate resourcing for these changes in NI (e.g. legal capacity and expertise for the transposition process, effective enforcement mechanisms)
5. **Ensure a comprehensive process** with the full involvement of NI government and non-government sectors to review the financial and policy implications of the withdrawal, post 2020, of current levels and types EU Structural Funds support, and a fully inclusive process to **assess need and re-design appropriate local, regional and devolved domestic social, economic and environmental funding programmes**
6. **Ensure continued access post-Brexit to EU transnational programmes** such as Horizon 2020 and Interreg as vital vehicles for maximising the public benefit of transnational/Europe-wide activities such as medical research.

**Further information**

Further information on key issues and concerns raised by the Northern Ireland VCSE can be found here <http://www.nicva.org/topics/eu-referendum-and-brexit>

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