

Making the Irish Sea border work will require partnership, cross-border cooperation, and preparation

*It's official – there will be additional border control posts at ports of entry into Northern Ireland. An entry into Northern Ireland means an exit from Great Britain. But how can this be done? **Katy Hayward** and **Tony Smith** reveal the secret to making the Irish Sea border a smooth crossing.*

So, we finally have it – the UK government has [told the NI Executive](#) that there will be additional border control posts at ports of entry into Northern Ireland. This green light (or red flag, depending on how you view it) has been a long time coming. Although [experts](#) have been pointing to the necessity of this since the revised [Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland](#) was first revealed, the government has been slow to acknowledge its implications for the movement of goods across the Irish Sea.

The Protocol means that goods moving east to west across the Irish Sea entry are – as a baseline – to be treated as leaving a ‘third country’ and entering the EU’s single market and customs union. In a wholly new way for the UK internal market, entry into Northern Ireland means exit from Great Britain. And this means additional border checks and controls, at least for live animals and agri-foods. And these, in turn, mean a border management system is required that is quite new in terms of location and scope.

This has big implications for the UK internal market and big implications for Northern Ireland’s economy, all of which require political and policy attention. But in this short piece, we want to step aside from the drama and the politics and even the ‘technical solutions’. Instead, we want to consider the problem in a constructive way. The Protocol entails a major change in the management of borders within the UK. Why not manage it as well as possible?



Using lessons from the rollout of new border management systems elsewhere, we want to bring forward three high-level principles that the UK government would do well to bear in mind.

The first principle is that of *partnership*. Border management is complicated. The challenge will not only be in the hands of UK Border Force. A wide spectrum of actors will be involved: police, customs, policy specialists, data analysts, market surveillance authorities, veterinarians, freight hauliers, ferry operators... And that’s before you even begin to consider the diverse array of those (from massive supermarkets to small farmers) who will have new procedures to implement just in order to keep buying from and selling to the same people as before.

Because it is so complicated, the system to manage it needs to be carefully designed and finely tuned. And for this reason, the partnership needs to be built with those who will be responsible for operating the system. The focus should not be on the highest levels but on those whose livelihoods depend on it working well. Ideally, to use the buzz phrase, you need to 'co-create' the system, hand in hand with the importing/exporting industry. Bring them in from the start, and understand what it is that they need. In short, collaboration holds the key to success.

Building a relationship of trust and respect between government agencies and industry is a good thing to do. This is not just because it is imperative that the system meets their requirements but also because it is a relationship that needs to endure. And that trust can reap rewards in due course. If businesses know that the system has been designed to best facilitate trade, then in the future they will be more likely to tell you about holes or wrinkles or breaches in that system that prevent it from working effectively.

The second principle is that of *cross-border cooperation*. There is plenty of evidence to show that you don't need to be in a political union to have good border management. What you do need, however, is a good bilateral or multilateral agreement and a level of confidence and trust between the parties. A [study](#) conducted for Cambridge University last year on borders in the Middle East and North African (MENA) region illustrates the point: even across the hardest of borders, cross-agency programmes can work if there is a political will to achieve it.

And the more 'open' the borders around Northern Ireland, the greater the need for cooperation between the agencies involved in border management on either sides of those borders. Communication and collaboration need to be valued and enhanced between departments/agencies in the different parts of the UK. And there is an urgent need to reinforce the good working relationship that already exists between the Irish Revenue Commissioners and UK Border Force especially given the rapidly-changing environment in which such cooperation can occur.

The third principle is that of *preparation*. UK Border Force will have overall responsibility for conducting any regulatory checks and inspections on the GB/NI routes, in tandem with a range of experts from other agencies. These checks will be conducted under policy guidance on behalf of all the relevant agencies, including HMRC and DEFRA (or DAERA in the case of Northern Ireland). UK Border Force already has officers deployed in Belfast and Liverpool ports; but so far they have been preoccupied solely on extra-EU traffic. Intra-UK goods traffic is (perhaps ironically) a rather unfamiliar subject for scrutiny.

No change to 'our way of doing things' can happen overnight without a period of 'getting used to it'. This is especially true when it comes to the use of technology, as anyone who has tried to use a PC after years of working on a Mac can testify. And, speaking of IT, because there has been no history of taking and compiling detailed records of goods movement between GB and Northern Ireland, the information we have to start with is incomplete. In order to have enough data to work out what is trivial and what is significant when it comes to unexpected movements or increase in traffic, there needs to be a system in place to capture data early.

We don't have to do customs checks by opening every box, crate and lorry. Future checks and searches have to be based on intelligence, not mere suspicion. And intelligence is refined information. There is already a wealth of data and technology across the supply chains that is not currently visible or accessible to the government. This is even more reason for government and industry to work together to facilitate compliant trade and traffic routes, whilst simultaneously ensuring compliance. But this needs to begin soon.

Overall we should never lose sight of the reason why it is worth making difficult decisions and taking action now. We must minimise the administrative burden and costs of increased friction on trade across the Irish Sea to avoid gratuitous harm to businesses and consumers in Northern Ireland. Balancing the need to protect the EU's single market alongside securing the UK's internal market will be a tricky one, and the details are still subject to careful negotiation. But, meanwhile, the need for partnership, cross-border cooperation and preparation only intensifies. It would be a measure of national responsibility and ambition, not concession, for the UK government to act on these principles.

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