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Cross Border Studies

# MEDIA WATCH

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**27 July 2018 – 3 August 2018**

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## Northern Ireland exports to Britain remain crucial for food and drink processors, new study claims

Britain remains the biggest market for Northern Ireland's food and drinks processing sector, according to a report.

The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) confirmed that the value of produce heading across the Irish Sea increased to £2.2bn in 2016, accounting for 50% of the £4.478bn total sales that year.

The 'Size and Performance of the Northern Ireland Food and Drinks Processing Sector, Subsector Statistics' study also reported that the Republic of Ireland is the most important export destination for the sector.

Cross-border trade south accounted for £646m in 2016, which amounted to 15% of total sales.

Signalling the crucial nature of exports for the sector, the report confirmed that in both 2015 and 2016 the size of value of the Northern Ireland domestic market was smaller than those markets outside of the UK.

DAERA's report revealed a resurgent food and drink processing sector in 2017.

After the total value of sales in Northern Ireland dipped from £4.415bn in 2015 to £4.365bn in 2016, provisional figures for last year show that the sector had added £113m in turnover, bringing it to just under £4.5bn.

The total number of people directly employed in food and drink processing increased 4% from 20,555 to 22,413 full-time workers. The figure is estimated to increase 4.8% for 2017 to 23,479 full-time employees.

Within the sector, beef, lamb, milk and milk products represented the largest subsectors for gross turnover in both 2015 and 2016. Together they account for 48% and 49% of the sector's total gross turnover in these years respectively.

Charlie Kerlin, head of agri-food at business advisory firm Grant Thornton, said the new data provided "welcome reading" for the food and drinks processing sector. However, he said performance "varied widely" across the subsectors, with firms processing sheep and beef meat estimated to have increased turnover by £40.9m compared to a provisional £8m decline in turnover in the pigmeat sector.

"The statistics also show an overall growth in employment in the sector, up 4.7% to 23,479 full-time equivalents. This is a reminder of the importance of the sector for local employment," he said.

"The report also includes a useful snapshot of the relative size of Northern Ireland's export markets, ahead of the UK's exit from the European Union.

"Finalised figures for 2016 show that around 75% of sales are in the domestic market, with Great Britain continuing to be our primary market. However, exports to the Republic of Ireland amounted to £646m or just under 15% of overall turnover," said the agri-food advisor.

"It illustrates how much of the sector is likely to be most impacted should a 'no deal' Brexit occur and the possible imposition of World Trade Organisation tariffs, dramatically increasing the costs of selling to markets outside the UK."

**Source: The Belfast Telegraph**

**28 July 2018**

## **Brexit rows and power-sharing failure may lead us on a downward spiral into toxicity, warns Robinson**

PETER Robinson sounded a warning yesterday that the Brexit process could have a toxic impact on relations within Northern Ireland - and between London and Dublin.

Addressing the MacGill Summer School in Glenties, Co Donegal, the former First Minister said that the stable connections of the last two decades will "unalterably change" as the UK leaves the EU.

He said unionists believe Dublin has been "completely self-serving and unnecessarily bellicose", while the UK believes Irish ministers had adopted a "rigid, if not antagonistic" posture.

The former DUP leader said: "I believe the absence of a working North-South institution has exacerbated the situation.

"If, at the end of the negotiations, there is the potential of UK and RoI relationships cooling and a worsening in unionist relationships with Dublin, the spillover consequences on relationships within Northern Ireland are clear and alarming.

"Dublin taking any decision in the EU which would have a detrimental impact on Northern Ireland will add bile to the mix. "It's not a pretty picture and not a positive vision for the future."

Mr Robinson also told the gathering that there was potential for a marked deterioration in the relationship between the UK and Irish Governments once the kinship fostered by their membership of the EU was gone. He said already fraying relations between politicians north and south of the border would deteriorate once Brexit occurs and cautioned that communities within Northern Ireland had become more "polarised" due to the "hysteria" whipped up over the UK's exit from the EU. Mr Robinson said tensions had been intensified by the collapse of Stormont, highlighting that the implosion of power-sharing had also put north-south and east-west political structures bodies into cold storage.

"Central to protecting the helpful and cordial set of relationships, that have been built up over many years, is the rebirth and smooth operation of the Northern Ireland Assembly, its Executive, along with the North-South and East-West institutions," he added.

"Without each and all of those parts being in place, and working, relationships will suffer - perhaps drastically.

"The absence of the complete network of connections leaves us all vulnerable to a downward spiral which may lead to toxicity." Mr Robinson said the collapse of Stormont had also increased "polarisation" here.

"Unquestionably, the parties and traditions in Northern Ireland have become more polarised as a result of the Brexit hysteria.

"Much of it was avoidable but an absence of the political cohesion that a functioning Executive has provided in the past has intensified the division."

Mr Robinson expressed his frustration at failure to find a way forward.

"It is intolerable that there are politicians who appear to have turned their backs on the will and needs of the community they are elected to serve," he said.

The former First Minister said that all sections of the community told him that issues such as the health service and education were more important than any of the reasons given for refusing to operate the Assembly.

He backed a suggestion that if the differences dividing the DUP and Sinn Fein could not be overcome prior to restoring Stormont, they should be resolved in a parallel process, with devolution returning in the interim. "There is no more important task for Assembly Members to perform than working to restore the institutions," he said.

"I contend that the revival of the Assembly and Executive is an imperative in a post-Brexit era.

"It represents our best hope of peace, stability and reconciliation."

The Assembly had its detractors, he said, but "it proved that politicians from very different backgrounds and views could work together and do so to the benefit of the entire community".

**Source: The Belfast Telegraph**