

CENTRE FOR CROSS BORDER STUDIES

## **Quarterly Survey on the conditions for North-South and East-West cooperation:**

Briefing on the findings from the 9<sup>th</sup>  
Quarterly Survey (January – March 2023)

Ben Rosher  
Anthony Soares

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## About the Centre for Cross Border Studies

The Centre for Cross Border Studies, based in Armagh, Northern Ireland, has a strong reputation as an authoritative advocate for cross-border cooperation and as a valued source of research, information and support for collaboration across borders on the island of Ireland, Europe and beyond.

The Centre empowers citizens and builds capacity and capability for cooperation across sectors and jurisdictional boundaries on the island of Ireland and further afield. This mission is achieved through research, expertise, partnership and experience in a wide range of cross-border practices and concerns (for more details visit [www.crossborder.ie](http://www.crossborder.ie)).

### 1. Introduction

As we write this report, the Good Friday (Belfast) Agreement is celebrating its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Queen's University Belfast hosted a range of events and talks on the Agreement, Peace Process, and the future of the Agreement that featured former Prime Ministers, Taoisigh, Senators, and Presidents. However, this all took place against the context of a still-collapsed assembly. February 2023 signalled the anniversary of the current Stormont collapse following the resignation as First Minister of the DUP's Paul Givan twelve months earlier, and the DUP's refusal to nominate a speaker after the subsequent Assembly Elections in May 2022. Following this, the 6-month interim period introduced in the New Decade, New Approach agreement that allowed incumbent Executive ministers to act lapsed, meaning that Northern Ireland is currently governed through a combination of expanded civil service authority, and occasional intervention from Westminster.

In Westminster, as a result of a breakthrough in negotiations between the UK and EU that saw the agreement of the Windsor Framework, the Sunak Government abandoned the controversial Northern Ireland Protocol Bill, which would have given the government powers to unilaterally disapply parts of the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland. It was hoped that the Windsor Framework, designed to reduce the level of checks on goods moving between Great Britain and Northern Ireland, would be enough to convince the DUP to return to power-sharing. In the event, however, the party decided the Framework did not satisfy their "seven tests" and so Stormont remains empty and Northern Ireland facing a protracted period of "government by Civil Service". Whether the Local Elections in May will alter incentives is yet to be seen.

Although references are made to the continued political impasse in Northern Ireland, responses to this 9<sup>th</sup> Quarterly Survey indicated that civic society organisations and local authorities on the island of Ireland saw an improved political context for North-South and East-West cooperation. Indeed, we saw the highest percentage of respondents noting that the political context had improved since these surveys began in the first quarter of 2021. The comments offered by respondents to this survey reveal that the more positive outlook is not just the result of the contents of the Windsor Framework, but also (and perhaps more

so) of the marked change in the relations between the UK Government and the European Union that made the Windsor Framework possible. This change in mood can be seen when recalling our [analysis of the results from the previous survey](#), covering the period October to December 2022, which saw major personnel changes in the UK Government, including a change of Prime Minister, but where only 5% of respondents indicated an improved political context for North-South cooperation, with the vast majority (76%) judging it to have remained more or less the same:

There is perhaps a sense that the majority of respondents are adopting a “wait and see” approach to what the current state of health of relations between the UK Government and the EU may be, and whether the changes in UK Government personnel may alter the prospects of finding resolution to the issues related to the Protocol’s implementation (p.1).

It appears that respondents to the 9<sup>th</sup> Quarterly Survey have moved from a “wait and see” approach, to one that sees the Windsor Framework as representing a positive reconfiguration of UK-EU relations that signals the potential for greater political stability. However, as noted earlier, this positivity is not blind to the political divisions in Northern Ireland that continue to prevent the restoration of the Assembly and Executive and, as comments made by respondents make clear, spill over into the social context for cooperation.

And yet, while the improved relations between the UK and EU are welcomed, it is important to understand how unilateral actions can undermine North-South and East-West cooperation and relations. The recently published report by the Centre for Cross Border Studies, [“The Windsor Framework: What could it mean for North-South and East-West cooperation and relations?”](#), points to the potential negative impacts of UK divergence on cooperation:

It would be entirely disingenuous to act in the belief that only policies emanating from Brussels could have an impact on the operation of the Protocol/Windsor Framework or, crucially, on Northern Ireland’s relations with the Republic of Ireland and/or the rest of the United Kingdom. Paragraph 55 of the UK Government’s Command Paper, [The Windsor Framework: A new way forward](#), makes this clear from the outset as it refers to the implications of what it notes earlier (paragraph 54) as what will be ‘now considerable underlying regulatory divergence North and South’ (p.13).

It is vital, then, that close attention is paid to the underlying context for North-South and East-West cooperation, and that any potential moves to diverge are fully considered in terms of their impacts on that cooperation. This will not be properly achievable unless those in both jurisdictions on the island of Ireland directly involved in North-South and East-West

cooperation are consulted. In turn, and in respect of the mechanisms under the Protocol (e.g. the Specialised Committee), this will require substantive progress by the UK Government and the EU establishing structures for engagement with civic society organisations. Additionally, given the new mechanisms set out in the Windsor Framework, similar structures will need to be established by the Northern Ireland Assembly once it resumes its functions. These will be essential for the identification of any arising issues regarding the implementation of the Protocol and in considering the feasibility of any proposed solutions or mitigations, and how these may impact on North-South and East-West cooperation and relations, and on the totality of relations encompassed by the 1998 Good Friday/Belfast Agreement.

This remains a core objective steering the Centre for Cross Border Studies in all its work in relation to the United Kingdom's departure from the European Union, which includes its convening of the [Ad-Hoc Group for North-South and East-West Cooperation](#).

Following the end of the transition period and the implementation of the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland from the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 2021, **these Quarterly Surveys by the Centre for Cross Border Studies have, therefore, become a vital means to give us an understanding of the extent to which the necessary conditions for North-South cooperation are being maintained, and how relations between civic society organisations and local authorities on the island of Ireland and Great Britain are being safeguarded. It is crucial that cross-border cooperation taking place at informal, local and community levels – which have for decades been the life-blood of cross-border cooperation and reconciliation – is made visible and taken into account when considering whether the conditions for North-South cooperation are indeed being maintained.**

This Research Briefing proceeds in 4 sections. The first provides information regarding the data collection and analysis. The second section provides an overview of the respondents. Due to the anonymous nature of the survey this is necessarily brief. The third examines in detail the respondents' experiences and perceptions of the North-South dimensions of cooperation and relations, and the fourth section analyses the respondents' insights into the East-West dimension.

### 1.1. [Understanding the data](#)

In this, the ninth round of this survey, 100% of the 34 respondents have completed at least one previous round of the survey. As the survey has been repeated every quarter since the beginning of 2021 and that there are a consistently high number of repeat respondents, we are in a position to infer the shape of some trends regarding views and experiences of the Protocol in a practical sense with a good degree of clarity. These insights are further developed through the inclusion of qualitative responses to the central contextual questions which allow for more nuanced insights into *how* respondents are experiencing the changing political, social, regulatory, and material conditions for North-South and East-West

collaboration and their suggestions for improving conditions on the ground. This information has proved invaluable in painting a more detailed picture of the current contexts for cross-border collaboration. It also bears emphasising that the respondents to all rounds of the survey conducted thus far each have a wealth of insight, experience, and expertise of cross-border cooperation and collaboration and the results presented should be considered with that in mind.

## 2. Respondents

The data has been collected via a survey of self-selected respondents between the 1<sup>st</sup> March and 17<sup>th</sup> April 2023, gathering 34 responses in total with 100% of respondents reporting that they have completed the survey in a previous quarter.

32% of respondents were based in the Republic of Ireland and 50% based in Northern Ireland, with 18% having a presence on both sides of the border (figure 1).

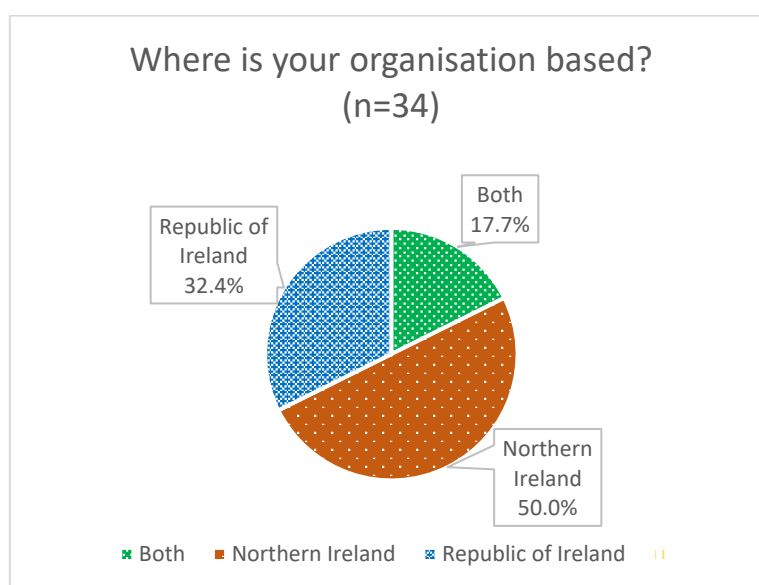


Figure 1

## 3. The North-South dimension

### 3.1. Contact and collaboration

In this quarter (Jan-Mar 2023) 82% of respondents have had meetings with organisations in the other jurisdiction on the island of Ireland (figure 2). For 62% of respondents their level of contact this quarter has been at the same level as the last and has increased for 32% of respondents.

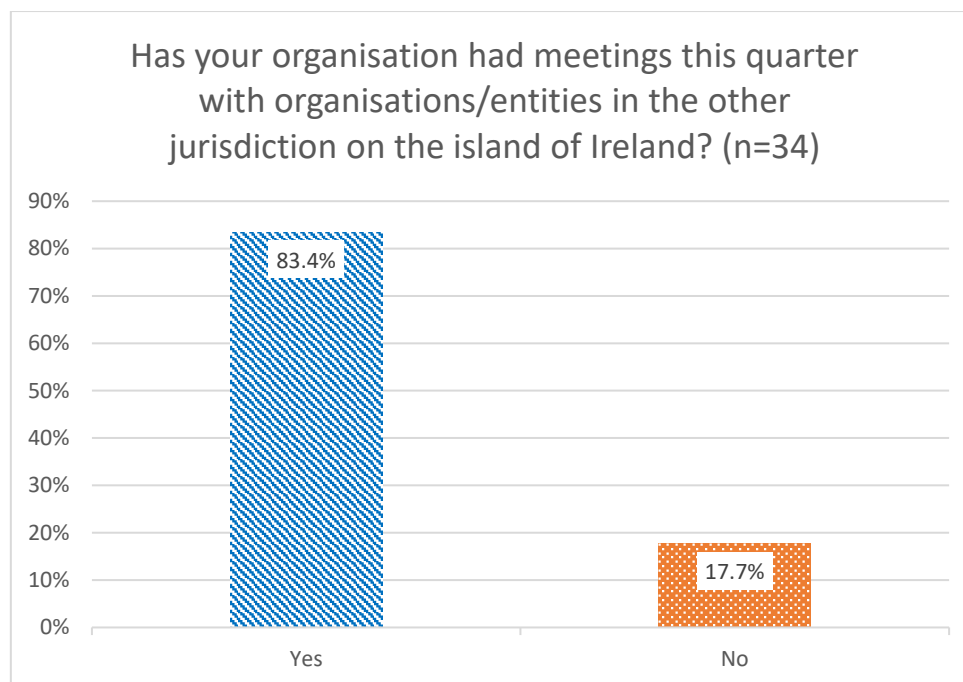


Figure 2

72% of respondents reported that meetings with organisations in the other jurisdiction discussed challenges to cross-border cooperation either on occasion (43%) or to a significant extent (29%). The nature of these challenges were varied, touching on concerns around funding, cross-border travel for education, and the pending introduction of Electronic Travel Authorisation for cross border travel for non-visa nationals.

- “Cross -border travel for non UK/ RoI citizens lawfully resident in N. Ireland or RoI; impact of different regulations on either side”
- “Barriers to cross border movement for educational access”
- “Discussions took place on the exemption to those legally resident in ROI provided by the UK Government in relation to ETAs, the Windsor Framework, and potential UK divergence on areas such as data adequacy”
- “Travel for NON British/ Irish citizens and refugees/asylum seekers. Access to educational institutions for non British Irish Citizens. Perceptions (political) of others in relation to the level of Cross border work going on within this organization”
- “Electronic Travel Authorisations have been discussed as well as the divergence of rights on the island identified in research as well as joint organisational responses to those findings”
- “Different roles and responsibilities of Local Authorities and stakeholders on both sides of the border”

At present 91% of respondents are involved in cross-border collaborations with a partner in the other jurisdiction on the island of Ireland (figure 3), and 77% of respondents are actively

considering new collaborative projects. The main areas of current collaboration focus on community development and cross-border cooperation. Over half (58%) of respondents presently engaged in cross border collaboration reported that they were in receipt of funding for cross-border collaborative projects, with the predominant funding source being the Irish government.

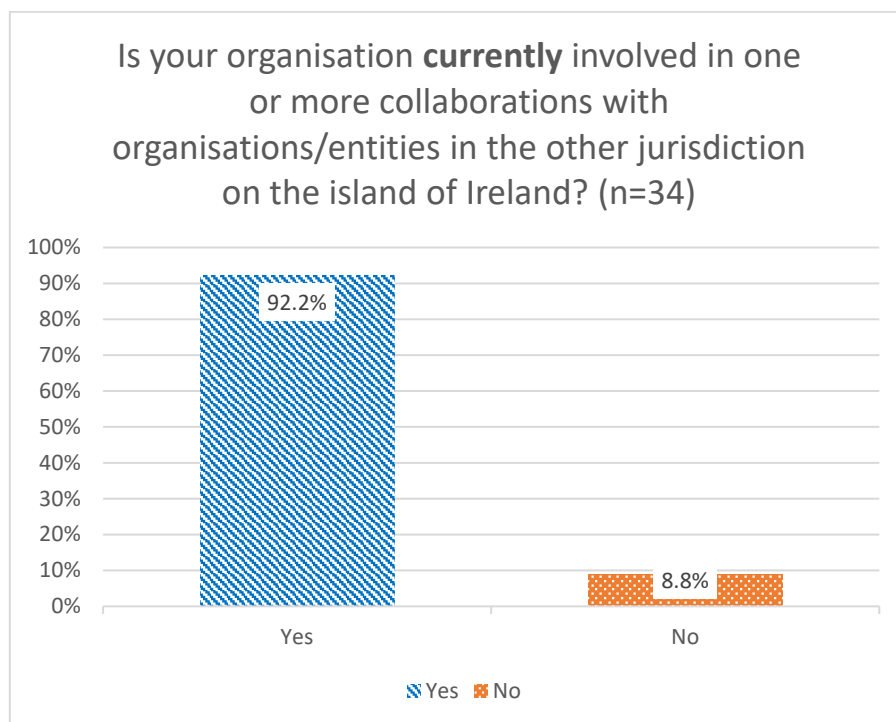


Figure 3

### 3.2. North-South context

When asked whether (and how) the political, social, regulatory, and material contexts for cross-border collaboration have changed over the last quarter (all n=34), 56% of respondents believe that the **political** context for cross-border cooperation has stayed more or less the same since the previous quarter. Perhaps most optimistically, 27% report that it has improved on the previous quarter – the highest proportion recorded since these surveys have been conducted (figure 4).

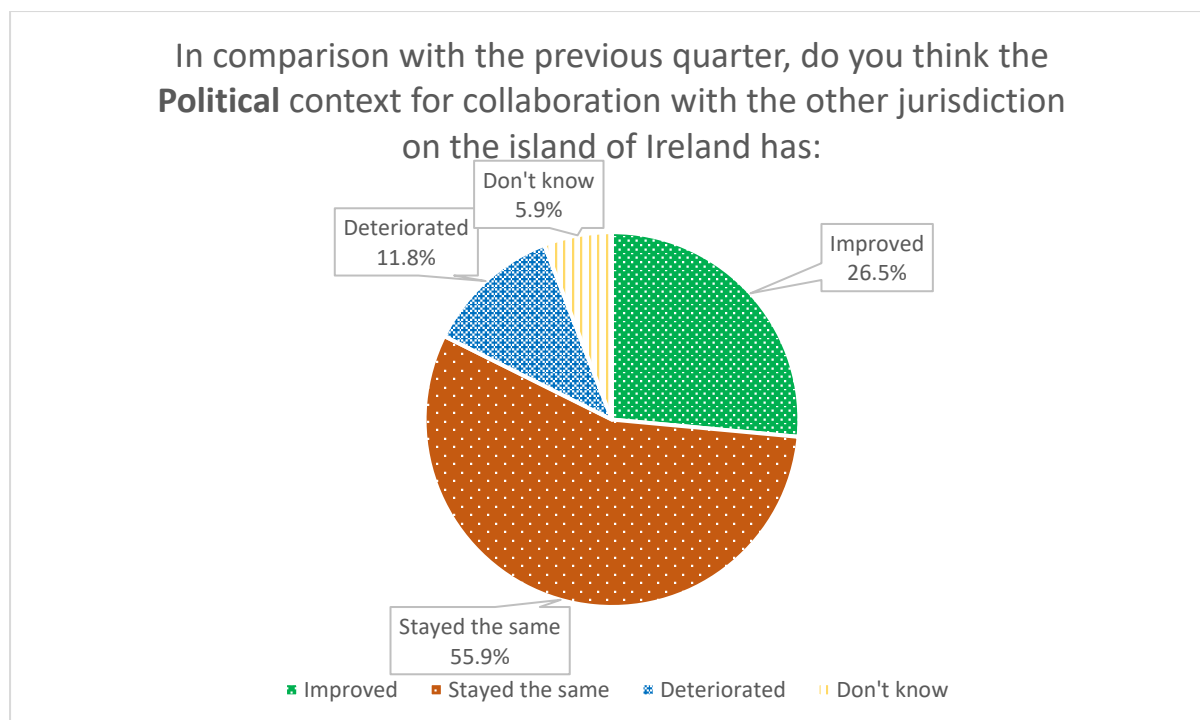


Figure 4

When asked to expand on their experiences of the **political** context for collaboration, respondents focussed heavily on the Windsor Framework and the associated improvement of relations between the UK and EU as a positive development. However, there is still a recognition that tensions among the PUL community and the ongoing absence of an Assembly are a cause of political uncertainty:

- “Windsor agreement will improve opportunities for collaboration”
- “Protocol agreement opens up collaborations on EU Horizon projects”
- “Lack of Stormont government is a major issue, sections of PUL community are pulling away from cross border actions, changes to the protocol in recent weeks have still to be agreed by the Unionist community allowing Stormont to return, period of great political uncertainty”
- “Although political tensions still remain within Northern Ireland due to the DUP's position, and there is still no functioning NI Assembly or Executive, the overall political context has improved due to UK-EU arriving at the Windsor Framework”
- “There is some hope with the Windsor Framework”

Turning to the **social** context (figure 5): 21% of respondents say that the social context has improved on the previous quarter. However, the predominant response is that it has remained the same (71%).



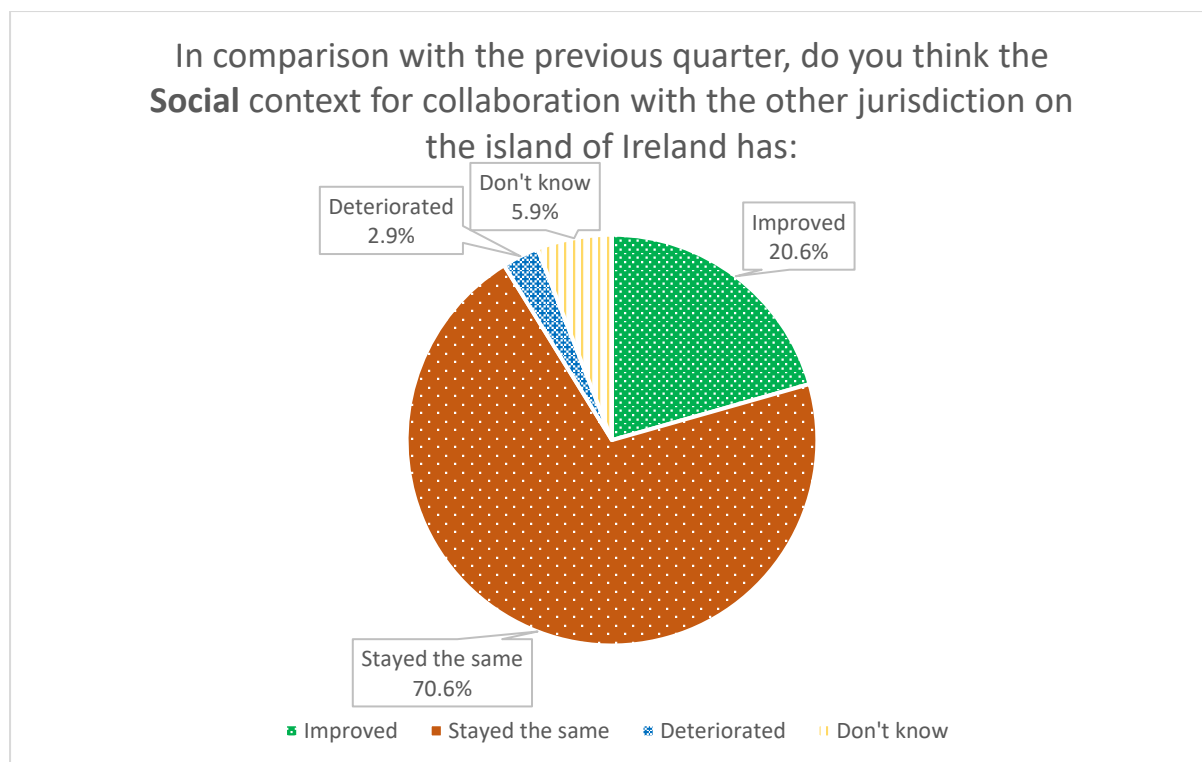


Figure 5

When asked to elaborate on the social context people are broadly optimistic in light of progress on the Protocol but recognise that the ability for social collaboration is heavily dependent on other contexts, especially the political situation.

- “Windsor agreement will improve opportunities for collaboration”
- “Agreements on Protocol issues are a good step forward for all levels of cooperation”
- “People and organisations continue to develop collaboration in the absence of an obstructive political administration”
- “I believe there is always a willingness in a social context, but the social context often relies on other factors to realise its capacity for collaboration”

In terms of the **regulatory** context (figure 6), 68% of respondents say that the regulatory context has remained the same compared to the last quarter, with 14% saying it has improved. This is particularly noteworthy as, for the previous three quarters, no respondent had reported an improvement in the North-South regulatory context.

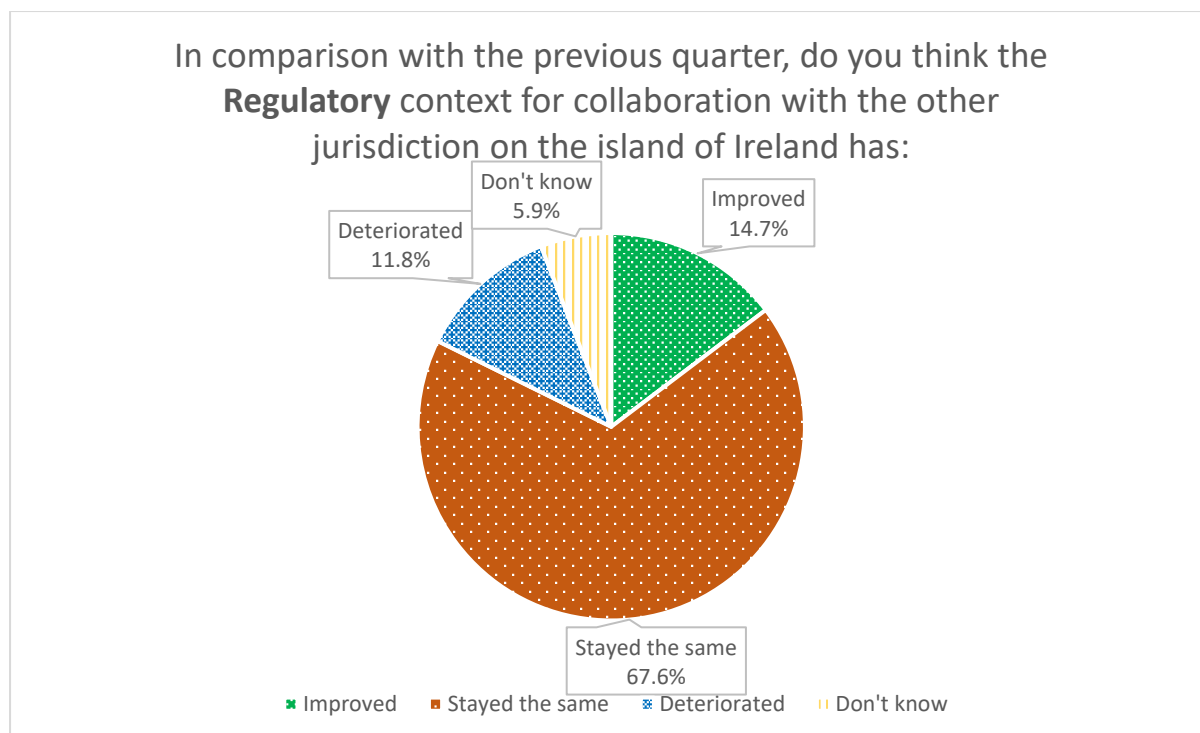


Figure 5

When asked to expand on their experiences of the **regulatory** context for collaboration, respondents pointed to ongoing uncertainty and stasis but for potential improvements in light of the Windsor Framework:

- “Things have stayed the same while protocol discussions continue. The Windsor framework if adopted will change this situation”
- “I still think there is significant uncertainty around protocol outworkings. Even though the Windsor Framework may now be legislated on, the likes of council elections and potential for lingering grudges still weigh on relationships”

Finally, with regard to the **material** context for North-South collaboration (figure 7), 80% of respondents believe it is the same as the previous quarter, with 8% reporting an improvement and only 3% saying that it has deteriorated since the last quarter.

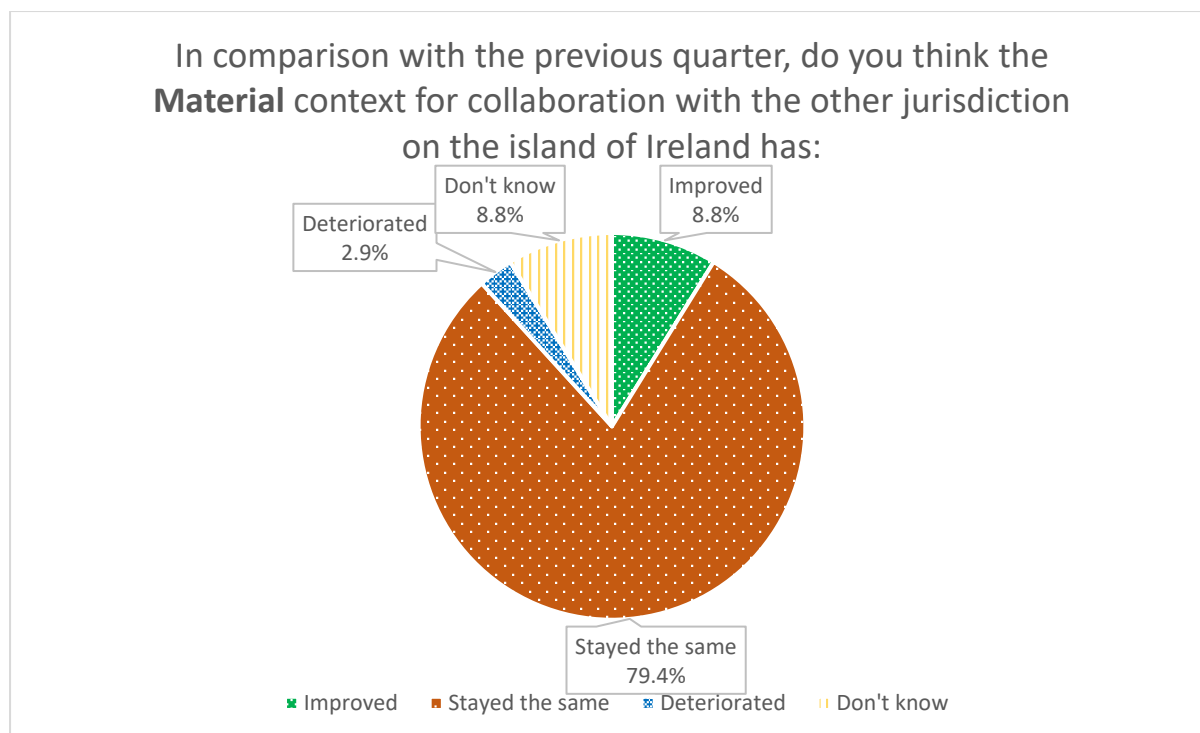


Figure 7

When asked to elaborate on their experiences of the **material** context for collaboration, respondents again point to the potential benefits of the Windsor Framework.

- “The introduction of the Windsor Framework simplifies some of the admin issues around movements of goods”
- “People and businesses getting used to new dimensions and finding best solutions in a context where everybody is getting economically hit by economic position across both Islands”

### 3.3. North-South suggestions for improvement

We have also asked respondents for any suggestions they have for improving the conditions for cooperation and collaboration. In the North-South dimension there were suggestions for improving the opportunities for cross-border interaction for school children, “border proofing” policies to minimise the impact of any potential divergence in policy between the UK and Irish governments following Brexit, improved rail connectivity, and increased funding from the UK government for North-South cooperation.

- “The UK Government and Civil Service should urgently adopt “border-proofing” to ensure the impacts of any policy direction on North-South cooperation and relations are considered properly. This is particularly important if the UK Government is considering divergence in areas such as data adequacy, the environment, professional qualifications, etc.”
- “Recognise the reality that the future of the island depends on a whole -Island collaborative approach and strategic direction. If we proceed on a common-sense

basis towards that goal economically , socially, materially on a basis of maximising equality and co-operation, we will get their and harmonising to the best practice rather than the lowest common denominator, we will get there”

- “how can we make a decision on the future when we can't believe the information that is being given to us. We find it hard after the misinformation given to many during Brexit to make an informed decision on our future in our country”
- “Have more exchange and interaction between children at National and Secondary school level through e.g. an All Island fund”
- “Reconnect by rail especial in the NW”
- “trying to bring people together on areas of mutual benefit. I think if the UK government could provide some funding for North South initiatives, say for example around research, energy etc it could benefit both jurisdictions. I know this happens, and the likes of Peace Plus is an example but that covers a particular part of the island.”

## 4. The East-West Dimension

### 4.1. East-West contact and collaboration

Turning now to the East-West Dimension, this quarter 50% of respondents reported having meetings with organisations in Great Britain (figure 8). 74% of respondents say that this is the same level of contact as the last quarter, and 12% reported that their level of contact had increased on the previous quarter.

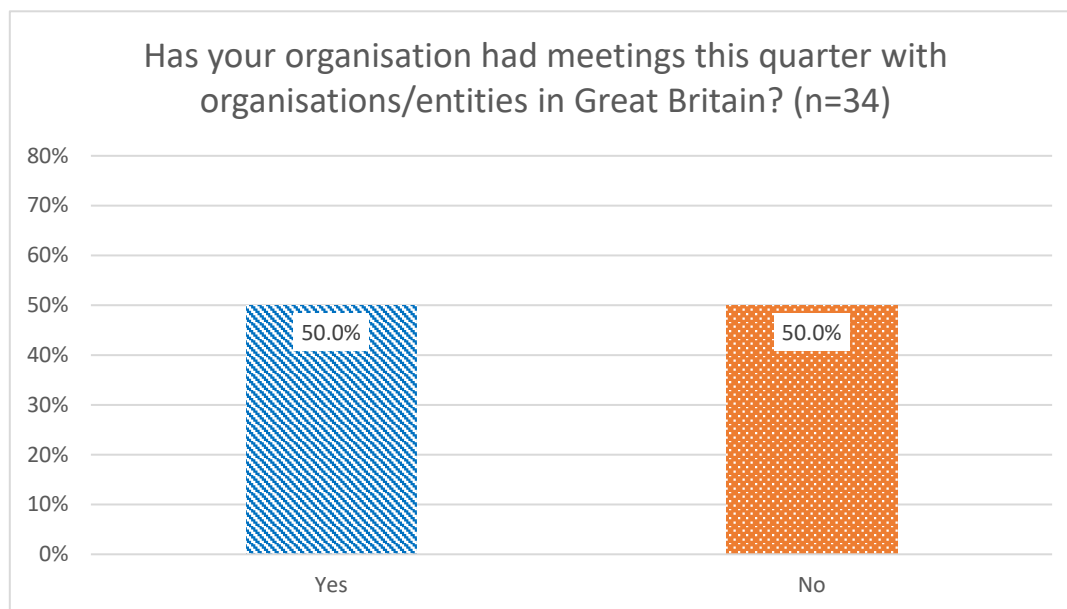


Figure 8

59% of respondents reported that meetings with partners in Great Britain discussed challenges to cooperation either on occasion (53%) or to a significant extent (6%). Such challenges were predominantly focussed on issues with regard to various funding schemes and potential implications of regulatory divergence:

- “Protocol agreement will open up potential for collaboration on Horizon EU Research projects”
- “Peace plus has left us with no way to plan relationship building as everything is based on North South”
- “Windsor Framework, skills shortages, work permits for refugees/ migrants”
- “Discussion centred on the regulatory frameworks and provisions and the extent to which these either hindered or supported development work”

This quarter only 41% of respondents say they are currently involved in collaboration with a GB-based organisation (figure 9), with the predominant areas of collaboration being economic development and community development. At present only 41% of respondents are actively considering initiating new collaborative projects with organisations in Great Britain and half of respondents currently engaged in East-West collaborative projects reported that their organisation was in receipt of funding for those projects, with the funding being drawn mainly from charitable foundations or the UK government.

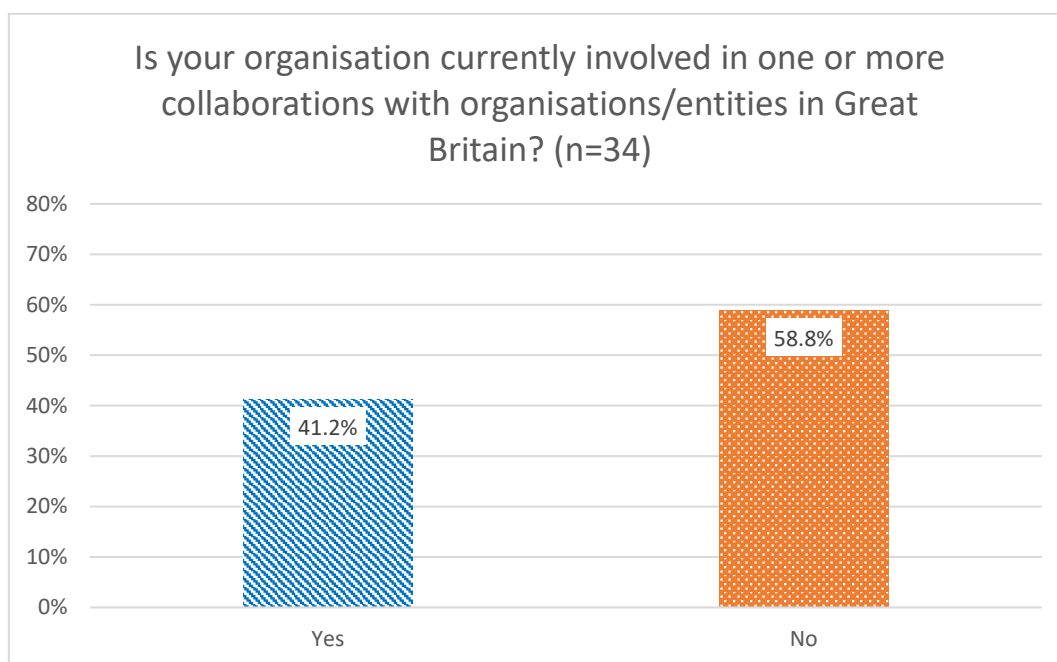


Figure 9

#### 4.2. The East-West context

When asked whether they believe that the political, social, regulatory, and material contexts for East-West collaboration have changed over the last quarter (all n=34), 47% of respondents believe that the **political** context for East-West cooperation has remained the same since the previous quarter, with 35% saying it has improved (figure 10).

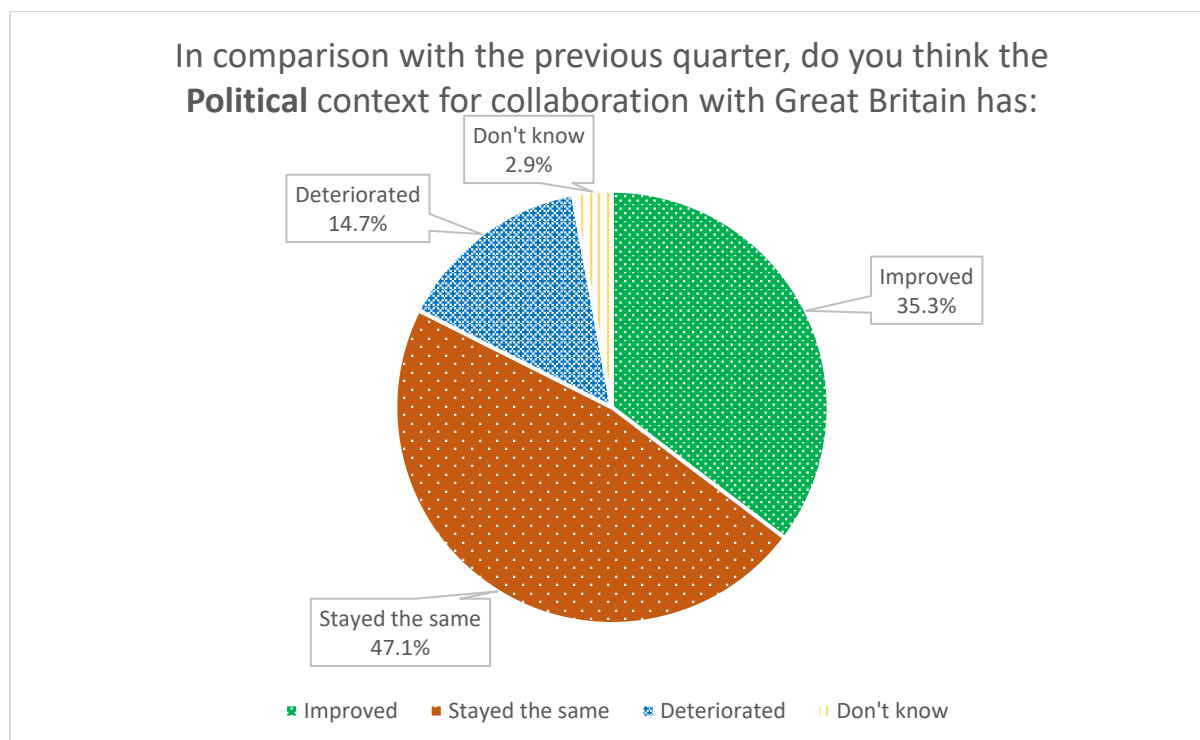


Figure 10

When asked to expand on their experiences of the political context for collaboration, respondents indicated that Windsor Framework and improved UK-EU relations and a more proactive attitude at Westminster have improved the political context, but that the absence of Stormont is still causing issues:

- “New political leadership in UK is more capable of negotiating agreements”
- “Unionist parties have become proactive in the positive outcomes of building relationships east west, GB politicians are becoming open to it”
- “Things have stayed the same while protocol discussions continue. The Windsor framework if adopted will change this situation”
- “Resolution of the EU Exit Protocol Agreement. Though the flip side (deterioration) is the continued absence of a sitting Assembly and NI Executive”

65% of respondents report that the **social** context (figure 11) has remained the same since the previous quarter, with 15% saying it has deteriorated but the same proportion reporting that it has improved. Respondents have reported that their “relationships have grown and we have had visits to GB and from GB” and that “opinion polls suggest the announced UK EU agreements on improving access to goods and medicines and facilitating pet travel have been welcomed”.

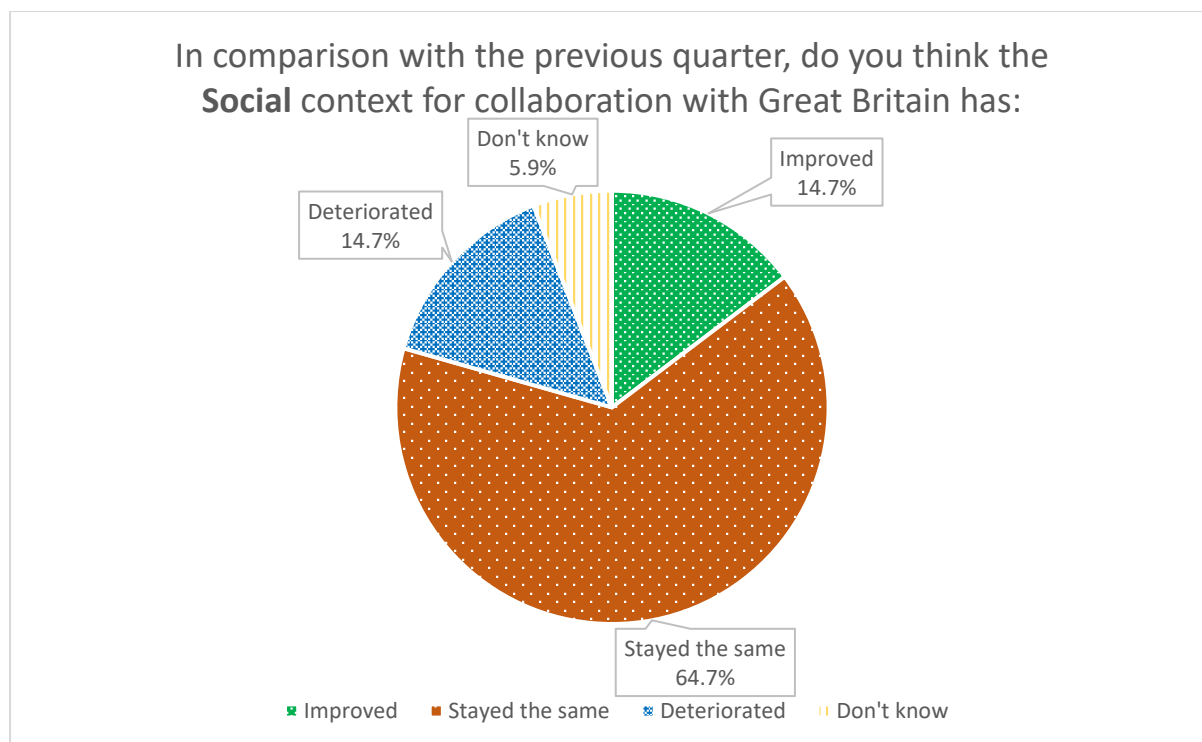


Figure 11

Turning to the **regulatory** context (figure 12), 62% of respondents say that the regulatory context has stayed the same over the last quarter, with 21% saying that it has improved.

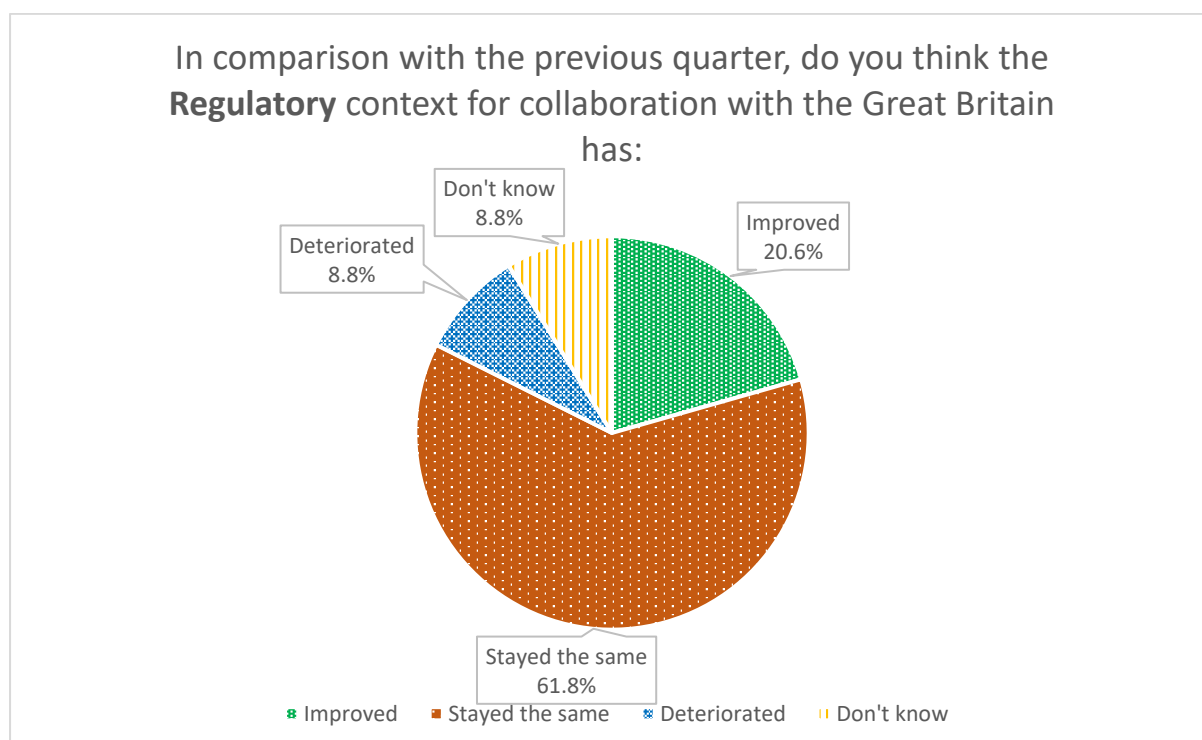


Figure 12

Respondents have said that the Windsor Framework has a potential to improve **regulatory** conditions for East-West relations with one respondent saying “regulatory changes pursuant to Windsor Framework remain to be fully implemented”

Finally, when considering the **material** context (figure 13), 62% report that the material context has remained the same since the last quarter, while 18% of respondents say it has improved.

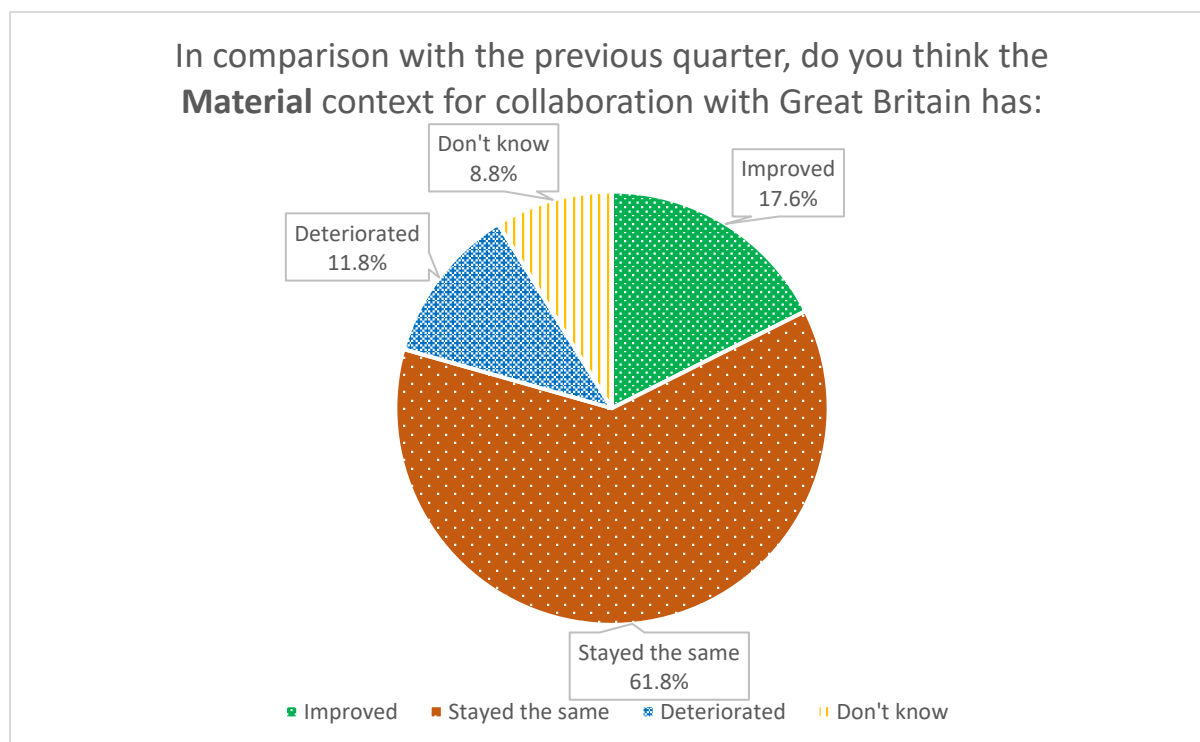


Figure 13

Respondents point toward the loss of Interreg and increased shipping costs from GB to NI as causing material problems.

- “With Brexit the Interreg mechanism died unfortunately so scope and context for cooperation is non existent for us”
- “been charged more to get shipped to N.I”

#### 4.3. East-West suggestions for improvement

In the East-West dimension there were suggestions for improved engagement with the unionist community and a general welcome of the Windsor Framework.

- “I have attended a few peace plus awareness events and not one has mentioned the concept of East West relationships. This is totally up setting the unionist community. I would like to know who to contact about this as it causing real resentment in our community”
- “Implement the Windsor framework”
- “Develop another cooperative fund/model”



## 5. The Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland

The Protocol has now been in effect (to some extent) for 2 years and we have asked respondents whether they believe it is, on balance, broadly a good or bad thing for North-South and East-West cooperation (Figure 14). 65% of respondents reported that they believe the Protocol is, on balance, a good thing for North-South cooperation, compared to 32% who are unsure and only 3% who believe it is a bad thing. In terms of East-West relations, 56% believe the Protocol is, on balance, a good thing for East-West cooperation, with 41% unsure, and 3% reporting it is a bad thing.

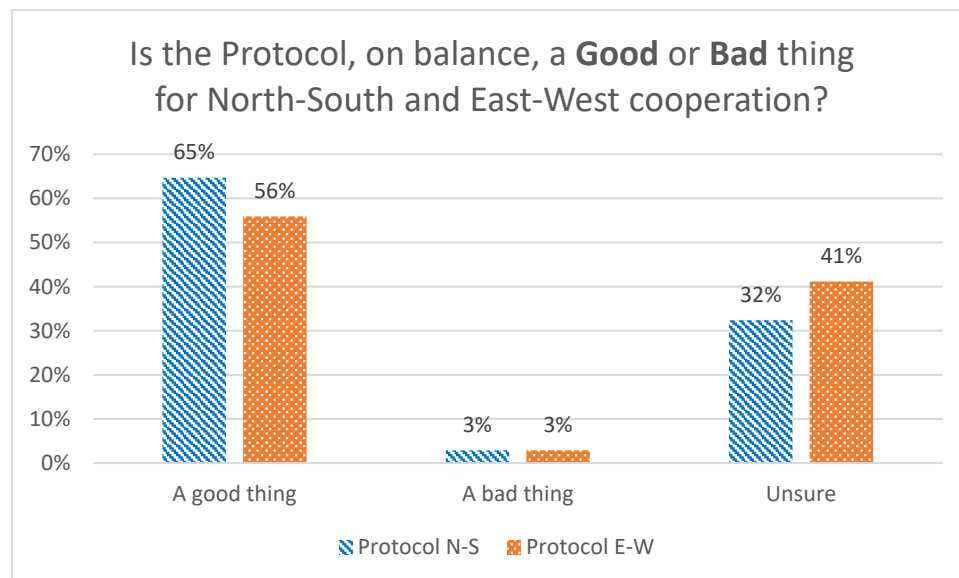


Figure 14

## 6. The respondents in their own words

In addition to the open text questions asked specifically around political, social, regulatory, and material conditions, the survey also asked respondents to provide, in their own words, any additional comments and insights they feel would be beneficial to understanding the impact of Brexit and the protocol on cross-border contact and collaboration, both North-South and East-West.

- “Cooperation on the island and between the islands must function at different levels, bottom up, between the 3 authorities and at an international level. Each level is important though the real concrete progress will be at the bottom up level between small business, trading, sporting, social, youth and education, tourism and maybe political. This people to people contact builds relationships and in time trust and confidence emerges more and more. At the upper levels institutional change can help though it depends on concurrent improvements at the lowest level. The rail connectivity is an example of strategic shift that has long term impact a bit like the Ballyconnel canal project. The cutting of the rail connectivity in the past was conducted so that natural links between parts of the island would be obstructed and that both parts would develop away from each other”*

- *“The Windsor framework needs to be adopted”*

## Conclusion

This quarter’s survey ends on a much more positive note than we have seen for the last 2 years. In terms of both the North-South *and* East-West dimensions, in almost every context, more people believe that the situation is improving than believe it is deteriorating (improved and deteriorated were equal for the East-West social context).

This can broadly be attributed to the Windsor Framework agreed between the UK and EU to mitigate against issues that have become apparent in the Protocol for Ireland/Northern Ireland and, more broadly, the improving relationship between the UK and EU under Rishi Sunak and is giving people engaged in collaboration, both North-South and East-West, cause for (cautious) optimism.

Obviously, there is more work to be done to restore the context for collaboration to pre-Brexit levels, and the absence of Stormont is still hurting the people of Northern Ireland but it does appear, at last, that the politics of Brexit with regard to Northern Ireland and Ireland are becoming more positive and more responsive to the needs of people who are trying to build communities across these islands.

**CONTACTS**

**CENTRE FOR CROSS BORDER STUDIES**

39 Abbey Street, Armagh BT61 7EB

028 (048 from Republic of Ireland) 3751 1550

[ccbs@qub.ac.uk](mailto:ccbs@qub.ac.uk)

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